

#6 – Headwaters of Thai Revivalism & Pentecostalism

It is often assumed that Thai Pentecostalism is a relatively new phenomenon, beginning no earlier than the John Sung revivals of 1938-1939. There has been a strong tendency, thus far, to ignore the Presbyterian missionary and ecclesiastical sources of Thai revivalism, which go back to earlier revivalistic movements that began in 1930 and 1925, respectively. Several key Thai figures in the early days of Pentecostalism in Thailand, notably the Revs. Boonmark Kittisarn and Suk Pongnoi were products of those Presbyterian revivalistic movements. Thai Pentecostalism represents, it can be argued, a logical outgrowth of earlier Presbyterian (and Baptist) church life in Siam.

While so much is clear, what has been unclear thus far is the earliest origins of Presbyterian revivalism in Siam. An undated item written by the Rev. Paul A. Eakin in about 1940 sheds some light on at least one source of that revivalism. Eakin was the Field Secretary of the American Presbyterian Mission in Siam at the time. He writes that in roughly 1903 an American revivalist by the name of Dr. Johnston visited and preached in the churches in Bangkok. Dr. George B. McFarland served as his translator. Eakin claims that McFarland felt a quickening of his own spiritual life and, in response, made a definite commitment to Christian service at that time. Not long afterwards, McFarland visited the United States where he came under the influence of the enthusiastic revivalist, Billy Sunday. When he returned to Bangkok in 1905, according to Eakin, McFarland held the first Conference of Christian Workers, which was to become an important program for leadership training and church renewal in central Siam. Eakin closes his comments with the observation that McFarland was a good imitator and took on some of Sunday's "eccentricities."

McFarland's "conversion" to revivalism as early as 1903 is the earliest instance of revivalistic influence in Siam that I have come across so far. It is difficult to prove, but it is almost certain that his revivalism influenced some church members and leaders towards a revivalistic bent of their own. He was the son of veteran Presbyterian missionaries, and he himself became an important figure in public life in Bangkok to the extent that the Thai government awarded him several orders of merit and the King honored him with the title of Pra Ach Vidyagama, or "First Councilor." He was even more influential in Christian circles, and the Conference of Christian Workers conferences he held in Bangkok and Phet Buri appear to have been well-attended and widely appreciated. Johnston's Bangkok sermons and McFarland's revivalism, thus, are one the earliest sources of the Presbyterian revivalistic movement, which movement contributed to the emergence of post-World War II Thai Pentecostalism.

Source: Paul A. Eakin, "Influence of Foreign Evangelists," [ca. 1940], in the Eakin Family Papers, Payap University Archives.