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Bong-Seok Choi (1869–1944): Hermeneutics, Power, and Pastoral Resistance

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Abstract

Bong-Seok Choi (1869–1944) is widely recognised as a significant figure in the history of Korean Christianity. Although his contributions have been noted in earlier scholarship, his role as a representative of cultural resistance has yet to receive sufficient interpretative attention. This study examines Choi's ministry primarily as a pastor - while also taking into account his activities as an evangelist and colporteur - within broader theological, sociological, and psychological contexts. Drawing on the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur, Foucault's genealogical analysis of power and knowledge, and insights from counselling psychology, it is argued that Choi embodied a prophetic ministry of resistance which simultaneously functioned as evangelism, cultural opposition, and existential care for colonised Koreans. "Jesus, Heaven; Unbelief, Hell! " (often paraphrased as "No Jesus, Hell!") was the celebrated slogan of Choi's sermons. It is not to be understood as a reductionist formula but as an ideological gesture that resists Japanese imperial domination and works as a hermeneutical gesture. What appears innocuous or naïve should instead be understood as an underground rhetoric with real effects in the political, psychological, and theological arenas. Although Choi's itinerant life as a colporteur exposed him to the dynamics of spiritual resistance, social discipline, and communal care, these experiences ultimately deepened his vocation as a pastor. It was in his pastoral office, more than in his colportage work, that his identity as a leader of resistance and martyrdom came most fully to expression. In conclusion, this study

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reappraises the impact of Choi's ministry on Korean Christianity and proposes interpretative frameworks for examining historical religious figures at the intersection of hermeneutics, Foucauldian critique, and counselling psychology.

Keywords: Bong-Seok Choi, hermeneutics, Foucault, colonial Korea under Japan, pastoral counseling.

Introduction

Throughout most of Christian history, attention has been focused on institutional leaders, theologians, and prominent missionaries, while individuals such as colporteurs have largely remained in obscurity. These itinerant Bible distributors reached areas where churches were weak, impoverished, or absent churches, selling and giving away Bibles at every stop (Chung, 1995; Yi, 1990; Kim & Chung, 2024). While sometimes perceived as simply "Bible vendors" or missionary aides, actually, they were accomplishing much more than implied by their designation. They were missionaries in their own right—transcending cultures, creating communities, and, in some instances, dying as martyrs in protest of governmental injustice (Chung, 2003a**;** Kim, 2017; Kim, 2025).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Korea's colporteurs were instrumental in the propagation of Protestant Christianity. They were particularly vital during Japanese rule, where Christian book delivery was a statement of evangelism and a way to survive (Go et al., 2021). They enabled congregations to survive persecution and maintain their convictions in spite of being constantly threatened (Park, 2014; Ryu et al., 1994). A prime example of one such unsung hero was Bong-Seok Choi (1869–1944). Though he started out as a poor colporteur, his most significant contributions were through pastoral ministry and his courageous theological opposition. His revivalist ministry, work in north Korea and Manchuria, and uncompromising refusal to conduct Japanese Shinto shrine worship ultimately resulted in his imprisonment and death in 1944, which solidified his reputation as a martyr.

His own catchphrase was a stern, arresting slogan: "Jesus, Heaven; Unbelief, Hell". Choi appeared to be eccentric, even fanatical, to some contemporaries(Chung, 2003b; Kim, 2025; Park, 2014). This condemnation ignores the crucial significance of his message, which can only be valued in the context of colonial oppression. Having undergone relative stability for decades under the Joseon dynasty, Korea was facing a grave crisis when it was annexed by Japan in 1910. For the next thirty-six years, Koreans experienced political repression, economic exploitation, and systematic suppression of their language and culture under Japanese colonial rule until liberation in 1945 (Seo et al., 2022). It was against this background of suffering and injustice that Choi's seemingly naive gospel message was a call to rebellion.

