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Revival. A case study in the church of Christ in Thailand.

ABSTRACT

The Thai revival of 1938-1939 resulting from John Sung's campaigns is the greatest revival movement in Thai church history. Nevertheless, the resultant fruit of John Sung's ministry was meagre compared to the results of his work in other countries, because the historical, socio-cultural, religious, and political situations of Thailand influenced the results of John Sung's campaigns. The revival was confined to the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) with which the missionaries of the American Presbyterian Mission (APM) were involved. The aim of this article is to explore the phenomena, characteristics, and emphases of the revival movement. An ecclesiological analysis and evaluation will also be considered regarding John Sung's campaigns.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although some studies have been conducted on the campaigns of John Sung, a Chinese evangelist, none of them have analysed his ministry in Thailand in any depth. The Bible will be used as the norm for evaluation of the campaigns. At the same time the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) which defined the Reformed Confessions of Faith will be used as the standard in an ecclesiological evaluation of the campaigns. The approach of the study will primarily be of a Reformed Theological nature – taking note of confessional, church historical, revival and revivalistic, missiological and systematic elements of theology. Most Thai churches had connections with the APM during the period 1900-1941 because the majority of missionary work until the Second World War was carried on almost exclusively by American Presbyterian missionaries (Eakin 1944).

Even though there were many revivals in biblical history and in church history (Riss 1988:11-16), the word *revival* probably “is one of the church's most abused terms” (Kaiser 1999:2). Therefore we need a correct understanding of the concept of revival. It should be noted that the Bible “will refer to the concept of revival without using this word more frequently than it does with it” (:229). The word revival does not signify mass evangelism, neither church growth movement nor emotional extravaganza. There is no clear and unified definition of revival in Reformed theology. The theology of revival of the Old School Presbyterianism, “[t]he traditional Calvinism of 19th century American Presbyterians upheld staunchly by professors from Princeton Seminary” (McKim 1996:194), is more close to Reformed theology than any theology of revival among other Reformed traditions. We cannot make revival happen, but “it is a sovereign act of God” (Lloyd-Jones 1986:103).

2. SOME FACTORS WHICH IMPINGED UPON AND AFFECTED THE RESULT OF REVIVAL

2.1 Historical factors

Thailand was known as Siam until June 1939 (Kim 1980:5). Thailand means *land of the free* because it has successfully retained its freedom since the thirteenth century whereas surrounding

countries came to be ruled by Western powers. “The early history of the Siamese of prehistoric time has been vague and shadowy” (Dodd [1923]1996:275). Suwannee Phuttharaksa (1981:228) divided Thai history into four periods, namely, the Sukhothai period (AD 1238-1378), the Ayutthaya period (AD 1350-1767), the Thonburi period (AD 1767-1782), and the Ratanakosin period (AD 1782-to the present). Thailand had an absolute monarchical structure from the beginning. During King Rama VII’s reign of the Ratanakosin period, a coup d’état was carried out on 24 June 1932 (Terwiel 1991:49) and the regime was changed from an absolute monarchy to constitutional government (Syamananda 1988:162). “Although the king has very little real power in his own right in the structure of the constitutional monarchy, all power is still exercised in his name” (Kim 1985:10). At times of national crisis, the king solved problems effectively (Terwiel 1991:50).

These historical factors helped create a national spirit of devotion and allegiance to royalty within the Thai psyche. This meant that, when the Edict of Religious Toleration was issued by King Chulalongkorn on 8 October 1878 (McGilvary 1912:207-215), the very idea of accepting something as alien as another belief system would predictably find little response in the heart of an average Thai person.

2.2 Socio-cultural factors

Suntaree Komin (1991) is considered to be the foremost authority on the characteristics of the Thai personality. Her book, *Psychology of the Thai people: Values and behavioural patterns*, offers nine value clusters which are characteristic of the Thai (:132-213). She enumerated the nine value clusters of the Thai as ego orientation; grateful relationship orientation; smooth interpersonal relationship orientation; flexibility and adjustment orientation; religio-psychical orientation; form over content orientation; interdependence orientation; fun-pleasure orientation; and achievement-task orientation (:133). These Thai characteristics contributed to create an integrated and unified culture which resisted Christianity most effectively. Their identification of Christianity as a foreigner’s religion is still the most serious obstacle to acceptance of the gospel among contemporary Thai people, as with their ancestors.

We can distinguish two periods in the Thai understanding and resistance to Christianity and European influences in Thai history: from 1511 to 1828; 1828 to about 1938. In brief, the missionaries depended upon the power of the West during the first period. During the second period they relied on Western civilisation (Lee 1996:68-69). Thai leaders made use of the benefits of Western science via the missionaries for developing nationalism and Buddhism. During the second period the missionaries worked hard but their work bore little fruit.

