

# John Sung and the Asian Awakening

by Timothy Tow

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*Dr. John Sung's ministry marked a significant turning point in the Asian Awakening, bringing hundreds of thousands of souls to Christ through his powerful preaching and revivalism.*

**Scripture:** Ephesians 2:8

**Topics:** "Revival Ministry", "Holy Spirit"

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## Description

Timothy Tow shares the remarkable story of Dr. John Sung, a native son of China who brought about an Asian Awakening in 1931, leading to the conversion of over 100,000 souls from 1933-1936 and possibly 200,000-300,000 souls from 1928-1949. Sung's ministry was marked by a powerful anointing of the Spirit, with thousands being saved through his relentless service and bold preaching against sin. Despite facing personal struggles and doubts during his education in America, Sung's encounter with the crucified Christ transformed him, leading to a life dedicated to preaching the Gospel and bringing revival to spiritually dead church members.

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## Transcript

According to Edward Band, there were only a score of missionaries in China three decades after Robert Morrison first brought the gospel to the country, and the total numbers baptized did not exceed one hundred. In fact, in 1900, the Chinese Church was just coming of age. Although a few foreign missionaries such as Marie Monson, Anna Christiansen, and Jonathan Goforth had considerable impact, the Asian Awakening did not begin in earnest until 1931 under the ministry of a native son, Dr. John Sung.

The Spirit mightily fell on Sung, and thousands were brought into the kingdom through his ministry. William E. Schubert, a veteran missionary to China, estimates that from 1933-1936, Sung had something over 100,000 converts. If this estimate is correct, we can safely compute that between 200,000-300,000 souls were born again from 1928-1949 through Sung's relentless service. He traveled to literally hundreds of locations during his ministry, and a catalogue of the places he visited would range the length and breadth of China and Southeast Asia.

The numbers saved under Sung's ministry are all the more remarkable considering there were only about a million Protestant Christians in China prior to the Communist takeover in 1949. In addition, those converted under Sung's preaching were instrumental in bringing many more souls to Christ. Lim Puay Hian, an outstanding disciple of Sung, alone won thousands to the Lord in Fukien Province.

Sung was born in 1901 to a family of eleven children. Strong-headed like his father, a Methodist pastor, Sung had both a fiery temper and a soft heart. At the age of eight or nine, he experienced the blessings of a revival that occurred in his home church in Hinghwa in which 3,000 were gloriously saved. At the age of 13, he became his father's assistant, even standing in for him at the pulpit and earning the nickname "Little Pastor."

#### Sung's Education and Conversion in America

The roots of Sung's distinctive ministry can be traced to the period of his education in America. A brilliant scholar, his parents planned for him to attend the Naval College. Failing this, and further being turned away from entering the university in the national capital by the sudden death of a sister, a missionary friend helped him come to America to complete his education.

Though at first he intended to study for the ministry in fulfillment of his parents' wishes, he instead chose to take up science. At the university, Sung struggled against the dark powers of modernist unbelief. By his own testimony, he did not indulge in the four Chinese proverbial sins of womanizing, gambling, drinking and smoking, but rather in the deadlier sins of the spirit. Pride, hypocrisy, doubt, and unbelief nearly ravaged his soul.

Sung's own experience of the crushing burden of sin during this time became the basis for his vivid portrayal of sin in his future ministry. Like John the Baptist whose name he assumed from the night of his conversion, his message was marked by unremitting rebuke of sin in both high and low places, particularly in the church.

Sung studied from 1920-1926, earning a Ph.D. in Chemistry, along with many academic awards. However, at the height of human glory, he was cast down with melancholy at the words of Jesus, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). At this time, he was visited by a Methodist pastor who suggested he attend Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

At Union Seminary, Sung was bombarded with liberal theology. His favorite teacher was Harry Emerson Fosdick, later minister of New York's famed Riverside Church. His faith crumbled to the ground. In a sermon he preached in later years, he lamented the deadening effect of modernistic teaching, punning the word "seminary" with the word "cemetery." Concluding that if God was dead and Christ was not risen, there was no purpose in Christianity, he turned to Taoism, Buddhism, and to the Koran.

The more he searched for the truth in these false religions, the more confused and desperate he became. For forty days and nights, Sung endured an intense struggle between truth and error and between the Spirit of God and the spirit of Satan. On the fortieth night which was February 10, 1927, Sung reached the point where he no longer desired to live. Nevertheless, he persevered in prayer and in the confession of his sins.

As the clock struck midnight, he was suddenly overwhelmed by a vision of the crucified Christ standing before him. In a compassionate voice, the Lord comforted him, "My son, your sins are forgiven! Your name is now changed to John." When the vision receded, John felt a wonderful relief in the sudden rolling away of his sin-burden. Leaping to his feet with a shout of Hallelujah!, he sang loud praises to God. His songs rang through the corridors of his fourth floor dormitory.

For a whole week, Sung preached the glad news of his newfound Savior ceaselessly. Gentle as a lamb to those who heard him patiently, he had the boldness of a lion against every power of darkness. His spiritual eyes opened, he went straight to his favorite teacher, Fosdick, and declared: "You are of the devil. You made me lose my faith!" For denouncing sin in high places, he was sent to a mental asylum where he was confined for 193 days.