It served as a religious provocation to a disoriented people, defying Japanese imperial authority, and exhibited quiet but stubborn resistance even before death (Gadamer, 1975; Ricoeur, 1984). A religious rebellion against the colonial state, his religion redirected allegiance away from the Japanese emperor to Christ (Foucault, 1980, 1982). From a psychological and pastoral perspective, the work of Choi offered the persecuted believers such distinct moral parameters and inner strength (Doehring, 2015; Seok, 2024). Past scholarship has made significant contributions by providing a solid, positivist foundation for understanding the historical facts of Choi's ministry (Park, 2014; Sim, 1992; Yi, 1990).

Such empirical approaches have been invaluable in establishing the chronology and external developments of his life and work. However, because positivist historiography naturally focuses on verifiable data, it has tended to engage less with the inner flow of his theological ideas and the spiritual dynamics shaping his pastoral actions. This study therefore seeks to

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complement rather than to criticize earlier empirical research by approaching Choi's ministry through the lens of intellectual and theological history. The two approaches, historical positivism and theological interpretation, each have distinct strengths and limitations; when viewed in a complementary relationship, they can together provide a fuller understanding of Choi's life and thought. In this work, an effort has been made to move beyond biography and instead read Choi's life as living witness of faith. It contends that he lived a "triple calling"- as herald, shepherd, and witness. In doing so, we discover that a man who was at times criticised by anti-Christian elements within Korean society and viewed with suspicion by Japanese colonial authorities because of his religious convictions and social engagement could nevertheless leave an indelible imprint on modern Korean Christianity, transforming suffering itself into a testimony of hope and resistance.

Methods

An interpretative qualitative approach is employed in the present study (Lee & Chung, 2024).The aim is not to reconstruct Choi's life in exhaustive detail from the existing archival sources, but rather to propose theoretical models that illuminate the dense theology underlying his sermons. Hermeneutics provides conceptual tools for interpreting Choi's declaration and testimony. Gadamer's unity of horizons (1975) enables a conversation between his colonial history and today's readers' horizons, and Ricoeur's (1984) narrative theory of identity plots out his life as a narrative.

Foucauldian genealogy charts his ministry on the grid of Japanese imperialism. Choi's refusal to participate in Shinto shrine worship was, in theological terms, an act of resistance, as suggested by Foucault's analyses of discipline (1977) and counter-conduct (1980, 1982). However preposterous or simplistic his slogan may appear, it exposed the mechanisms by which the state sought to control minds and bodies, serving as a trenchant condemnation of Japanese colonial ideology. Pastoral counselling psychology provides further existential insight into Choi's proclamation.

Seok's (2014) model of crisis intervention and Doehring's (2015) integral pastoral approach illustrate how Choi's martyrdom and proclamation fortified suffering Christians and established therapeutic boundaries. The entire interpretive framework is grounded in biblical theology. Romans 10:15 -"How lovely are the feet of those who bring good news" -aptly recalls Choi's itinerant ministry. To emphasize the theological continuity of his vocation, his life is interpreted in the biblical pattern of preaching, pastoring, and martyrdom. Biographies, Presbyterian church documents, and missionary reports (Ryu et al., 1994) are the primary sources for this research with secondary material on Korean theology and church history (Kim & Chung, 2024; Kim, 2025; Park, 2014) contributing additional information.
There remain, however, very many lacunae in the record. No detailed examination of Japanese colonial police archives has yet been undertaken that might illuminate surveillance activities or the criminalisation of religious protest. Choi's extensive pastoral ministry in Manchuria is also insufficiently documented, as mission histories of that region remain underexplored. Similarly, many voices within his story are muted, since church records and traditions were not systematically preserved or analysed.

This paper is thus more interpretive than highly reconstructive, offering theological and philosophical debate rather than historical reconstruction. Its gaps - specifically the way resistance was experienced and remembered by communities - need to be filled through further research in barely documented archives and oral traditions. Comparative histories of Chinese and Japanese Christians over this period could deepen our knowledge of religious resistance throughout the Japanese empire. Secondly, situating Choi's testimony in the context of memory studies, postcolonial theology, and martyrdom studies would place his

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testimony within international discourses of the endurance of faith in persecution. This inter-disciplinary discourse would heighten the recognition of the historical importance of Choi's ministry as well as widen its theological implications beyond the Korean context.