2.3 Religious factors

“Thailand must be counted as one of the pre-eminent Buddhist countries in the world” (Keys 1987:416). Buddhists comprised 92.34% of the total population of 60 million in 2000 (Johnstone, Mandryk & Johnstone 2001:618). It is commonly agreed that the sophisticated philosophical belief system of Buddhism is the main reason that the Thai Buddhists misconstrue the substance of the Christian message.

Despite the fact that the Thai people had interacted with Mahayana Buddhism, they did not adhere to its teachings (Deininger 1991:11). After the Kingdom of Sukhothai became independent from Khmer which had followed Mahayana Buddhism (Syamananda 1988:22), King Ramkhamhaeng accepted Theravada Buddhism in order to eradicate the influence of Khmer (Kim 2000:132). The King adopted Theravada Buddhism as the state religion (Davis 1997:36). “All the Thai kings in the recorded history of present-day Thailand have been followers of Buddhism. The country’s Constitution specifies that the King of Thailand must be a Buddhist and the upholder of

Buddhism” (Kusalasaya 2001:22). Historically, Thai kings played important roles in protecting and promoting Buddhism.

Thai Buddhism is neither pure nor orthodox Buddhism. “Thai folk religion is modified animism, combining spirit cults, Brahmanism, and Buddhism into one integrated composite whole” (Smith 1977:78). Despite the obvious inconsistencies among the three religious systems, the Thai view their syncretistic composition as one integrated whole (:92). The Thai have strong social solidarity through Thai folk Buddhism, which includes the elements of Animism, Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism.

2.4 The Thai social circumstances during John Sung’s campaigns

The lives of the people who attended John Sung’s campaigns in Thailand in 1938-1939 were affected by Phibunsongkhram’s nationalism. His nationalist programme can be summarised according to three tendencies, to wit, militarism, economic nationalism, and cultural nationalism (Vella & Vella 1978:270). His programme was militaristic and his power base was the army (:269). Cultural nationalism included the patriotic interpretation of Buddhism (Kennedy 1968:57). The Phibunsongkhram government’s economic nationalism proclaimed “Thailand for the Thai” (Wyatt 1984:254) and “economic Thai-ification” (Skinner 1957:261-262). The programme was a fatal blow to the Chinese. It is certain that they were pressured by nationalism in all areas of their lives. The persecution possibly contributed towards their accepting Christ more easily than Thai people did. At the same time, social pressures contributed as positive factors to enhance receptivity to the gospel for the Thai.

3. THE THAI REVIVAL OF 1938-1939

3.1 The precursors of the revival movement

John Sung’s campaigns were not the first revival movement in the Thai church. Before he came to Thailand in 1938, some forerunners had intermittently laid the foundation for his revival movement in the Thai church.

The Laos Christian Convention began in Chiangmai in 1903, and the expectation of the revival increased in all five mission stations in northern Thailand (Denman 1904:62). The Conference for Christian Workers which began in 1905 (Toktaeng 1984:9) became the seedbed of the revival movement in central Thailand. William Edward Biederwolf (1867-1939), who was a popular American Presbyterian evangelist, held renewal meetings in Bangkok churches in January 1924 (The Biederwolf meetings 1924:9). After that the churches in Bangkok talked together about revival and arranged a big gathering or conference on this subject. Frank Buchman from the United States introduced the House Party Movement for the first time in Thailand in November 1925 (Swanson 1995:102). A Burmese Group, called at that time the Burmese Gospel Team, came to visit Thailand in 1930 (The Burmese Gospel Team 1930:456) and the tendency for revival spread more widely than before among the Thai churches and missionaries. Paul Lyn, a Chinese evangelist, visited Thailand in 1936 and influenced the Thai church leaders with regard to the subject of prayer (Pongsanoi 1939:20). The Revival Committee was started officially by the Church of Christ in Thailand in 1936 (McFarland 1937:124). Now all the churches in Thailand were ready to accept the idea of revival.

3.2 John Sung’s ministry in Thailand between 1938 and 1939

3.2.1 John Sung

John Sung (1901-1944), the greatest evangelist China has ever known (Lyll [1954] 1965: vii), made the greatest contribution towards revival in this church. Out of a total of one million

Protestants in China before the Communists took control in 1949, several hundred thousands of people were born again and filled with the Spirit under John Sung's ministry (Tow 1988:49). His life story is dramatic and unusual. God used him as a powerful instrument for his glory, both in China and in Southeast Asia.

John Sung was conservative in his theology and therefore objected to liberal theology and the Social Gospel. His theology of revival is coincident with Old School American Presbyterianism but some aspects of his evangelistic methods, such as counting the converts and using the invitation system, are identical with the New School. Despite John Sung's errors, God used him mightily for the Thai church.

