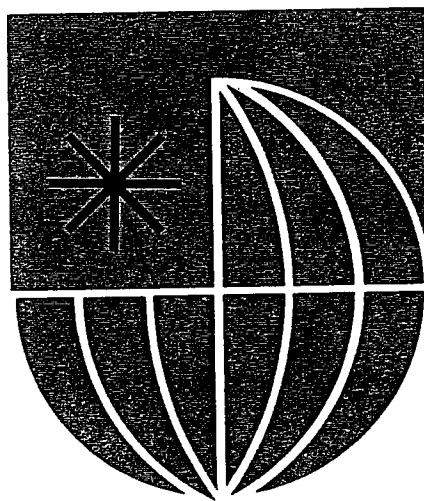


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## The University Bible Fellowship: A Forty-Year Retrospective Evaluation

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*A student Christian movement called the University Bible Fellowship (UBF) is now spreading around the world. Using a tentmaking approach to lay ministry with strong emphasis upon Bible study and disciplined living, UBF has become a dynamic Christian movement in our time. Yet the ideals and achievements of UBF remain obscure and even controversial. In this article, I discuss the history, structure, and activities of UBF, including the role played by its founder, Dr. Samuel Lee, who died on January 8, 2002.*

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The University Bible Fellowship began with a few collegians in Kwangju, South Korea, in early 1961 as a result of a recognized need for campus evangelism. By the end of 2001, almost 1,500 UBF missionaries have borne witness to the gospel and reached out to fellow students in Europe, the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Asia. In its forty years of history, the UBF has consistently fostered an evangelical awakening among young adults.

I joined the fellowship in 1973 and actively participated in its ministry until 1983. I still maintain a friendly relationship with UBF. Due to my personal experience within UBF and the lack of scholarly literature about the organization, this paper analyzes its ministry without citing many references.

### Historical Background of the UBF

Soon after the coup d'état led by General Jung Hee Park in 1961, a group of students from Chonnam and Choson universities began to look for a spiritual solution that could both heal the anxieties of intellectuals and give direction to future generations of students. Reflecting on their socioreligious history in Korea, these students concluded that the best solution to the problems of Korean intellectuals was a spiritual one, that is, the gospel. What was needed was a Christianity that could transcend not only the political issue of communism versus democracy, but also the religious issue of denominational conflict.

The leader of this Christian group was Samuel Chang-Woo Lee. Lee was born October 9, 1931, in Kobe, Japan, as the second son of Elder Y. J. Lee and Eun-Soon

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Chang Lee. Several events in his life served to shape his character: the death of his mother while he was still an infant, his war experience, his conversion to Christianity, and a second religious experience, which led to a renewed commitment to campus evangelism and UBF mission work. Among these, the death of his mother had the greatest impact upon him. Lee himself often recounts that this event, more than any other, led him to ponder the meaning of existence and God's purpose for his life.

In 1950, with the start of the Korean War (1950–53), Lee joined a student volunteer regiment of the South Korean army and served in one of the bloodiest battles of the war. He saw many of his friends maimed and killed and began to reflect further on the meaning of life. One night, a Bible verse he had learned as a boy came into his mind as though by revelation: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10, NIV). In the light of this verse, he finally could understand the meaning of the sufferings he had experienced and could accept God's sovereignty upon his life. That night he prayed to devote the rest of his life to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

After the war, Lee entered the Presbyterian seminary in Seoul and supported himself by working as an English translator. He worked in the World Vision office and helped translate and distribute Navigator Bible study materials. His contact with the Navigators led him to realize the importance of a one-on-one ministry.

Upon graduating from the seminary, Lee became pastor of a Presbyterian church located near Chonbuk University and received a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1960. In 1961, Lee was called by the Presbyterian Mission and the First Presbyterian Church to pastor a church and to pioneer a ministry to students in the Christian Student Center in Kwangju. Miss Sarah Barry, a Presbyterian missionary, was also assigned to work in this center. Barry taught the Bible in English, and since students were eager to learn the language, many came. As it turned out, this center spawned the movement that would become University Bible Fellowship.

As Lee ministered to the students, he was saddened to observe that most of them were caught in a web of despair. These students were dejected politically, spiritually, and socially. Their country was divided. Korea had become an ideological battleground between the Soviet Union and the United States. Churches were full of divisions and politics. And most important, Kwangju students were at regional universities—schools outside Seoul and considered second-rate—and they were poor. Lee realized that without hope, people lose the will to live. And hope never comes to those who cannot overcome dejections and sadness. Lee found hope in Christianity.