Research Findings

Apart from sketching a biography of Bong-Seok Choi, this research terms his life and ministry theological protests. The material challenges of colportage gestated the tenacity that would characterize his pastoral ministry, writing vocational calling rather than personal failure through his conversion, Confucian education, and shame experiences. His non-participation in Shinto shrine worship was a direct challenge to Japanese imperial authority, inscribing resistance onto his very body. Through its hermeneutical fusion of horizons, Foucauldian counter-history, and pastoral-existential care, Choi's revivalist slogan - "Jesus, Heaven; Unbelief, Hell! " - was not a reduction but a complex statement functioning simultaneously as proclamation, protest, and healing. On these counts, it was an instance of contextual theology in subtlety. Choi then emulated these foreign martyrs such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote his vocation in the biblical model of sacrificial discipleship - a vocation he boldly brought to martyrdom in 1944.

Discussions

Early Life, Conversion, and Colporteur Formation

Social life under Joseon Korea (1392–1910) was informed by Confucian standards that controlled not just education, but also kinship and public standing (Jeong et al., 2021). Confucian Classics knowledge was not just intellectual achievement but a means of moral expertise and social standing. Literary Chinese knowledge and the ability of disciplined prose were cultural capital to officialdom, while ancestor veneration and genealogy underpinned an honour and shame economy. It was where Bong-Seok Choi was formed, having absorbed remembering habits, control over syntax, and rhetorical frugality. These latter revived in resurgence slogans such as the much-quoted "Jesus, Heaven; Unbelief, Hell!" -a much-decried as blasphemous slogan but quite more truthfully a Christian re-interpretation of Confucian rhetorical equipoise (Kim, 2025). But the same system that had shaped him likewise doomed him to destruction. Failed gold prospecting and business ventures put him in jeopardy, and he was compelled to be a party to a financial scandal in 1900 to which he was judicially condemned and subsequently exiled to Sakju, a county of north Pyongan Province near the Yalu River border with China (Kim, 2025).

In a society in which shame was civic death, his honour was lost, and even marriage to Jeong-Nam Kim—something that otherwise would be taken to restore family reputation -failed to heal the rift. The shame of business failure was deeper than marriage's rehabilitative energy could erase, and Choi was socially ostracized. Hermeneutically, exile created what Gadamer (1975) referred to as a "horizon of despair." Understanding, for Gadamer, was never passive reception but the fusion of horizons where present prejudices encounter new meaning. The Confucian grammar of honour and shame was reconstituted rather than abolished. Shame, the awareness of irreversible loss, was reconstituted as the very possibility of hearing the promise of the gospel. Ricoeur's narrative theory of identity provides an equivalent insight. For Ricoeur (1984), not just idemidentity—status, social role, and survival through time—constitutes selfhood, but ipse identity, which is formed through responsibility, fidelity, and promise. Exile stole from Choi idem—status, lineage, and social capital—but made possible ipse based on vocation. Shame became re-scripted as calling to baptism; the apparent conclusion was the beginning of ministry.

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His conversion stories differ in detail but find common meaning. Some credit Yu-Gye Baek's encouragement, leading to baptism by American Methodist missionary William A. Noble in 1903 (Noble, 1910/2004; Park, 2014). Others emphasize his encounter with a Bible Society colporteur, Gi-Hyeong Park, whom he purchased a New Testament from (Kim, 2025). He read John 3:16 and, moved by its promise, he met with Elder Bae-Gyeong Jo, attended church for a year, and was baptized, with a second dream confirming his sensed call (Kim, 2025; Ryu et al., 1994; Sim, 1992). Hermeneutically, the particular medium - missionary goading or colporteur mediator- is of no concern to the act of truth in which Scripture addressed an already stirred conscience to shame (Gadamer, 1975). Choi was drawn to Presbyterian polity, not doctrinally- because Methodist-Presbyterian relations were cordial—but under the auspices of local mentors in Presbyterian circles. Elder Bae-Gyeong Jo of Sakju, under whose instruction he was being readied for baptism, and Bible colporteurs along the border regions were deeply aligned with Presbyterian mission organisations (Kim, 2025; Park, 2014). The theological weight center at Pyongyang, where Samuel Moffett and others had established the Presbyterian Seminary in 1901, also implied that future leaders like Choi became integrated into Presbyterian structures of training and oversight (Ryu et al., 1994).

