
A Japanese Lay Christian's Testimony

Ichiro Sato

My personal experiences in Japanese society illustrate the challenges and opportunities I, and many others like me, meet when witnessing for Christ. In candor I need to say that despite my best efforts, I doubt my qualifications to discuss the Reformed witness in Japan. Therefore, my remarks are offered with genuine humility.

I am currently a member of the Kamakura Yukinoshita Church. With sincere deference to the Reformed/Presbyterian history and tradition it represents, I must say that as a Christian I have not been reared in a completely Reformed environment. While a student, for example, I spent six years helping some Christian missionaries God had sent to Japan from Sweden. As their interpreter, I was almost a full-time evangelist.

I came from a typical non-Christian Japanese family that, while having no serious interest in religion, was immersed in Buddhist and Shinto customs and traditions that had been rooted deeply in Japanese society over the course of more than a thousand years. These traditions represent the interaction of age-old Confucianism and Taoism transmitted to Japan from China through the cultural bridge of Korea.

In my teens I became a Christian simply by accepting Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. With great interest I attended Bible classes at a church in my hometown taught by a Miss Irene Anderson, a missionary from the United States, and a Japanese pastor, the Reverend Naomi Honkawa. My mother church was, and still is, affiliated with the Kyodan (United Church of Christ in Japan). Although I am not certain, I believe it may have originally been a congregation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. I do not recall that my teachers ever emphasized the value or importance of denominational origins. To an average Japanese boy, a Christian church was a Christian church. It was an institution very different from the familiar Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines found everywhere in Japan.

Earnestly urged by my spiritual teachers, and led above all by the Lord, I was baptized in 1949 at age seventeen. It was by God's grace and guidance that I was saved. I was simply taken captive by Jesus Christ. As a high school sophomore, I was just one more naïve and immature student. My desire was to live as Jesus commanded: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33).

Naturally, I did not understand much about Christianity. But I believed the words of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so

that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." To this day I have taken Christianity as my way of living as one of God's little children, "for it is to such that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matt. 19:14b).

When I became a Christian, I immediately experienced the opposition of my parents. They objected to my faith because I not only refused to participate in Japanese social and family customs that had any taint of Buddhist or Shinto traditions, but, like the cocky high school boy I was, I also criticized grownups observing the old Japanese traditions of our Buddhist and Shinto religious heritage for practicing idolatry.

I want to emphasize that I respect my parents. They were ordinary, plain, hardworking, and good-natured people. I have never ceased to be grateful for the love and care they gave their six children. In Japan, as well as in China and Korea, ancient Confucian and Buddhist influences make filial piety as much an essential virtue as that enjoined in the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother."

By becoming a Christian, I simply wanted to live a good, moral, ethical life. In my parents' eyes, however, I was a radical social renegade, a problem child if not a juvenile delinquent. At the end of World War II, Japan was in dire poverty. As the family's eldest son, my parents expected me to care for them in their old age by taking over my father's country grocery store. I was, so to speak, their old age insurance. Thus, as a struggling Christian youth I learned the hard reality of Jesus' teaching:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, . . . Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it (Matt. 10:34-39).

My story is representative of the vast majority of Christians in Japan, not only in terms of their relation to their immediate and more distant family but also in terms of the context of their daily social life. In our church we discuss seriously how to reach our family and friends with the gospel of salvation. We agree that it is really very difficult to witness for Christ to our families, to our fellow workers, and to the broader Japanese society.

Christians are a scant one percent of Japan's population of 124 million. We estimate that more than ninety percent of our church's six-hundred-member congregation comes from non-Christian families, and that second- and third-generation Christians can be counted easily on ten fingers. In my guesstimate, roughly thirty percent of married Christians do not have Christian spouses.

Tolerant, understanding, and harmonious though the non-Christian partner may be, that makes participation in church activities difficult.

Japan's National Police Agency announced recently that the number of visitors to prominent Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples throughout Japan during the first three days of 2002 reached 84.91 million (that is, two-thirds of the population), a drop of 4.3 percent from 2001, and a record low in the last decade. My city of Kamakura was once the seat of the old Kamakura shogunate, the military government in the early twelfth century, and is the site of a well-known Hachiman shrine. Statistics indicate that one million people visited Kamakura to offer their prayers on New Year's Day, half a million on the second day, and 440,000 on the third. Thus, about two million people came to offer their New Year's prayers during the first three days of 2002. On subsequent Sundays and holidays during the first month of the year, a considerable number of people, mainly from the Tokyo area, continued to visit our city as a part of their "New Year's pilgrimage."

Although that might suggest that the Japanese are the world's most pious and religious people, that is not the case. Visits to such shrines are simply a customary annual event, like a tourist's excursion. What is customarily done on these occasions, however, is to wish and pray for the growth and prosperity of their businesses. People also purchase fortune-telling labels or cards to read what the gods' oracles say concerning their sons' and daughters' success in passing the highly competitive entrance examinations for prestigious colleges and universities. I really cannot say whether people seriously believe in such things. A short haiku does suggest that "Only when encountered by great hardships and painful suffering, people cling to gods' sleeves."

As a nonscholarly, lay Christian businessman with a much greater interest in studying the Word of God than in learning about non-Christian religions, I do not know enough about Buddhism to describe its teachings in depth. What little I do know about it represents the general knowledge of the Japanese masses. Buddhism teaches, for example, that all human beings become Buddhas or Bodhisattvas after death; they become deities, since all are destined, sooner or later, to enter upon the way to Buddhahood—the divine condition. Buddhism also acknowledges the Shinto gods with all their attributes and dignities, declaring them to be incarnations of Buddhas. We Christians disassociate ourselves from these ideas because they are contrary to Christian doctrine. At the same time, we realize that these pantheistic religious concepts make it very difficult for us to disseminate the story of Jesus and God's plan of salvation.

