Models of Civic Responsibility: Korean Americans in Congregations with Different Ethnic Compositions

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This article compares different discourses of civic responsibility for Korean American evangelicals in a second-generation Korean congregation and a multiethnic congregation located in the same impoverished ethnic minority community. Those in the second-generation church define civic responsibility through difference from immigrant Koreans. They stress caring for members of their local community and explicitly reject their parents’ connection of Christianity to economic mobility. Yet, they find relating to other minorities in their local community difficult because of an implicit belief that the economically impoverished are not hardworking. Korean Americans in the multiethnic church connect Christianity to valuing diversity. A religious individualism that is used to justify diversity also helps Korean Americans stress their commonality with other ethnic minorities and legitimates commitment to community service. These results help researchers rethink how new groups of Americans might influence the relationship of evangelical Christianity to American civic life.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars estimate that by the middle of this century the United States will be nearly 50 percent nonwhite. Such changes are due in large part to recent immigration. Immigrants are influencing the religious diversity of the United States. Some bring non-Western religions (Wuthnow and Hackett 2003). However, the largest change to American religion is occurring as new immigrants restructure the racial and ethnic composition of American Christianity (Jasso et al. 2003). In particular, they are influencing American evangelicalism (Warner 2004). Evangelicals form one of America’s largest religious movements and share certain core beliefs, including the Bible as trustworthy, human nature as sinful, hope for salvation in God’s son Jesus, absolute moral standards, and a personal knowledge of God (Smith et al. 1998).

Researchers focus primarily on the kinds of resources immigrant religious communities provide their own members (Bankston and Zhou 1996; Hurh and Kim 1990; Min 1992). Less immigration and religion research specifically examines how congregations might link new Americans with broader civic life. Civic life incorporates all of the ways in which people realize their duties, rights, and responsibilities as American citizens (Wuthnow 1998). It includes the kinds of choices they make about how (as citizens) to participate in American society. Civic participation can range from campaigning for certain politicians or causes to volunteering in a local soup kitchen (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Civic actions have in common that they are often borne out of identities as citizens. They are usually voluntary, not aimed at reaping an economic profit, and generally concerned with improving some version of the common good (Putnam 2000). While civic integration is often measured by indicators such as volunteerism or political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), it is important to understand how new Americans see the connection between religion and civic responsibility in their own terms. Studies of civic discourse, the ways in which new immigrants and their children talk about the kinds of responsibilities they have as American citizens to participate in public life, will allow researchers to discover how new Americans might adapt to, negotiate, and even change existing constructs for the connection between religion and civic life.

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In particular, the degree to which an individual desires to participate in his or her local community is a central indicator of commitment to civic life (Wilson and Janoski 1995). Here I present data on discourse surrounding community service for Korean Americans in two different evangelical congregations. Data come from ethnography of and in-depth interviews with Korean Americans at Grace Church, a second-generation Korean evangelical congregation, and Manna Fellowship, a multiethnic evangelical congregation with Korean American participants. I ask, first, what kinds of discourse Korean Americans in these two churches develop to understand community service and, second, how Korean Americans view the relationship of their particular church to civic responsibility. Korean Americans at both Grace and Manna believe being an evangelical means they have responsibilities to care for those in the wider American society outside their own ethnic group. However, their congregations provide different approaches for understanding such responsibilities. This research lays the foundation for broader understanding of how second-generation immigrants, and Korean Americans in particular, might influence the institutionalized relationship between evangelical Christianity and American civic life.

RELIGION AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Through their places of worship Americans become involved in civic life that occurs outside religious organizations. Congregational attendance provides participants with religious teachings that justify community participation, networks of like-minded individuals (who ask them to participate), and an awareness of needs in their communities (Putnam 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wuthnow 1999). We might reason that as new Americans participate in evangelical Christian churches, they would become more integrated into broader American civic life. However, there is an ongoing debate about the influence of evangelical Christianity on civic participation. Some argue that American evangelicals are often more concerned about participating in their own church communities than about wider societal participation (Bellah et al. 1985; Wilson and Janoski 1995; Wuthnow 1999). Some research shows that evangelical churches may participate less in American public life than either Catholic or mainline Protestant congregations (Chaves, Giesel, and Tsitsos 2002). Others argue, however, that evangelicals are becoming more aware of needs in their communities. They are developing what sociologist Christian Smith calls an “engaged orthodoxy,” the ability to maintain distinctive faith commitments while being fully involved in American society (Smith et al. 1998). On some measures of volunteerism and financial contributions, evangelicals even surpass other groups of Americans (Regnerus, Smith, and Sikkink 1998). Given these tensions, it is unclear whether being part of evangelical churches will foster civic integration for new Americans.