He believed that Christianity, if it is purified daily, has enough strength to build both individual and national life. He also believed that if Christianity is to succeed in Korea, it must address two fundamental problems. The first is the problem of factional strife among the Protestant denominations, and the second is the attitude that Western ideas and ways are superior to indigenous ones. If these two problems can be dealt with wisely, Korea would have a bright future, he decided.

The first problem, that of denominational divisions, was cultivated, however unintentionally, by the various Western denominations that arrived in Korea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As part of their evangelistic approach, the Western missionaries divided the Korean peninsula into separate mission zones, each of which fell under the jurisdiction of a specific denomination. Ironically, even

though the missionaries developed this approach to avoid the struggle associated with "religious consumers," these divisions only exacerbated regional hostilities and aggravated denominational competition.

Second, because things Western were considered superior to their own, Koreans were expected to follow Western ideas categorically in theoretical and administrative matters. As a result, Koreans denigrated their own culture and had an indiscriminate admiration for, and imitation of, Western culture. In addition, some Western missionaries acted condescendingly toward Korean Christians and discouraged them from engaging in critical reflection on their faith—thus hindering the intellectual development of the Korean church. Recognizing these problems, Lee and his followers attempted to "purify" Christianity in Korea and to find a new vision and hope for Korean intellectuals.

In September 1961, under the leadership of Lee and Barry, students began gathering for Bible study and prayer meetings. Lee hoped these meetings would strengthen the students as they learned the Word and shared testimonies. They also found that the students could share their message of love and hope with others. By the end of that year, about eighty students came regularly to these meetings. Some years later, their number was in the thousands.

The students, it was evident, were attracted to the meetings by their intent, candid informality, and interdenominational orientation. Through these open and earnest meetings, the students found reasons not only to have hope but also to care about others. Lee and Barry had succeeded in their initial task.

As the movement grew, Lee and Barry moved to Seoul in 1966 and began UBF work there. Lee paid special attention to ministering to the students of Seoul National University (SNU), generally regarded as the top institution of higher learning in Korea. It has produced many leaders in every field of endeavor. SNU's students are proud of the school, and many of them are proud of themselves as well. When Lee first approached these students, they ridiculed him for his presumption that he could teach them anything, since he was a graduate of a regional college. Yet Lee's vision soon bore fruit. Many SNU students, as well as students from Yonsei and Korea universities, two other leading universities in Seoul, began to attend his Bible study meetings.

By 1970, Lee felt that he had done enough for UBF and decided to leave after finding a suitable successor. Yet this plan could not be carried out. One night in 1970, a kerosene furnace in Lee's room overturned, covering him with kerosene and engulfing him in fire. His body was so badly burned that his doctor told him he would never recover his original facial features. For a month he was treated in the SNU hospital, with his hands tied above his head to prevent him from touching his injured skin. This incident led to a deep religious experience, second in importance only to his conversion, and to a renewed commitment to campus evangelism and world mission. As Lee lay in the hospital, he wondered again and again why he had been burned. Why had God allowed this accident to happen? Then the answer came to him: It was because he had planned to leave his ministry with young collegians. When Lee was sure that this was the right answer, he yielded to God, pledging that if God would restore his body, he would dedicate the rest of his life to the work of UBF.

After undergoing extensive medical treatment, Lee's body was completely healed. For Lee, however, the accident or "the lightning of fire," as he called it, was a spiritual experience that anchored him to UBF. In 1977, Lee left Korea for the United States.

Then he lived in Chicago, Illinois, the international office of UBF, until his death.

When Lee moved to Chicago, the question of who could assume the directorship of the Korean UBF arose. There were many able men and some who had been trained as staff members, but a lay leader, Dr. John Jun, took the leadership, even though it meant giving up a lucrative career as a medical doctor. Dr. Jun has been called "the saint of the Orient" among the UBF circles due to his peaceful image and character. Under Dr. Jun's leadership, Korea UBF has grown greatly. In 1991, Lee came to Korea to receive an honorary Doctor of Literature degree from the Chunbuk National University.

### **The Overseas Ministry of UBF**

UBF's commitment to world mission is not unique in the history of modern missions, but follows in the tradition of the student movements, such as Samuel Mill's haystack prayer meetings and the Cambridge Seven.

The seeds of a world mission vision were planted in the hearts of UBF members through Bible study. The first missionary work began with the pioneering of new provinces in Korea, particularly those that had traditionally been hostile toward each another. Through Bible study in UBF, many college students of Kyongsang and Cholla provinces in Korea (which were historically antagonistic) came to embrace the gospel and, by so doing, overcame their regional prejudices. After witnessing the transforming power of the gospel in these young people, UBF members realized that the gospel transcends any ideology, be it capitalism, Marxism, or communism, and that the gospel transcends all other human barriers as well. They came to believe that the gospel is the common ground on which people of all races and nations can learn to respect and love one another.