Even if direct proof of the denominational allegiance of his counsellors does not exist, the predominance of Presbyterian influence within his circle makes this development historically plausible. Foucault's (1977, 1980, 1982) theories of power and knowledge provide a useful interpretive framework for understanding one dimension of Choi's early vocation. It should be noted, however, that there is no evidence that Choi himself understood his work as a Bible colporteur primarily in political terms. Rather, his principal concern appears to have been evangelism, Scripture distribution, and the spiritual transformation of individuals and communities.

From the perspective of this study, however, his colportage ministry may be interpreted as an indirect form of resistance. The bodily strain of long-distance walking, exposure to harsh weather, and public ridicule did not produce passivity but sustained commitment to an alternative religious vision. Through Bible reading in marketplaces, prayer in homes, and the distribution of Christian literature, Choi contributed to the formation of local Christian communities whose ultimate loyalty was directed toward Christ rather than any earthly authority (Kim & Chung, 2023; Park & Chung, 2024). In this sense, his ministry fostered forms of Christian identity that stood in tension with later imperial claims to absolute allegiance.

This indirect and largely implicit resistance reached its fullest expression in Choi's later pastoral ministry. His proclamation of "Jesus, Heaven; Unbelief, Hell!" and his refusal to participate in Shinto shrine worship represented a more explicit spiritual challenge to the emperor-centred ideology of colonial Japan. Thus, while Choi probably understood his early colportage primarily as evangelistic service, the present study argues that it unintentionally laid the foundations for a Christian counter-culture that later matured into a more visible form of religious resistance.

His street-level slogan was therefore not obscene language but revolutionary declaration: a thick apocalyptic appeal disrupting official histories with gospel hope (Foucault, 1977). From the perspective of contemporary pastoral psychology, Choi's ministry can be interpreted as providing forms of resilience and identity reconstruction.Clinebell (1984) provides that prolonged exposure to risk generates patterned strength in establishing defensive walls around suffering communities. Doehring (2015) emphasises holding empathy together with prophetic confrontation, both of which were evident in Choi's ministry - gentle listening at a doorway coupled with bold challenge in the marketplace. Hernandez, Gangsei, and Engstrom (2007) describe "vicarious resilience," whereby one person's endurance empowers others

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through identification.

Choi's stamina in the face of derision and poverty functioned in precisely this way, offering his congregations embodied hope. He enrolled in Pyongyang Presbyterian Seminary in 1907 during his work at Byeokdong Church, graduated in 1913, and was ordained. His ministry was characterized by strict moral self-discipline—anti-smoking, concubinage, and Sabbath-breaking (Park, 2014). Following the annexation of Korea in 1910, the Japanese empire enforced rigorous colonial domination by the Government-General. It was an era of national displacement, military-police rule, and resistance to political action. The survey of the land (1910–1918) pushed out farmers, and measures for assimilation - prohibiting education in the Korean language, censorship, and forced compliance with Shinto ceremonies - destroyed identity and loyalty and channeled them into allegiance to the emperor (Park & Chung, 2024). Korea was economically turned into a base for Japanese expansion; socially, the colonial regime was a police state under which spying, imprisonment, and torture stifled opposition.