3.2.2. John Sung's itinerant ministry throughout Thailand

John Sung arrived in Thailand for the first time in September 1938 and set off on a six-week tour. His second visit was in May 1939 and he toured for two months. These visits resulted in the greatest spiritual awakening Thailand had yet experienced. He led campaigns in three different places in Bangkok and in one place each in Nakhonpathom Province and in Trang Province in 1938 (Sung 1995:267-269). It is evident that his work made less impact on the Thai church than on the Chinese church during the visit of 1938. He worked for the Thai church more than for the Chinese church (Lyll [1954]1965:168), visiting eleven different locations over two months in 1939. He testified in his diary that "on the whole, 3,000 people were saved, and 1,500 sick ones were prayed for, and 285 evangelistic teams were formed" (Sung 1995:277).

3.2.3 The results, phenomena, characteristics, and emphases of John Sung's campaigns

There are both positive and negative results. John Sung was the means of building up the confidence of both the Thai church in general and the leaders of the church in strength and faith (Swanson 1995:107). His campaigns helped the Thai church to reverse the numerical decline of its membership and brought about its accelerated growth (Smith 1982:197). The campaigns aroused an eager response towards evangelism in the Thai Christians. The McGilvary Theological Seminary, the official theological institution of the CCT, closed for nine years from 1940 to 1949 because the protagonists of John Sung's campaigns wanted to start a Bible College (Swanson 1995:107-108). There was tension within the APM and church (Eakin et al 1955:130). Nevertheless, the positive fruits undoubtedly surpassed the negative results.

The attendees of John Sung's meetings repented of their sins, became keen on attending services (Pongsanoi 1968:171), dedicated themselves to God (Sung 1995:275-277), and had an overwhelming thirst to study God's Word (Singhanetra 1939:25). His characteristics of preaching were totally different from the American Presbyterian missionaries. He was demonstrative and energetic, showing a great passion for the topic on which he was preaching (Kho 1999). John Sung emphasised the theme of salvation through Jesus Christ alone (Toktaeng 1984:110), repentance (Pongsanoi 1999), and evangelism (Pongsanoi 1968:128).

4. AN ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF JOHN SUNG'S MINISTRY

4.1 An interesting resemblance between the Old-New Side split of 1741 in the American Presbyterian Church and the Thai revival of 1938-1939

It is going too far to say that the theological controversy over revival within the American Presbyterian churches in the eighteenth century had a direct impact upon the theology of revival of the American Presbyterian missionaries in Thailand in 1930s. It is quite probable that the theological controversy over revival within American Presbyterianism indirectly influenced the American missionaries in Thailand at the time.

4.1.1 The Old-New Side split of 1741 in the American Presbyterian Church

Since the revivals of the First Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, American Presbyterians have been associated closely with revivalism. There were Presbyterians among the leaders of the revival in the American colonies (Hart 1999:216). During the first few decades of revival movements in the eighteenth century, three big problems emerged which related directly to ministerial qualifications, different understandings of genuine revival, and the nature of true faith. In conclusion, the Old Side was convinced that the ministers should be educated in the fashion which had become traditional in the universities of the Old World and New England. They focused on the importance of erudition as a qualification for the ministry. On the other hand, the New Side adherents asserted that experiential piety and an experiential knowledge was more important than academic ability for ministerial qualifications (Lingle & Kuykendall 1978:68).

The New Side and Old Side differed with regard to their understanding of revival. The New Side Presbyterians claimed that the Holy Spirit had brought true transformations of individuals and communities through revival (Westerkamp 2000:4). The Old Side Presbyterians argued against the methodologies of the New Siders, claiming them to be disorderly and contrary to Presbyterian principles (Guelzo 1999:182). The Old Side was opposed to revival because of the perceived emotionalism and potential disorder of the movement (Lingle & Kuykendall 1978:68).

The advocates of the New Side understood the essence of true faith to be the religion of the heart and were convinced that the revivals were the work of the Holy Spirit. They described their opponents as legalists. On the other hand, the Old Side found the essence of true faith in right reason and intelligent orthodoxy or the religion of the mind (Westerkamp 2000:8).

4.1.2 The Thai revival of 1938-1939

It is quite remarkable that the tendency of the division of 1741 between Old Side and New Side Presbyterians in America manifested exactly the same pattern two hundred years later in the Thai revival of 1938-1939. The three problems of the schism of 1741, namely, ministerial qualifications, different understanding of the nature of true revival, and the nature of true faith, was repeated in Thailand.

