

“Soldier Spirit and Theology of Sacrifice of Mid-Twentieth-Century Korean Missionaries in America: Case Study of the University Bible Fellowship”

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This paper examines the ethos and theology of South Korean missionaries born in mid-twentieth century Korea who descended onto the various college campuses across the United States from the 1970s to preach the gospel to Americans, particularly white Americans. It addresses how Korean evangelical missionaries were able to proselytize Americans by delving into the theology that undergirded their mission efforts. Based on a case study of University Bible Fellowship (UBF), the largest non-denominational missionary-sending agency in South Korea, the data for the paper consist of: four years of participant observations in UBF chapters; 108 interviews with Korean missionaries and UBF staff; 186 online surveys; and content analysis of UBF documents. This paper pays close attention to the socio-historical context of Koreans born in mid-twentieth century Korea who came of age when South Korea was still a poor and politically volatile nation, ruled by one authoritarian regime after another during the height of the Cold War. It argues that the Korean missionaries likened themselves as spiritual soldiers and came equipped with an intense “soldier spirit” to evangelize Americans. As true soldiers, the missionaries also sacrificed intensely and practiced a theology of sacrifice, a “theology from below” to make their revitalization efforts a reality in America. The paper concludes with the question of whether this soldier spirit and theology of sacrifice can persist among Korean evangelicals in the more affluent and globalized contemporary South Korean context.