

# TOWARD A NEW ATTITUDE ON SOCIAL DIAKONIA

## A LESSON FROM THE CHURCH'S ENCOUNTER WITH SOCIETY IN OKAYAMA

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Let us turn to history, to see how the mission of church took place in Japan and how Christ's church in Japan was formed and especially to ask the question what was the relationship between church and society in the early history of Christian church in Japan.

Within this limited space we can not review the chronological development of one hundred years, and it is also impossible to describe all the aspects of social service of the churches covering the entire country. Therefore I would like to limit myself to a particular area of the country and to see how actually the church engaged in a conversation with the world and what were the basic patterns and characteristics of the relationship between the church and society in the particular area.

I intentionally chose the Okayama area for various reasons: 1) Okayama is one of the places in which since the early Meiji period an active encounter between church and society took place, 2) my personal involvement in the Okayama area, first, as a pastor at Kurashiki Church and as a research worker during the past three years have convinced me of the rich resources of Okayama on this question.

The first evidence of mission to Okayama took the form of social diakonia, namely a visit of Dr. Taylor in the spring of 1875. He was asked by an influential man, Yokotaro Nakagawa, then a government worker, to help the medical work of the area. Although he made several trips, he could not make arrangements for permanent stationing there. After some investigation and preparation, in April 1879, the

Okayama Mission Station was founded. According to what is normally written in the church history of Okayama, it was Mr. Nakagawa who came to Kobe in November 1878 in order to invite Dr. Berry of American Board. But this was not true. Last year while I was in Boston I went to Library of Harvard University to see the file of the Okayama Mission of American Board. I discovered the fact that it was Dr. Berry who searched for the place and through an incidental experience met with Nakagawa who came to Kobe for other business. Let me quote from the report of Otis Cary dated June 1879.

“Dr. Berry being already blessed with a knowledge of the language was ready to lead some of the younger men into the interior. (Note, how the study of the language was taken seriously at that time, although they did not have tape recorder nor Naganuma books!) He therefore planned to go with Mr. Atkinson in an exploring tour in search of some place favorable for our work. Important historic events turn upon a pair of old boots without which possibly Okayama Station would not have been founded.

The story is perhaps worthy of being put on permanent record. Our esteemed Japanese friend, Nakagawa, is the possessor of a pair of boots made of red leather. The day before Messrs Atkinson and Berry were to start on the tour just referred to, the former while passing by a native hotel in Kobe happened to see these very boots standing by the entrance. There could be no mistake, they would be known if seen at the North Pole. Evidently the owner could not be far away and inquiry made it certain that Nakagawa was in the hotel. That evening in a consultation held with him, the prospect of establishing a mission station in Okayama with Dr. Berry engaged in medical work in a school, was suggested. At first he showed no great interest in the scheme, but afterwards becoming enthusiastic over it, he said that instead of continuing his journey to Kioto he would at once return to Okayama and prepare the way for Mr. Atkinson and Dr. Berry if they would delay their coming for a few days. Thus the old red boots though they interrupted the business of their owner, sent him back to a work without which we would perhaps have been unable to gain a foothold in the city.”

This we may call the work of Holy Spirit through a pair of old red boots. The interesting fact in the beginning of the mission in Okayama is the fact that the church witnessed the love of God through services to the social need of the people in Okayama. Evangelism and social service were taken as the inseparable parts of the total mission of the church.

In the early period of the Okayama Mission, social service, Christian

education and preaching of the good news went together. The work of mission was centered upon the medical work of Dr. Berry. They opened a half a dozen stations outside of Okayama city mainly through the medical work which was followed by preaching and teaching of Gospel. The second Annual Report of Okayama Station by Otis Cary dated May 1880 says,

“It will be seen that with the exception of Takedarmura all our outstation are founded in connection with medical work. The interest of the physicians and other prominent men being aroused, they have been willing to provide means for preaching the Gospel as the only way of securing the humanitarian work. ....While speaking of medical work it may be well to sum up here the number of patients seen by Dr. Berry through theyear as 5934.”

Dr. Berry who became an adviser for the health and sanitation program of the prefecture, made valuable suggestions in prison reform and improvement of the city sanitation project.

Miss Alice Pettee Adames, inspired by her cousin, Rev. and Mrs. James Horace Pettee who had been staying in Okayama since 1879, succeeded the spirit of diakonia in Okayama. On the way to a outstation Sunday School she used to pass a slum area and became friendly with the children and young people of the slum, and finally established a Sunday school in 1891 which later became Hakuai, the oldest social settlement in Japan. She opened a primary school for children, a medical settlement for sick people and night school for working boys and girls. It is a dedicated ministry to people in need continuously carried on for nearly seventy years by those who were called to take part in the Christ's suffering in the world.