After John Sung's meetings, a confused state of affairs arose in the CCT because the campaigns resulted in people coming to repentance and faith, and backsliders were restored to faith again, causing a rate of increase higher than any before. The sudden increase of church members became a burden for the Thai church leaders and the missionaries who had to help them (Pongudom 1984:84). They requested that a Bible College be started (Seigle 1939:163) but the APM refused to accede to the suggestion of the group advocating the establishment of the Bible College (Elder 1939). Carl Elder (1940), the most bitter antagonist of the campaigns, expected a very high standard of ministerial qualifications whereas Loren S Hanna, the most ardent supporter of the campaigns, wanted to lower the standard according to the situation in Thailand at the time (Hanna [s a]: 5-6). Loren S Hanna considered that secular scholastic ability or qualifications were not essential for the minister who had more need of the knowledge of the Bible and the experience of the Holy Spirit.

The Rev Boonmark Gitisarn, the best known protagonist of John Sung's campaigns, affirmed, both in writing and verbally, that the power of the Holy Spirit was manifested and there was evidence of true conviction of sin in all of the meetings (Gitisarn 1979). Most of the witnesses of John Sung's campaigns testified of the campaigns as a genuine revival movement as Thailand had never experienced either before or after these meetings. We find the most severe criticism of John Sung's ministry in Thailand in the document; referred to as "Mr. Hanna's case." The document concluded that John Sung had conducted highly emotional revival meetings (Eakin [s a]:1). Carl Elder was confrontational enough to evaluate the campaigns as of "the devil and so must be completely eradicated" (Cort 1940).

The antagonists of the campaigns understood that intellectual understanding of the Bible was the essence of true faith (Bansiddhi & Intaphantu 1939). The protagonists of the campaigns understood that the essence of true faith is a matter of the heart more than the mind (Pongudom 1984:84).

4.2 An ecclesiological evaluation of John Sung's ministry using the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF)

Even though John Sung is not from a Presbyterian Church background, there is sufficient reason to use the ecclesiology of the WCF as a criterion to evaluate his campaigns. The CCT and the APM missionaries accepted the WCF as their confession of faith. The former number indicates the chapter and the latter number the verse.

The WCF (25.1) says that "The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof..." This section teaches us "the nature of the Church from the divine point of view" (Williamson 1964:187). The invisible universal church is one. John Sung never instigated division within the church but encouraged people to unite together in the Lord (Lyal [1954] 1965:125-126). Even so, his followers tried to separate themselves from other groups (Pongudom 1984:84). The WCF (30.1) also says that "The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his Church, hath therein appointed a government in the hands of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate." This section of the Confession teach us that Christ is king and head of the church. He has appointed a government which is in the hand of church officers (Williamson 1964:231) for building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:11-12). John Sung did not admit the authority of the officers such as missionaries, pastors and church leaders unless he felt they were genuine. His condemnation of the church officers exerted such an influence that they were left with little authority in the church. He did not acknowledge the authority of the officers as being from the Lord Jesus.

According to the WCF (25.5), "The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture, and error: and some have so degenerated as to become apparently no churches of Christ. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth, to worship God according to his will." John Sung pursued the perfectly holy church on earth (Hughes 1989:32). But "[w]e must recognize that this is a process, and that any church of which we are a part will be somewhat impure in various areas...there will be no perfect churches until Christ returns" (Grudem 1994:875). The church has to make every possible effort to become pure but must needs admit impurity in some areas, as recognised by the WCF.

4.3 Useful lessons to learn from John Sung's campaigns

Some useful lessons for the APM and the Thai church can be found. John Sung's campaigns represent the biggest revival movement in Thai church history up to this present time. But the APM and the CCT could not seize the opportunity of revival in the Thai church because of their own inhibitions. The most important reason is that neither of them could work in close cooperation with the other. If we take the case of the Korean revival of 1907, the missionaries and the indigenous churches united their efforts to preserve the fruits of the revival (Park 2000:18-19). But in the Thai church, there was no collaboration in the matter of the revival, even within the same missionary group and the same denomination, namely, the APM and the CCT. The antagonists and the protagonists of John Sung's campaigns among the APM and the CCT should have accepted the other side more open-mindedly. "We cannot always discover a reason why a particular revival came to an end" (Edwards 1997:229). But in Thailand it is possible to find the reason why the Thai revival of 1938-1939 was discontinued. More than anything else, the revival stopped because the APM and the CCT did not work in close cooperation for the same goal, that is, the revival of the

Thai church.

The central issue is whether the Thai church can use the lessons of their past. Hopefully, they can learn a great deal from their past if they are intent on using a historical perspective to solve current problems.

5. CONCLUSION

Through this article we have sought to attain our goal, which relates to an ecclesiological analysis and evaluation of the Thai revival of 1938-1939 among the Presbyterian Churches of Thailand. Even though the revival brought about by John Sung's campaigns was the biggest revival movement in Thai church history, it could not continue because of many reasons. Only the Holy Spirit can help the Thai to see the truth of Jesus Christ. "Oh Lord, help them to realise their spiritual potential and experience revival again!"

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