Those who study the religious participation of recent immigrants largely focus inward on the kinds of resources immigrant congregations give their own members. These include providing a place for meaning and belonging (Warner and Wittner 1998), job networks and social services (Min 1992), and for the second generation, reinforcing ethnic identity (Bankston and Zhou 1996). Yet, looking at religion primarily through the lens of its adaptive functions for immigrants neglects the possibility that religion might also help new Americans focus outward and develop responsibilities to a broader American community. Research on religion and immigration has only begun to consider religion’s outward potential and this work has focused primarily on the experiences of first-generation immigrants (Chen 2002; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Foley 2002).

In addition, researchers need to look at the nearly 10 percent or roughly 27.5 million Americans who are second-generation immigrants (2000 Census) in order to understand how religion among new Americans might influence civic life. The first generation often lacks English-language skills and many are not citizens, factors that make it difficult to participate in wider American political and social institutions. The second generation, however, generally has access to all the legal rights of citizenship and many have additional resources such as fluency in English and educational and economic success, resources that often facilitate general American civic
participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). It becomes important, therefore, to determine how second-generation immigrants might use religion to socially construct civic identities and responsibilities.

In particular, researchers need to know how specific religious contexts matter for civic incorporation among second-generation immigrants. Differences between congregations may lead to multiple understandings of civic life among and between ethnic groups (Becker 1999). Studies largely assume, however, that even for second-generation immigrants religious participation is largely co-ethnic (Bankston and Zhou 1996; Chai 2001; Jeung 2002; Warner and Wittner 1998). Yet, we know that at least 8–10 percent of American congregations are multiethnic or multiracial, and many of these are evangelical churches that include second-generation immigrants (Jeung 2002; Min and Kim 2002). As second-generation immigrants become part of broader American religious life, studying how they might use the cultural resources of congregations with different ethnic compositions is particularly important. Here I examine a second-generation Korean and a multiethnic church, the two most common types of churches in which Korean Americans currently participate (Min and Kim 2002).

One way to study religion and civic life among new Americans would be to do a survey that measures the influence of religious involvement on civic participation. Second-generation immigrants, however, do not have an established family history of civic involvement to socialize them into existing American civic practices. Consequently, they may not understand the relationship of religion to civic life in the same ways as other groups of Americans. Attention to how second-generation immigrants talk about civic responsibility allows understanding of the various ways they construct categories to relate religion and civic life.

KOREAN AMERICANS

Asian Americans are an ideal group among whom to examine the intersection between evangelical religious participation and civic responsibility. Because I am interested in the relationship between religion and civic discourse, it made sense to study an immigrant group where religion plays a central role and that is part of a religious tradition that has established institutional resources in the United States. Perhaps what is most distinctive about Korean Americans is their high degree of religiosity. Over 70 percent of first-generation Korean immigrants and many second-generation immigrants belong to a Korean church, the most popular being evangelical congregations (Hurh and Kim 1990; Kwon, Kim, and Warner 2001; Min and Kim 2002). Asian Americans, and Korean Americans in particular, also form a large nonwhite group in evangelical seminaries (Lee 1996).

Since there was a significant wave of Korean immigration in the 1970s, there is a growing group of second-generation Korean Americans who are young adults. Young adult Korean Americans are more likely to choose their own congregational affiliations and have more opportunities to participate in civic life than a younger group of second-generation immigrants. Further, second-generation Korean Americans often have high levels of education and economic opportunities, factors that foster civic participation in the general population (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

DATA SOURCES

These data are part of a larger project in which, from January 2002 through January 2003, I studied civic life among second-generation Koreans in various evangelical congregations. Here I focus on interviews with Korean Americans in two specific churches: Grace, a second-generation Korean congregation, and Manna, a multiethnic congregation with Korean American participation. I participated in each for nine months, attending Sunday services and congregational activities; reviewing organizational literature, such as newsletters, general mailings, and bulletins;
and conducting interviews with the pastors and leaders of each church. Grace and Manna were located in adjacent suburbs in the Northeast near the same impoverished urban area, which I called Old Town, allowing me to study the differences in how Korean Americans in both churches understood their relationship to those in the same local community. Old Town was comprised of whites and African Americans, as well as various Southeast Asian and Latin American first-generation immigrant groups. Twenty-four percent of the families in Old Town who had children under five lived in poverty; compared to 17 percent of the general American population (2000 Census).