Confronted with the orphans who did not have any person to care for them and being encouraged by pioneers like George Müller who made a visit Japan in 1886, Ishii Jyuji opened Okayama Orphanage in 1887. In spite of the difficulties Ishii faced through the years, he extended the work of service to orphans with the support of his friends and earnest prayer. In regard to education, churches in Okayama were extremely sensitive in responding to need, especially education of women

who did not receive any opportunity of education at the time.

In Okayama, even before the formation of the church, there was serious talk among Christians about establishing a school for women. Again let me quote from Annual Report of Okayama Mission by Otis Cary, in 1879.

“The last plan to be mentioned here is one originating with the people themselves, for founding of a school for the Christian education of girls. The first active measure for this were taken only two or three weeks ago when six persons (four of them Christians) met together for consultation on various things and decided that such a school was needed. They then pledged themselves to give \$100 annually for three years towards its support.”

This was one year before the official formation of the Okayama Church. Out of this spontaneous effort and prayer, Sanyo Girl School was founded on October 18, 1886. A similar thing happened in Takahashi, twenty seven miles northeast of Okayama. It was a city of about 2,000 houses and formerly was the castle town of the feudal chief of that province. The Gospel was brought there through medical work, and the church was founded in 1882.

Two years before the formation of the church, namely, in 1880, two women teachers of a local primary school were forced to resign from their jobs because they took a part in an evangelistic meeting in the town. They decided to establish a Christian School for girls in the town. The school was formed in December 1881, five months before the official formation of the church. Both Sanyo and Junsei are the oldest girl's schools existing in the Okayama prefecture today.

In a recent visit to the area, I discovered two cases in which Christians founded schools for women in the rather remote mountain area. In Tsuyama, Takeuchi Girls School was founded by Fumiko Takeuchi, graduate of Kobe college in 1893 and continued until 1903. In Katsuyama also a small girls school was formed under the name of Shuei Gakusha (school of excellency) in 1893 by Takeyo Kanzaki, and has produced several prominent women.

In relation to the civil liberty movement, Christians made a valuable

contribution to the protection of human rights and promoted equality and liberty among all people. Isoo Abe, later founder of the Japanese Socialist Party, graduated of Doshisha, and went to serve to a church in Okayama in 1887. He was astonished at seeing Eta people (specially segregated minority) taking an active part in the life of the church. Takeda-Mura was a village of Eta people located about one and a half miles northeast of Okayama city. Nakatsuka, one of the members of the Takeda-Mura became an earnest Christian and led the adult Bible study group in which many of the former Samurai class people participated. Theoretically Abe had known Christianity stands for the equality of all people but seeing this reality of the oneness of people in Okayama Christians, he was awed by the power of Christian religion.

After having made such an outstanding contribution, the churches in Okayama in the course of the later development of the history somehow could not follow in the steps of the forefathers.

What was the reason the church became inactive in social witness? Was it caused by a changing trends in society or did the church internally lose this distinctive element of Christian faith? We may point out the lessons we learn from the Church's encounter with society in Okayama in the following ways.

### (1) The Primacy of Diakonia

The immediate and spontaneous expressions of service or love toward one's neighbour, especially toward the suffering neighbour, is an indispensable mark of the witnessing community. A living church does not necessarily mean a busy church or an institutionally well established church. It is a church which is willing to serve others as Christ who is the head of the church, served us at the cost of his life. As Luther precisely expressed it.

"A Christian man lives not in himself, but in Christ through faith, in his neighbour through love; by faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. by love he sinks down beneath himself into his neighbour."

(Treaties on Christian Liberty, Works, Mulenberg Press, II, p. 342)

Especially in this secularized society in which we live mere preaching in monologue and mere verbal proclamation is insufficient to communicate the Gospel. The age of children when everyone considered religion as genuinely acceptable has passed. Now man of the mid-twentieth century think of religion as superstition, from a rationalistic view point, and as opium from a Marxist interpretation. I believe this secularistic outlook of a matured world was caused not so much by the world as by the church which limited or disregarded the function of diakonia to the world. While people sought to obtain the bread of life, the church tended to provide a sentimental, sweet hymns or hard and abstract theological doctrine.

H. D. Wendland wrote an outstanding book, "Church in the Modern Society", in which he depicted the task of the church in the industrial society as follows,

"In this new era of its encounter with the world, the church would neither try to integrate the whole world in itself nor attempt to become the predominant institution and set the pattern. In the world which reached maturity the church will renounce any claim to clerical domination and any attempt to "churchfy" the world—not because it is forced to do so, but because it realizes the true nature of its ministry to the world. The new attitude of the church to the world will then, have to be one of service."