But having a vision for world mission is one thing and carrying it out is another. To the poor students in UBF, sending a missionary to a foreign land was not easy. They had no money. They did not know how to obtain passports or visas for missionary candidates. Yet the students earnestly prayed for world mission, and their prayers were like a flaming fire. After much prayer the students decided that the small Cheju Island, just off the coast of Korea, would be an ideal mission field. In 1964 they commissioned and sent a college graduate named Han-ok Kim to Cheju Island as their first missionary.

Although it may look like a small thing, this sending of a single missionary to a small island off the Korean mainland was a milestone in the history of UBF. Until that time, Korean Christians had assumed that world mission could be carried out only by affluent Western nations. Moreover, because of their long history of suffering under the world powers, the Korean people had a tendency to be quiet and sentimental. Yet the gospel completely changed these sentimental and passive young people into dedicated missionaries with great vision for the whole world.

In 1968 Lee found that some UBF nurses were going to West Germany as contract laborers. By faith, Lee persuaded them to delay leaving until they had received UBF missionary training. Miraculously, they did. Thus, the first UBF overseas missionaries were Korean women. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, many other nurses followed them as lay missionaries.

As the German UBF ministry grew, the way was opened to send lay missionaries to the United States. The first UBF missionaries to the United States were med-

ical doctors and nurses, who came in the 1970s. In 1977, Lee emigrated to the States to direct the work, and Sarah Barry joined him in 1978 in the Chicago UBF ministry. Upon his arrival in Chicago, Lee found the missionaries holding worship services in Korean. There was not a single American studying the Bible or attending the worship service.

Lee's first step was to set a clear direction for all Korean lay missionaries to engage in cross-cultural evangelism. The missionaries suddenly found themselves speaking only English (however broken) in their Bible studies, in prayer meetings, and even in their homes. They experienced much frustration as they tried to communicate with American students, finding many cultural and language barriers. As time went on and faith grew, they were gradually convinced that they could serve American college students with the Bible and build them up as disciples. The fruits of their endeavors were not immediate success, but their labors were not in vain. On 7 January 1978 Chicago UBF conducted a Sunday worship service in English with three American students from different ethnic backgrounds in attendance. As of 19 August 1990, the Chicago UBF had 396 members (Chung 1992:54). It was reported that around a thousand members attended the Christmas worship service of Chicago UBF in December 2001.

As the American campus ministry grew, UBF's global outreach grew as well. Lay missionaries were sent from Korea to Argentina (1976), Guatemala (1976), Bangladesh (1979), Mexico (1984), France (1985), the Philippines (1984), Saudi Arabia (1985), Spain (1985), Australia (1986), Switzerland (1989), Austria (1989), New Zealand (1989), and Kenya (1989). In addition, UBF has been able to send missionaries to Russia, Venezuela, Peru, China, Sweden, and many other nations. The *Kukmin Daily* of 1 January 2000 reported that 8,208 Korean missionaries were serving in the countries of the world. Among these, UBF had sent out the most, with 506 in North America, 374 in Europe, 289 in Asia, and 116 in other nations, making a total of nearly 1,500 UBF missionaries serving in the various continents of the world.

### The Structure of UBF

The organization is divided into chapters, according to city and/or campus. A small city with a single college or university may have only one UBF chapter, while a large city with many campuses may have several chapters. Each chapter is led by a chapter director, who is a UBF staff member. A chapter, in turn, is subdivided into a number of fellowship groups, usually depending on the size of the chapter. A fellowship group is led by a fellowship leader, usually a student who has been studying the Bible for at least three years, or a graduate.

### *UBF Theology*

From the beginning of the movement, UBF members have embraced the teachings of the Bible and tried simply to love and imitate Christ, without developing a formal creed of their own. As UBF grew and was regulated in 1987 as a nonprofit corporation by the Korean Ministry of Culture and Information, it became necessary to draw up a formal, written statement of theological position:

1. We believe that there is one God in three Persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

2. We believe that God created the heaven and the earth and all other things in the universe; that he is the Sovereign Ruler of all things; that the Sovereign God reveals himself; we believe in his redemptive work and in his final judgment.
3. We believe that the Bible is inspired by God; that it is truth; that it is the final authority in faith and practice.
4. We believe that since the fall of Adam, all people have been under the bondage and power of sin and deserving of the judgment and wrath of God.
5. We believe that Jesus Christ, God and man, through his atoning sacrificial death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection, is the only way of salvation; he alone saves us from sin and judgment.
6. We believe that regeneration is by the work of the Holy Spirit; that the Holy Spirit works in the heart of every believer to lead him or her.
7. We believe that we are made righteous by grace alone, through faith alone.
8. We believe that the church is the body of Christ and that all Christians are members of it.
9. We believe that Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Obviously, the statement is evangelical in orientation. Yet the members are neither asked to subscribe to it in writing nor encouraged to memorize it. These doctrines are gradually assimilated as the members engage in ongoing Bible study.

#### *Sunday Worship Service*

Every UBF chapter holds a worship service on Sunday afternoon, usually at three o'clock. The time, three in the afternoon, was originally chosen so that students could attend a local church worship service in the morning with their families. This meeting has grown and now functions as a true gathering of the body, an assembly of a local congregation.

The worship service is organized along a schedule something like this: The service opens with silent prayer, followed by the singing of a hymn of praise. Next, representative prayers are offered by one or more prayer servants, who have been appointed beforehand. These prayers always include intercession for various missionaries in other countries, as well as for God's blessing on the service and on the message from the Word. Music plays an important role in UBF worship services. Each service includes not only congregational singing but also special music performed by various UBF members who are musically gifted. Many large chapters also have small orchestras and choral groups. Before the message, the Scripture passage is read aloud responsively by the congregation and a student leader, who presides.

The focal point of each worship service is the Bible message, which, technically speaking, is more biblical exegesis than sermon, for UBF's method is textual rather than topical Bible study. Usually the director of each chapter delivers the Sunday message, but spiritually mature lay leaders are also given opportunities to share, as part of their discipleship training. After the message an offering is taken. At the conclusion of the service, the congregation pairs off for prayer based on the Scripture just studied and on individual needs.

#### *UBF Bible Conferences*

Each region of UBF holds more than two annual public conferences, two to five days per conference. Christian thinkers from the field of theology, history, and phi-

losophy are often invited to speak at these conferences. Also, every UBF member is expected to take an active part in one way or another, be it preaching, sharing a testimony, leading a Bible study, or serving behind the scenes.

#### *Leadership Training*

UBF takes disciple-making very seriously. Training takes many forms, the most basic of which is discipline in the study of the Word. For this purpose, there is a student-led meeting each week, usually held on a Friday evening. During the week, student leaders study the passage for the week (that is, the message delivered at the previous Sunday's worship service). They then write a *sogam*, a personal testimony, based on the passage, and share their testimonies at the student leaders' meeting. In this way, the Word of God is reinforced and planted in each person's heart.

#### *The One-to-One Discipleship*

Underlying the methodology of one-to-one discipleship is the theological conviction that when human beings are valued not for their inherent worth, but for secondary reasons—heritage, rank, birth, appearance, and the like—they can hate and mechanize other people or turn them into commodities.

Since its beginning, UBF has eschewed large gatherings and focused on personal evangelism. To be sure, UBF does recognize the necessity of occasional large gatherings, and in fact has employed various Bible study methods—group Bible study, Bible conferences, and public Bible lectures by ministers, professors, and informed laymen. But UBF is also aware that large gatherings can easily become nothing more than a way for participants to release psychological and emotional tensions.

#### *Lay Evangelism*

All UBF leaders and missionaries except full-time staff members hold secular jobs while engaging in missionary activity, following the biblical example of the apostle Paul, who worked as a tentmaker while pioneering in founding many early churches.

All would-be UBF evangelists go through two levels of training: a preliminary and a main phase. The trainees undergo preliminary training under the guidance of regional UBF staff. In this phase, they are expected to study the Bible, learn the rudiments of the language of their future mission field, and complete their professional training, taking one to two years. They reach this level of training after graduating from a college.

When the preliminary training is over, the trainee begins the main intensive phase of training, which is usually held in Seoul for trainees living in Korea, and in Chicago for those outside Korea. In this phase, the trainees must live together with other trainees and attain a thorough understanding of the Bible, concentrating on the five Books of Moses, the Gospels, Romans, and the Acts of the Apostles. A trainee also has to absorb biblical theology, philosophy, and church history. Furthermore, the trainees have to develop their ability to speak the language of the field. This part of the training usually lasts more than three months.

#### **Critique of the UBF**

UBF's commitment to world mission and its tentmaking missionary model have been praised by many churchmen in Korea and abroad. Yet it would be misleading not