Resistance, even minor, was ruthlessly crushed. The March First Movement of 1919 had revealed the virulence of Korean national consciousness and the ferocity of Japanese repression, with thousands killed or imprisoned (Park & Chung, 2024). Amidst this background of oppression and cultural destabilisation, others such as Choi offered alternative disciplines and forms of communal living. Bare by contemporary standards, his rural regulations provided therapeutic containment within a destabilised culture. Unlike imperial discipline, which masked domination in civic rhetoric, Choi's discipline was explicit in its aim, accountable to presbyteries, and directed towards communal flourishing (Foucault, 1977; Doehring, 2015). Choi's early years thus formed an integrated pedagogy. Paideia classic embodied rhetorical competence; exile defined horizon within which grace was intelligible (Gadamer, 1975); conversion re-formed narrative self (Ricoeur, 1984); colportage gained resistance skills that created counter-truth in colonial land (Foucault, 1977, 1980, 1982; Kim & Chung, 2023); and seminary training produced doctrinal literacy and pastoral discipline (Ryu et al., 1994). Together, these formative experiences explain why Choi was able to transform personal failure into vocation, pastoral leadership into community formation, and religious conviction into steadfast resistance under Japanese colonial rule.

Hermeneutically, shame formed horizon upon which promise was heard. Narratively, loss was re-narrated as call. Genealogically, itinerancy introduced practices that fragmented imperial sovereignty through local networks. Pastorally, suffering was metabolized into tenderness and resilience (Clinebell, 1984; Doehring, 2015; Hernandez, Gangsei, & Engstrom, 2007). Out of these convergences emerged a leader whose sermon was saturated with Scripture, whose body was inscribed with the marks of endurance, and whose asceticism grounded communities in distress. Exile, which had once been a terminus, became the womb of calling; the traveling cry on street markets, the seed of social identity; the labor of smuggling Bibles across borders, an apprenticeship in valor. It was from here that arose the pastor who would plant churches, resist Shinto shrine rituals, and serve time—the same feet that had marched dust roads now teaching a people how to stand.

Pastoral Ministry and Anti-Shinto Resistance

Choi's pastoral ministry extended far beyond Byeokdong Church after his initial appointment. In 1914 he was dispatched to southern Manchuria, where he undertook evangelistic work in Gando, Tonghua, and Fengcheng. By 1926 he had established at least twenty-eight churches, demonstrating the breadth of his missionary zeal. His leadership was formally recognised in 1923 when he served as moderator of the South Manchurian Presbytery. He served in a number of churches during Pyongyang Presbytery in 1927 and conducted itinerant evangelism in Suan county and Goksan county. Haheo-ri was one of twelve churches

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evangelized directly by him in 1930 (Kim, 2025; Kim,2025b).

This continuity between his early itinerant ministry as a colporteur, and his later ministry as pastor and organiser is an exhibition of the integrity of proclamation, ecclesial discipline, and institutional leadership. Viewed through Foucauldian analysis, Choi's congregations became counter-institutions in colonial Korea. While the Japanese empire sought to consolidate loyalty through shrines, schools, and bureaucratic rituals -devices of disciplinary power designed to normalise obedience and produce compliant subjectivities -Choi's churches cultivated alternative identities grounded in allegiance to Christ. These communities functioned as sites of counter-conduct, destabilising imperial hegemony by enabling believers to imagine an eschatological horizon beyond the reach of empire.

At the centre of this discourse stood Choi's hallmark proclamation: "Jesus, Heaven; Unbelief, Hell! " Though to modern ears it may sound naïve or callous, in its colonial context it was an eschatological distillation of theology addressed to a people deprived of agency, speech, and dignity. The slogan infused theological richness into a vocabulary accessible to the poor, excluded, and half-literate, situating gospel hope in an absolute dichotomy reconfiguring ultimate destiny. It was a Gadamerian horizon of fusion, where the horizon of salvation and judgment in the Bible confronted the despair of the colonial situation.

By reducing profound teaching to Christ or unbelief, paradise or hell, Choi brought theology within reach, present, and memorable during a crisis of existence. In Ricoeur's lexicon, it was an identity narrative signifier that centered faithfulness, protest, and hope. Its reverse form and rhetorical parallelism were appealing to Korean oral culture, easy to memorize and recite. In the streets, markets, and revival rallies, it was performative speaking, thrilling reaction and confirming identity. So announcement became democratized, and the ordinary believer was able to announce the gospel in reproducible language. Shrine worship imposed by the Japanese, officially civic but actually religious, enshrined imperial household kami and necessitated ritual acknowledgment of the emperor's divinity (Chung, 1988; Park & Chung, 2024).