Grace had 90 members and Manna had 150 members. Both churches were also evangelical and nondenominational; this meant I could observe the importance of local congregational differences between churches in the same religious tradition. Further, the pastors in each church had attended well-known American evangelical seminaries, meaning they had access to the broader resources of evangelicalism. Typical of other second-generation Korean churches, although largely autonomous, Grace was sponsored by a first-generation Korean congregation (Chai 2001).

Manna had four main racial groups present. In a survey of the church I conducted as part of the larger project, 15 percent of those at Manna identified as “White American;” 3 percent as “African American;” 73 percent as “Asian American,” 1 percent as “Hispanic American,” and 8 percent as “Other.” The Asian American members of the congregation were largely second-generation Korean American and from various Asian ethnic groups including Chinese, Cambodian, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, and Filipino. Of the Asian Americans in the congregation, 22 percent were second-generation Korean American. Using Michael Emerson and Karen Chai Kim’s definition, the church was multiracial because less than 80 percent of its membership was any single racial group (Emerson and Chai Kim 2003). The pastors and leadership of the congregation called Manna multiethnic, however, and that is how I will refer to it throughout this article. I did semi-structured interviews lasting between one and three hours with 20 Korean Americans at Grace and 18 Korean Americans at Manna, for a total of 38 interviews. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes related to the connection between religious participation and community service (Strauss 1987).

I also selected a group of Korean Americans who were, as much as possible, similar in other respects besides their congregational membership. The Korean Americans at Grace and Manna were all young adults, at least 21 years old, and American citizens; the other individuals at Manna were of a similar demographic as the Korean Americans. All had or were pursuing a four-year college degree. The Korean Americans in each church were also similar in terms of education and socioeconomic status; most were young professionals. Common occupations included medicine, business, and teaching. Those in both settings were completely fluent in English and many spoke some Korean, although few were bilingual.

The purpose of this research is not to make a strict causal argument between the models of civic responsibility for each of these congregations and the views of individual congregation members controlling for other factors. Rather, I am trying to determine the models of civic responsibility second-generation Korean and multiethnic churches might provide Korean Americans and how Korean Americans use such cultural resources once they are already part of these contexts.

**FINDINGS**

Immigrant churches often place a priority on serving the needs of their own members, helping immigrants adapt to American society (Min 1992). In light of this finding, I thought Korean Americans who attend Grace, the second-generation church, would place more emphasis on serving other Koreans. I reasoned that Korean Americans who attend Manna, the multiethnic church, might be more assimilated to American society and place more emphasis on serving the needs of diverse groups of individuals. Instead, I found that both churches provide Korean Americans with a discourse that legitimates outward-looking concern for their local community.
KOREAN AMERICANS IN CONGREGATIONS

and the wider American society. However, this outward-looking discourse is based on different and church-specific models of civic responsibility.

To be different from first-generation Koreans and similar to other American evangelical churches (Yep et al. 1998), Korean Americans at Grace stress their responsibilities to help those outside their church and outside the Korean ethnic community. In an effort to evangelize, the church also fosters high commitment to church-sponsored volunteer activities. To be different from immigrant Koreans, Grace explicitly rejects connecting Christianity to economic mobility. The church implicitly reinforces, however, that Korean Americans should be hardworking and not complain about adversity. Using Christianity to justify being hardworking and to deemphasize discrimination makes it difficult for Korean Americans to understand how to relate to the other ethnic minorities in Old Town whom they perceive as not very hardworking.

In contrast, Manna encourages congregation members to see their ethnicity as a “gift from God” and to connect Christianity to valuing diversity of ethnicity and lifestyle within the limits of evangelicalism. Korean Americans at Manna find this approach appealing as a way to gain distance from Korean immigrant Christians whom they believe link Christianity too tightly with Korean ethnic culture. Although they are part of the same social class as those at Grace, Korean Americans at Manna express a common ethnic identity with other ethnic minorities. This means they find it easier to relate to non-Korean ethnic minorities in the local community. In addition, using Christianity as a rationale for valuing diversity of opinions actually helps Korean Americans develop a discourse for high commitment to individual community-service activities, but fosters low commitment to participating in specifically church-sponsored community service.