(Dietrich Wendland, *Die Kirche in der Modernen Gesellschaft*, s. 14)

## (2) Diakonia and Evangelism

If the diakonia is the one of the important marks of the living church our question is "What is the relationship of diakonia to the other tasks of the Christian church?"

Canon Wedel in his stimulating article which appeared in *Ecumenical Review*, in April 1957 pointed out the inseparable three-fold witness of the church, as existed in early church in Jerusalem after Pentecost, namely, *Kerygma*, proclamation of Gospel, *Koinonia*, sacramental fellowship, and *Diakonia*, service to social need. One may add *Didache*, namely the teaching ministry of the church to this trinity. Whether it is triangle or quartet, it is clear that the churches' witness

is the witness of the entire body as a whole. It was rather tragic when we look back the later development of the churches in Okayama, there was a notable disintegration of these inseparable tasks of the mission of the church.

In the Taisho period and early period of Showa, several churches in Okayama Prefecture were unfortunate split, mainly on this issue. Namely, a split between Saidaiji and Kagato Churches occurred around 1919 since the former regarded fellowship among the congregation and the later pietistic devotional life as the essential element of the church. Similar division took place in the early 1930s in Kuse Church, one group emphasized the social reform movement with a liberal theological perspective, and the other, emotional revivalistic movement under the influence of the Holiness Church. Of course, these were the extreme cases, but it is true to say with a few exceptions, the church did not grasp comprehensively the total task of the mission of the church. It is fair to say in the course of time the institutional churches tended to limit their major concern of church work in terms of institutional strengthening or activities within the church building, whether worship, organized evangelism, prayer meetings, or bazaars, and tended to lose the spontaneous willingness to render new forms of service to the new problems in changing society. Christian social work agencies, on the other hand, were caught between two problems. On the one hand, they had a tremendous struggle to keep up the technical excellence and equipment of public social work agencies which have been developing rapidly in recent years. On the other hand, as the process of professionalization of social work developed, there was a temptation to lose the distinctive Christian element in the work. This led to another form of fragmentation of the inseparable three-fold witness of the church. If I may state the problem in a more positive form, it can be said that diakonia is not a means to evangelism, but the act of diakonia itself is a part of the witness to the redemption love of God in the world.

An act of giving bread to the needy is not like the act of fishing,

giving bait in order to catch a fish out of the dirty pond called "world" and into a clean and pure pool called "church". This is what I call "fishing industry" evangelism. But actually evangelism is our total witness to and response to the work of God present in the world. Diakonia in this sense is an important aspect of the witness of the church. It is a "Pantomime of Salvation" if I may use a phrase of Professor Hoekendjiek, who says, "Service to men is not a preparation for the bringing of the Gospel, but is in itself a way of exhibiting the Gospel in deeds and acts. It is also the Pantomime of Salvation without any accompanying spoken test."

### (3) Social Diakonia

As Reinhold Niebuhr ably described in his little book "Contribution of Religion to Social Work" (1932), the church was the mother of social work. Churches in Okayama as well as in others parts of Japan performed the role of being mother for the development of social work. However, Niebuhr also points out very critically in the book how the church tended to provide naive individualistic charity rather than social justice which gives human rights, in the course of the modern development of Christian social work.

As we observed, in our case study, it was a venture of the small group of Christians to initiate and to support various kinds of social work in Okayama. But on the other hand, the work of charity tended to be expressed in individualistic form. In spite of the external growth of the institutional church, churches in general in the later development of church history in Okayama became less critical toward the causes of existing social evil and tended to widen the gap separating them from the lower class people.

Thus the social concern of the Protestant churches by and large was expressed in the efforts to secure a decent living for all people as charity rather than a right of the people. I would like to describe this type of diakonia as the charitable diakonia of the bourgeois period.

It is obvious in this rapidly changing industrial society, the form of diakonia comes to the swiching point, namely, change from individualistic charitable diakonia to the demonstration of social diakonia. Let me quote from a sentence of Professor Hoekendjik who expresses the meaning of social diakonia in a moving way.

After explaining the need for charitable diakonia he says, "But there is more; these poor are recognized as those who in society are likely to be the victims of unnecessary suffering. They are vulnerable in society, without defence against the arbitrariness of the rich and powerful. They are unprovided for, unprotected and oppressed, unless God's people intervene with justice on their behalf. This means more than to show 'charity'. It means taking the side of the poor, showing brotherhood and solidarity with those who are being threatened, placing oneself between them and points of oppression. In this way a correction is brought into society and a sign is established of the world of peace as it is meant and promised by God. This is social diakonia."