The colonial state therefore sought to redirect ultimate allegiance from ancestral custom and Christianity to the emperor, sanctifying state authority. By this means, it was not a populist act but one politicized to obliterate the difference between piety and political loyalty, forcing Koreans to worship imperial power as sacred duty. Schools, state authorities, and even Christian churches were forced into compliance, with refusal punishable by fines, imprisonment, or exclusion from education and employment (Jeong et al., 2021). Against this background, Choi's proclamation exposed the falsity of neutrality.

Declaring "Jesus" as the sole locus of sovereignty, he rejected the emperor's deification, while "No Jesus" unveiled the futility of imperial promises and the emptiness of shrine worship. His slogan thus acted as a discursive firewall, shut to assimilation and challenging colonised Koreans to imagine something different from imperial discourse. In Foucauldian terms, it overturned the empire's "regime of truth" by providing an alternative technology of the self, based on religious as opposed to political power. Colonial trauma, marked by dispossession, cultural erasure, and ritual enforced under coercion, led to what today's psychology identifies as moral injury and identity disorientation. Within this context, the stark binary of Choi's proclamation offered existential clarity and boundaries for reconstructing identity. Crisis counselling theory underscores the value of clear alternatives in stabilising disoriented individuals and communities (Seok, 2024). By demarcating the line between Jesus and unbelief, heaven and hell, Choi gave his hearers a moral compass that transformed fear into resilience.

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His unyielding rhetoric also conveyed danger, redescriptions of martyrdom and persecution as normal elements of Christian identity instead of isolated anomalous tragedies. This is paralleled in the concept of vicarious resilience, where the courage of one leader can allow entire communities to tap into strength by identification. The slogan also had an important ecclesial function. More than a theological maxim, it served as a catechetical threshold, a portal into discipleship embedding ethical practices and communal boundaries. Choi's strict pastoral discipline—prohibiting gambling, concubinage, and Sabbath-breaking—extended the clarity of his proclamation into communal moral life.Thus, the slogan was inseparable from the construction of a distinctive ecclesial identity: a counter-cultural community resistant to imperial assimilation.

The final test came in the late 1930s with mandatory shrine worship. In 1938 the Presbyterian General Assembly formally sanctioned compliance, but Choi would not budge. He fled temporarily to Sinmido but was arrested, imprisoned, and repeatedly jailed from 1939 to 1940 (Kim, 2025). Alongside other resisters, he persisted in resisting imperial pressure. From a Foucauldian perspective, shrine worship was a disciplinary technology for inscribing Koreans into imperial sovereignty. Choi's defiance embodied radical counter-conduct, reassigning sovereignty to Christ alone. Hermeneutically, his refusal was the blending of biblical loyalty and imperial coercion into an obedience happy to embrace martyrdom (Kim, 2025). Pastorally, his temerity brought about vicarious hardness, enabling groups to become tough by virtue of his witness. By both life and ministry, declaration, pastoral direction, and theological opposition merged into one, so his testimony represents a central Christian vocation parable amidst colonial domination.

Martyrdom and Modern Ramifications

Weakened and incarcerated in March 1944, Choi initiated a forty-day fast based on the biblical examples of Moses (Exodus 34:28), Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), and Jesus (Matthew 4:2). He was granted medical parole and passed away on 15 April 1944 at Pyongyang Union Christian Hospital (Kim, 2025: 117). Passing away in Passion Week cemented his narrative into Christian history and martyrology and resurrection tradition. Hermeneutically, his pain and demise were a moment of truth (Gadamer, 1975), reading his life-narrative through the biblical drama of testimony. Reading him Foucauldianly, his body was an act of counter-conduct, in opposition to imperial biopower by enduring pain in allegiance to God's agenda rather than submitting to the regime of discipline (Foucault, 1980). Pastorally, his martyrdom was vicarious strength, a therapeutic icon of unbending dignity even amidst destruction, for traumatized Christians, as detailed by Hernandez, Gangsei, and Engstrom (2007). His life had thus fulfilled a triple calling: herald (Romans 10:15), shepherd (Ephesians 4:11–13), and witness (Revelation 2:10).