ETHNICITY, CLASS, AND MODEL OF CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AT GRACE

Any evangelical church might use community service as a way to evangelize. Yet, Grace’s emphasis is shaped by the congregation’s perception of its relationship to first-generation Korean churches. Members of Grace often told me they respect their parents for having a strong faith and encouraging them to become Christians. Yet, as a second-generation Korean congregation, Grace wants to make itself distinctive from the immigrant aspects of the parents’ culture. This means—although Grace is ethnically Korean—it wants to be known primarily as an American Christian rather than a Korean Christian immigrant church.

Korean Americans at Grace think immigrant Koreans often connect Christianity too tightly to Korean culture. In response, ethnicity is not examined overtly in the pastoral sermons and discussed less often among individual members than it is at Manna. In an interview, Pastor Joseph, a Korean American in his early 30s and the main pastor at Grace, told me that second-generation Korean churches should be different from first-generation churches, and because of their language and educational resources have no reason not to serve the wider American society. He believes second-generation churches ought to develop a deeper and more sincere form of faith than that of their parents, one that separates Korean culture from Christianity. He described first-generation Korean Christianity in the United States as “ten thousand miles wide, but only an inch deep.” In Pastor Joseph’s view, immigrant Korean Christians concentrate on upholding the Korean culture to the extent that they stop focusing on the specific tenets of Christian teaching.

The church leaders often told me Grace could be distinctive from first-generation churches and become a more fully Christian congregation by doing community service. Instead of being focused on retaining Korean culture or providing only for other Koreans, churches should be places where, according to my respondents, people come to “learn more about God and to serve the local community.” Pastor Joseph explained this as wanting “our church members not to be too comfortable at our church, but to be a blessing to the world.”

For example, I asked Pastor Joseph what specific role congregation members should have in interacting with those in the local community. He explained that church members should “have a powerful testimony of charity and mercy” and benefit American society spiritually as
well as materially. Pastor Joseph also told me his goal is for the congregation to relate more to Old Town in the future, and gave examples of setting up a medical clinic or providing an after-school program for children in the community. Joshua, a Korean American in his early 30s and another church leader, said: “I would like to see the church do or become more engaged in mercy ministry [community service]. Actually helping people around the community where our church is [located].” The desire to serve is clearly present at Grace.

In an effort to be different from the first generation and a distinctively evangelical church, those at Grace connected evangelism with obligations to volunteer in specifically church-sponsored volunteer activities. Because evangelism is central to the mission of the church, members have a nonnegotiable responsibility to be involved in church-based community-service activities. Congregation members can be assured such programs will have a narrowly defined evangelistic focus. They do not have this kind of assurance when participating in service activities sponsored by non-religious community organizations.

The leadership of the church strongly encourages members to participate in as many church community-service programs as possible. For example, before each service project church leaders send e-mails to the church-wide list. These e-mails exemplify how connecting evangelism to service motivates members to participate. In one such e-mail, a coordinator for the youth shelter outreach, a Korean American woman, wrote:

I know that we get so accustomed to the idea we will all be going to heaven that we forget to spread the [news]... so come on brothers and sisters, let’s spread the news to those who don’t know... youth shelter only meets once a month.

At Grace, church members are expected to participate in the youth shelter outreach both because of a desire to show mercy to others and because of the potential such outreach provides to do evangelism.

Explicit Rejection and Implicit Acceptance of Economic Mobility

Another way Korean Americans at Grace create a distinction from the first generation is through rejecting the ways in which the first generation connects class mobility and Christianity. Negotiating class differences between themselves and groups they are trying to help is also part of determining the nature of civic responsibility for Korean Americans at Grace. Many of my respondents describe this as ‘rejecting their parents’ ideas about the American Dream’ in pursuit of a more authentic Christianity. They told me first-generation Koreans think of the American Dream as the idea that if you “don’t complain and work hard enough eventually anyone can ‘make it’ in American society.” Jessica, a Korean American in her late 20s, explained in a cynical tone how common it is for the first generation to talk about the American Dream. The first generation tries to pass the value of economic mobility onto the second generation, often connecting it with being a good Christian. According to Jessica:

Our parents all struggled at some point. All of our parents came to America with fifty dollars in their pocket... Our parents all walked five miles in the snow to go to school in Korea. That’s why “education is so important and we should value it.” They all... had to wash windows or eat dog food because they couldn’t read the label and it was cheap... So because they all had to struggle, status and wealth in the Korean culture is very important.