The mental hospital was God's appointed seminary for Sung. Shut out from the world, he read his Bible through repeatedly. Henceforth, he would read no other book. Confined in the section of the hospital reserved for the most severe cases, Sung was bombarded by a tirade of jangling sounds throughout the day. Here the hothead of a scholar was properly tempered to become a patient servant of the Lord. Upon his release, he threw all his degrees and academic awards into the ocean on his voyage back to China in order to make sure he would not be attracted again by the glitters of this world.

### An Eyewitness Account of Sung's Ministry in Singapore

Perhaps my own experience of Sung's ministry when I went to hear him in Singapore at the age of fifteen will help to describe this man of God further. My first impression was that he was a most unusual man. Attired in a white Chinese gown with a shock of uncombed hair flapping before his big forehead, his demeanor was at the same time earnest and serene. Owing to much speaking, his voice was hoarse but rich with sincerity and appeal.

Realizing that what the Chinese Church needed was repentance and new birth, he fearlessly lashed out at the sins of the people, naming them one by one. His remedy was none other than the precious blood of Christ and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. He declared our duty before a holy God to humble ourselves and to confess our sins. Many, including myself, wept bitterly for our sins.

The words of his theme song were, "In the cross, in the cross, be my glory ever. All my sins are washed away in the blood of Yesu." By singing that chorus in repentance, we were acknowledging that we had been truly cleansed by the precious blood of Christ. We knew and felt sure that our sins were forgiven. When we were thus gloriously saved, a wave of praise and prayer went up spontaneously from our hearts and lips as in the days of the Acts of the Apostles.

After the sermon, many who had problems met with Sung. In these counseling sessions, feuding elders and deacons made up with each other. Sums of money that had been stolen were returned. Mr. Gan, a man with three wives, repented together with them. He made an agreement with his second and third wives to live apart while continuing to provide for their needs.

After a preaching tour in Malaysia and Indonesia, Sung returned to Singapore for a second campaign. He took his converts through a Bible study three times a day. His sermons in these sessions, though topical, were graduated. The result was a progression into Bible study which led the new converts into the deep truths of the Scriptures.

A thorough student of the Bible, Sung knew the Old Testament as well as the New. His sermon texts ranged through every book of the Bible. Believing in the soon coming of Christ, he would expound Daniel or Revelation in follow-up meetings after every revival campaign. These Bible study sessions, like his revival meetings, would last two hours each session, and were conducted three times a day.

Sung strongly emphasized the holiness of God by quoting the Ten Commandments and by denouncing specific sins that fit under the categories of each Commandment. Since the wages of sin is death, he spoke often on the themes of heaven and hell.

Sung was very sound in his doctrine of Christ. Making Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and return the center of his preaching, his sermons were orthodox and well balanced. In addition, Sung's doctrine of the church was solid and fundamental. While he was not slow to rebuke modernist ecclesiastical leaders, he loved and worked well with God's people.

### The Nanchang Pentecost

The break-through of Sung's ministry came in the city of Nanchang. During this campaign, Sung preached three times every day, each time with a fiery anointing. At the end of the first two weeks, God was moving mightily. Sung announced on Sunday morning that there would be a prayer meeting that night instead of the regular preaching service. That afternoon, 193 students and teachers went to a village, Bean Sprout Lane, about two miles outside the city. They went two by two into the village homes to witness. The village people would come out of their houses carrying their idols. The stone idols they threw into the river, and the wooden ones they burned. The entire village gave up idolatry.

### Communist Students Converted

One night during the services in Nanchang, the Holy Spirit fell on the congregation. Sung surprised us by suddenly asking everyone to go home to their rooms to pray quietly. He said, "Now I'll pronounce the benediction." However, as he prayed, the Holy Spirit fell a second time, and everybody began to pray in chorus again. Again he stopped us: "You didn't understand; I didn't say to pray here." I later asked him why he stopped us, and he told me, "I didn't want the missionaries to say, 'That crazy Sung made all the students crazy.'"

As he began to pronounce the benediction again, the Holy Spirit fell upon the whole congregation a third time, and Sung at last let us go on uninterrupted. Spontaneous prayer must have continued forty-five minutes to an hour. As Christians were coming under conviction and confessing their sins, seven or eight Communist students also began to come under conviction. They later confessed that they had been paid to come to the meetings in order to cause trouble.

These Communist students were in the center of rows scattered throughout the audience where they could make the most disturbance. They tried to get out, but the Christian students wouldn't let them out of the rows. The Christian students had been praying for them. All the agitators could do was to stand up, beat their breasts, and cry out, "Oh, our unspeakable sins." They all became earnest Christians.

### The Power of Divine Anointing

Divine power in no small measure was poured upon Sung. His work was not one of adding to the Kingdom by tens, but rather of multiplying by hundreds into thousands and ten thousands. Out of the population of one million Protestants in China in 1949, several hundred thousand were born again and filled with the Spirit under his ministry.

His ministry was not so much evangelism as it was revivalism. His messages were directed at spiritually dead church members more than those outside the church, though a portion of his converts were from heathen backgrounds.

When I think of Sung and then consider what I see and read of present-day evangelists, he towers like an Everest over foothills. Is this an overstatement by a lover of John Sung? If you are inclined to think so, take note of the appraisal of Sung by William E. Schubert, a veteran missionary to China, who said, "Dr. John Sung was probably the greatest preacher of the 20th century. I have heard almost all of the great preachers from 1910 until now, including R. A. Torrey, Billy Sunday, Henry Jowett, and Billy Graham. Yet John Sung surpassed them all in pulpit power, attested by amazing and enduring results." May God give us more such men.

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