His preaching was contextual theology, his shepherding therapeutic containment, and his martyrdom theological resistance. His legacy is a parable of holistic ministry. The martyrdom of Choi is echoed in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's testimony, executed by the Nazis in April 1945 at Flossenbürg concentration camp. In his prison letters, Bonhoeffer maintained that discipleship involves costly grace - a grace under injustice, even unto death (Bonhoeffer, 1979).Both Choi and Bonhoeffer both narrate Christian witness when state power sought to conscript the church into ideological conformity.Where Choi resisted imperial demands of Shinto shrine worship, Bonhoeffer resisted Nazi control of the German church in the Aryan Paragraph and Führerprinzip.In both cases, refusal to trade religious allegiance to political power made their lives acts of theological resistance. Moreover, Bonhoeffer's conviction that the church realises its identity only in service to others (Bonhoeffer, 2017) resonates with Choi's pastoral vocation.

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By establishing moral boundaries, creating communal stability, and preserving eschatological hope, Choi ministered not for his own survival but for that of the colonised Korean church. Both men teach us that martyrdom is more a thing of obedient living than of sensational death, leaving behind a witness that will not be silenced. Today's effects are many. To begin with, in the mode of proclamation: as Choi reinterpreted the gospel for colonized Koreans and Bonhoeffer for a compromised church under Nazism, so too will the contemporary church have to reinterpret Scripture for cultures threatened with displacement, ecological collapse, and political authoritarianism (Grenier, 2025). Secondly, Christian practice can never be detached from power: the church will once again and again have to fight against collusion with disciplinary regimes, whether imperial Shinto, Nazi totalitarianism, or consumerist and nationalist ideologies currently in existence as well as unconscious capitalism (Nicolaides, 2025).Thirdly, pastoral care will require to combine empathyand courage, not only providing comfort but prophetic challenge. In the face of trauma, proclamation must be therapeutic and subversive. Choi's witness is therefore not a relic of the past but a challenge for the present.

His slogan, often dismissed as simplistic, emerges as hermeneutically contextual, Foucauldianly resistant, and pastorally therapeutic. His witness still calls the entire church to express faith, bravery, and hope before the same forces that continue to shape our world.His life is an example of the integration of proclamation, resistance, and care—something the worldwide church so urgently needs in a time of trauma and crisis. In dialogue with Bonhoeffer's vision of costly grace and ecclesial responsibility, Choi's martyrdom calls the church to live faithfully "for others" amid the powers of the present age.

Conclusion

In Bong-Seok Choi's ministry, what initially appeared to be a crude revivalist slogan—"Jesus, Heaven; No Jesus, Hell!"—in fact functioned as a form of contextual theology that articulated resistance. Hermeneutically, it became part of the horizon of hope within the Bible and the desperation that colonialism had engendered. Foucauldianly, it was anti-conduct to Japanese imperial power. Psychologically, it gave the colonised strength and clarity. That Choi bore the calling of colporteur, pastor, and martyr is evidence that proclamation, discipline ecclesial, and costly witness are one.The heritage of Choi overflows from his own era. His life reminds the church that theology is always contexted, that it will never stop necessitating defying oppressive regimes, and that proclamation and pastoral care must be retained together in societies marked by despair and coercion. His witness remains challenging the entire church to embody faith, courage, and hope in the presence of the same powers that continue to rule our world. This study is limited by the availability of historical sources and by its primarily interpretive approach, which cannot fully reconstruct every dimension of Choi's life and ministry. Some aspects of his pastoral work, particularly in Manchuria and within local Christian communities, remain insufficiently documented. Future studies should investigate underutilised colonial archives, missionary correspondence, and oral histories to provide a more comprehensive reconstruction of his ministry. Comparative analyses of Christian resistance movements in Korea, China, and Japan may also contribute to a broader understanding of religion, power, and resistance in East Asian colonial history.

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