Although neither of Jessica’s parents had working-class occupations in Korea, her narration of the “typical Korean immigrant parent story” reveals how pervasive such discourse is among the first-generation Korean immigrant community.

On one hand, part of what my second-generation respondents find troubling about their parent’s use of the American Dream is the way they connect being a good Christian to economic
mobility. They want to be different from the first generation through separating economic mobility from Christianity. Jacob, a Korean American in his early 30s and another member of the leadership team, said members of the congregation really struggle with how to hold being a good Christian in tension with the desire for economic success:

I think we have a yuppie mentality and I think it’s very dangerous . . . We look at them [Korean Americans who are financially successful] and we say “wow, they’re really godly people.” But on face value what looks godly is not godly under God. Because whatever they do, they’re giving out of their wealth not out of their poverty . . . I think this yuppie mentality is very dangerous in our church.

To be truly “godly” according to Jacob, the members of the church should separate professional success from living for God. Even though he thinks most members of Grace are probably economically and educationally successful, Jacob does not want to make professional success synonymous with being a good Christian.

Although they explicitly reject the American Dream, implicitly Korean Americans at Grace adopt a spiritual version of the American Dream and connect Christianity to working hard and not complaining about discrimination, poverty, or other life problems. This implicit acceptance of the American Dream makes it difficult for Korean Americans at Grace to relate to residents of Old Town because of the perception that the residents often complain about discrimination and poverty. For example, in public teachings and sermons, the church leaders link being a Christian to de-emphasizing one’s problems. In multiple sermons Pastor Joseph told congregation members that they should focus less on their own problems and instead concentrate on God and serving others.

There is the victim mentality. A lot of people feel they have a bad lot in life. They may think they are poorer than others . . . If only we read the Bible, we will see that Jesus set us free . . . If a person would meditate on that truth, then they would never see themselves as a victim again.

Here Pastor Joseph emphasizes that if one reads the Bible closely he or she will realize it is not about understanding one’s own problems, but about de-emphasizing poverty and other troubles for the sake of doing Christian service, about “not acting like a victim.”

In terms of civic responsibility, de-emphasizing one’s problems provides Korean Americans at Grace the motivation to focus outward. However, identities as those that are upwardly mobile and do not “act like victims” create the perception of distance between Korean Americans at Grace and the residents of Old Town and make community service difficult. For example, using similar discourse as the church sermons, Bill, a Korean American in his late 20s, told me it was often difficult for him to provide social services to those who “act like victims.” In particular, although he participates in church-based social services, Bill finds it difficult to help black Americans, a large percentage of the residents in Old Town:

I find that group tougher than others. Not all of them, but they always seem to have a chip on their shoulder because of racism. I feel bad because I don’t think that’s the case anymore. Maybe there are specific instances, maybe I’m in la-la land, but I like to believe that we are all equal.

Later in our discussion, Bill said he has close friendships with colleagues at work who are African American. Yet, when doing community service among black Americans, Bill finds it difficult to relate.

Because Korean Americans at Grace emphasize class rather than ethnic or racial identities they have few narrative resources to create bridges with the nonwhite, non-Korean, impoverished residents of Old Town. Sangjoon, a Korean American in his mid 20s, talked about the efforts of the church to volunteer at a local youth shelter that houses primarily African American and Latino youth:
I wonder how the kids look at us when we come, because we are, you know, suburban Korean Americans. We received the best education. Like [Korean American] high school kids, they already have cars and we don’t really worry about finances and generally we come from pretty good famil(ies). And for us to come and really help them out, I feel that the kids might not buy it.

I found, through informal discussions with the social workers at the youth shelter, that in one sense Sangjoon is right. Most of the teenagers at the center do not have the educational and economic resources of Sangjoon and the other Korean American young professionals at Grace. In another sense, however, emphasizing an identity as a middle-class suburban American, rather than as an ethnic minority, is very much a social construction and one that differs from the way Korean Americans at Manna create identities. Such identity choices have consequences for discourse about civic responsibility.