Returning home from church on a recent Sunday, I chatted casually with an American tourist. We met on a jam-packed train between Kamakura and Ofuna, cities only ten minutes or so apart. I said, "These crowds of people have been to the shrine to offer their New Year's prayers, but they are not religious." This man responded, "It does show that they have needs, though." His remark reminded me of what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church of God in Corinth:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

How mightily these words encourage us to live so as to win people and to meet their spiritual needs!

When in 1997, the International Conference on Homiletics was held in Kyoto in western Japan, I was privileged to serve as a conference interpreter. This invitation, so very different from my usual business-related assignments associated with industry and commerce, was a difficult but spiritually enriching experience. After the conference, I was on the Kyoto railroad station platform, waiting to board a Shinkansen bullet train to Tokyo. There, I accidentally met a Swedish businessman, an old acquaintance from the Tokyo area. When I told him about my just-completed job, he asked, "What's homiletics?" "The art of writing and preaching sermons," I explained. "In other words," he retorted, "they discuss how to tell lies." I was appalled that a man from a so-called Christian country would make such a statement! I am reluctant to quote him since he very well may be an exceptional case. But I share this incident because it illustrates something we all encounter at times, whether we live in the so-called heathen land of Japan, or in a Christian country. These lines from Edgar A. Guest's "Sermons We See" express it well:

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear,
Fine counsel is confusing, but example's always clear;
And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their
creeds,

For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.
I soon can learn to do it if you'll let me see it done;
I can watch your hands in action, but your tongue too fast may
run.

And the lecture you deliver may be very wise and true,
But I'd rather get my lessons by observing what you do;
For I might misunderstand you and the high advice you give,
But there's no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.

We all tend to regard ourselves as peculiarly different from others. Christians in Japan tend to focus overly much on difficulties and challenges we feel are peculiar to us. While everything I have said about the particular hardships and difficulties Christians face in Japanese society today may be true, we should, in my opinion, consider ourselves blessed. Are we not constantly reminded and motivated to make a conscious effort to seek the Lord's way precisely because we encounter difficulties and challenges in our society? We are, therefore, compelled to be reformed day by day.

Whenever we discuss the hardships and challenges we meet today, I am reminded how much we in the Japanese Christian church owe to our forerunners who went through far greater difficulties. Since our old feudal Tokugawa shogunate regime in the middle of the nineteenth century abandoned its policy of seclusion and opened a number of ports to foreign ships (referred to as the "Opening of Japan"), the mission boards of the Reformed Church in America and the Presbyterian Church have made the effort to send many competent missionaries to Japan. We know, too, that many Japanese students who went to America then, and later into the Meiji Era (1868-1912), were welcomed and greatly assisted by American brothers and sisters in the Lord. If all that hard work, generosity, and hospitality were in God's will and, therefore had his blessing, then we know that the Japanese church, as well as our nation, is under God's blessing and care. The Japanese Christian church and believers can never forget this fact.

May the Lord grant us such spiritual growth that we may be able to live in ways that win more people to his way of salvation. I find I do not have the words to express fully what pertains to our spiritual life. Perhaps it transcends human intellectual and emotional comprehension. May the Holy Spirit help and lead us to everything our soul and spirit need to live and to give a true Christian witness.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:12-15).

"Ecumenical, Engaged, Aware, and Alert"

"Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's book provides an excellent introduction to the study of contemporary pneumatology. Kärkkäinen summarizes an impressive array of positions and viewpoints accurately and succinctly without losing sight of the main issues, themes, and theologians. I highly recommend it as an introductory text."

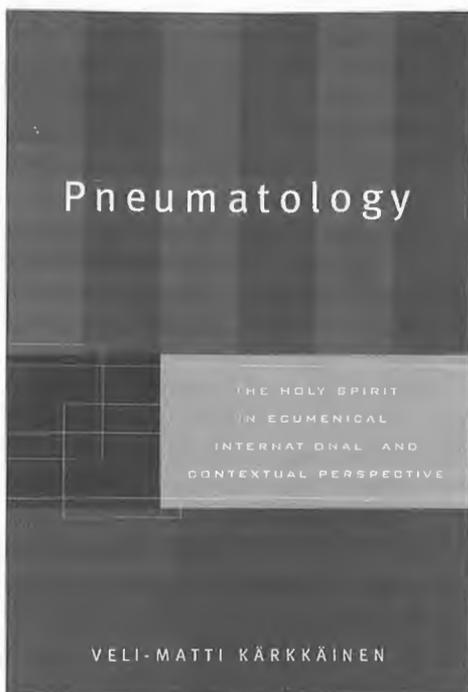
—Simon Chan,
Trinity Theological College

"Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's *Pneumatology* is the most comprehensive yet succinct introductory text on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit on the market today. Here is evangelical theologizing at its best: ecumenical, engaged, aware, and alert."

—Amos Yong, Bethel College

"Somewhat unexpectedly, the Holy Spirit has become a main topic of systematic theology at the end of the second millennium. We can indeed speak of a pneumatological renaissance, but it is difficult to understand the variety of new theologies inspired by this renaissance. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen offers a balanced account of contemporary debates on the Holy Spirit. This instructive overview is always connected with a sincere ecumenical quest to preserve the unity of Christian doctrine."

—Risto Saarinen, University of Helsinki



0-8010-2448-X • 208 pp. • \$15.99p

Baker Academic

Subscribe to Baker Academic's electronic newsletter (E-Notes) at
www.bakeracademic.com