What does this mean to perform a function of social diakonia in our Japanese society today? To be sure we must continue our charitable diakonia. But the point I am making here is in this highly complex organizational society in which we live, it is a fact that *without social diakonia the charitable diakonia also shrinks*. Let me make this point more concretely in quoting from Professor Hoekendjik again,

"Today one of the large group of people who are out of touch of church and society is workers in industry. They could not be situated in traditionally known society. He is neither a handworker nor a poorman, although that is what he was called for a long time. As a proletarian he found himself outside of the society which had been ordered either by traditional ethics or professional ethics, and thus he now found himself outside the reach of traditional diakonia.

Completely new ways had to be sought in order to bring salvation for the proletarian into the situation. In the era of social diakonia, those who were formerly the object of charity have become partners in a common struggle for social justice and reorganization."

In this sense, the work of the trade union movement and legislative work in the political realm are highly crucial areas in which the

social diakonia of churches are called for.

In the training of ministry and laity in our Protestant churches, and in the actual programs and organizational structure of our churches are we ready to respond to these challenges of social diakonia or not?

#### (4) Ecumenical Aspect of Diakonia

Diakonia is an act of love to people in need. It is a transforming love across the barrier of kinship, group, class, nation and even denominationalism. It is an ecumenical concern of the churches throughout the world to participate in Christ's suffering ministry in the world. It is a beautiful phase. But how far reality is from the vision of celebrating together the Agape meal. But there have been encouraging new frontier developments emerging in the ecumenical diakonia in recent decades. Inter-Church Aid is certainly an effective example of the God's people around the world meeting the urgent suffering of the world, bringing all the resources of God's people together-material, ideas, talent, spirit and personal. Inter-Church Aid means to choose to be partners with whom one can serve in the world.

That which has been received wants to be used in service. Recently I encountered one concrete example of social diakonia on an ecumenical level. Mr. John Ramsey who had been an organizer of the labor union movement in southern United States, now the Secretary for Community Relations in the United Steel Workers Union, was sent by the Commission of Ecumenical Mission and Relation of United Presbyterian Church U. S. A. to the Christian churches in Korea in order to help the churches to render mere effective service to the working people in Korea. Upon his arrival in Pusan he visited the Dock Worker Union which has more than 30,000 workers. They are now in the process of building a fine union hall. Mr. Ramsey asked one of the union leaders, whether there is a possibility to have Christian meeting in the Union Hall. The union leader said, "We dock workers are working hard with low wages and exploited. We do not have time

and money to enter Christian church.” Immediately Ramsey said, “Christianity is the religion of those who were exploited and those who have sufferings and heavy burdens are invited to here the Gospel.”

This kind of personal exchange among the churches of the world in order to stimulate each other for the performance of social diakonia is highly important.

#### (5) **Eschatological Aspect of our Diakonia**

Now finally I come to the last point which is fitting as the last heading since the title is Eschatological Aspect of Diakonia.

The word, eschatology may sound to some of you as something which has fearful connotation. In deed, no one can look the final judgement without fear and trembling. However, unlike the Buddhist doctrine of judgement, Christian outlook toward the final day is that of hope and joy rather than fear and sorrow. We know the forgiveness and resurrection at the final day through the event of Jesus Christ who is the center of our history.

We are living between the times, the time of Christ's ascension and the final consummation. How is the Christian understanding of history seen in terms of eschatological view related to the work of diakonia?

It is not easy to perform the function of diakonia in any period of history. Especially in the realm of the social diakonia in this highly complex and changing society, one tends to be discouraged by facing incomplete and even incoherent achievement, and to face the almost dead end-situation. There are temptations to become a machine, on the one hand, to serve to the machine repeatedly without thinking seriously of the task of humanity. On the other hand, there is a temptation to become like animal seeking the attainment of his own selfish interest or institutional interest. The Christian also feel these temptations. He also experiences failure in performing the act of social diakonia. One time he has to compromise and he may drop the dishes.

In this sense he is not so different from other non-Christian friends. But the decisive difference exists at one crucial point. Namely, he believes in the forgiveness of sin and the final victory of God over the world, because Christ already has risen from bondage of death and darkness. He has a somehow undefinable sign of hope in his freedom from sin. Thus the eschatological aspect of our witness can be expressed in the following way. Together with the members of the God's people in the world, we participate in an orchestra which is practicing a piece of music. Each has a different instrument, large or small, which is skillfully or unskillfully. The practice is fragmental and imcomplete, and sometimes interrupted by wind and storm. But with a sense of hope and joy, we are continuing our preparation because we believe at last the time will come when the eternal conductor holds the orchestra at rest, the supreme instrument will announce the theme which will sound throughout the symphony, and which may be called the symphony of redemption.