From participating in the church, I found that Korean Americans at Grace have a high commitment to church-sponsored community services. Generally, about half of the congregation participates in monthly church community-service activities. Yet, Korean Americans think of class differences between themselves and the residents of Old Town as creating a cultural chasm. They implicitly adopt the principle that America is a meritocracy. Although they do not believe pursuing wealth should be synonymous with being a good Christian, they suspect that those who are not economically successful are simply not working hard enough. Such views make it difficult to relate to those in the their local community.

DIVERSITY AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AT MANNA

As a multiethnic church, Manna helps its members develop an understanding of how to connect being a Christian to valuing ethnic diversity. Although growing in number, multiethnic congregations are still not the norm in American society (Emerson and Kim 2003). Because they are part of a multiethnic church, Korean Americans consider themselves distinctive from a Korean immigrant worship context and distinctive from other American evangelical churches. Manna fosters a religiously motivated commitment to ethnic diversity as part of its model of civic responsibility. This approach to civic life provides Korean Americans with a group mentality as part of the social margins of society and a different discourse for community service than available to those at Grace.

The congregational literature, sermons, and conversations with leaders all reveal that ethnic diversity is a central goal of the church. According to the congregational brochure, one of Manna’s core values is to “see the church as a group of people with different cultures and backgrounds.” Being a multiethnic congregation is defined as: “valuing the ethnic diversities of God’s Kingdom, establishing an atmosphere in which we enjoy the synergy of a diverse community,” and “raising up a multiethnic leadership and staff.” In the brochure, Manna legitimates a multiethnic vision by citing passages from the Bible, which talk about “developing a church without walls in the area of cultures and backgrounds.”

In sermons, the congregation leaders often connected being a multiethnic church to their mission as Christians. During one sermon, Pastor Phil, a Chinese immigrant and one of the head pastors at Manna, told the church:

Let’s share [with others] about being multiethnic . . . [the early church] was a multi-lingual church . . . God wanted everyone . . . God put it on their heart to do missions . . . This applies to Manna.

In this quote, Pastor Phil uses a story from the Bible to justify Manna’s focus on ethnic diversity. Being a multiethnic church is made legitimate by connecting ethnic diversity with Christian teachings and developing a more effective outreach.
Diverse Models of Civic Responsibility

Like those at Grace, Korean Americans at Manna also connect Christianity to responsibilities for participation in a wider American community as well as their specific local community. The collective narrative for civic engagement at Manna, however, stresses appreciation for diversity. Korean Americans at Manna think that, as Christians, they have a responsibility to help those who are different from them. Young-Mi is a Korean American in her early 20s. She gives Manna and her school credit for providing her with a particular life ethic that justifies valuing and caring for all Americans regardless of race or ethnicity:

I can remember when I was young, how you talk about Martin Luther King . . . how he wanted equality for blacks and whites. That kind of leads to a discussion on how we need to accept all people . . . how God accepts us no matter what we look like or where we’re from . . . To help people who aren’t like you, reaching out like that kind of makes you a better American because that’s what this country is: helping people out . . . regardless of what people look like or their backgrounds or what language they speak, you kind of help each other regardless of those things.

Young-Mi connects overlapping religious and racial identities to civic responsibility. She reasons that because God accepts her no matter “what she looks like,” she has a responsibility to accept and help people who are different from her.

At Manna, Korean Americans find this approach to diversity helpful in negotiating the tension between the immigrant Korean model of connecting Korean culture to Christianity and the second-generation model of decoupling ethnicity and Christianity. Jeremy, a Korean American in his early 20s, told me he is tired of living up to the ethnic cultural expectations present in many Korean churches. Attending Manna helped him come to a different view of being Korean:

I am always going to feel that it is going to be my exterior, it is the shell that I am in, the Korean framework . . . I am Korean, rather than any other race or shape or whatever. God decided to make me Korean . . . And hey, it’s pretty cool, this Korean thing. Korean people are in tune with you.

Jeremy distances himself from first-generation Koreans through using a religious framework to see his Korean ethnicity as something “given by God.” Where those at Grace often see a tension in an ethnic Christianity, for Jeremy and other Korean Americans at Manna Christianity and ethnicity exist in harmony.

Valuing Diversity and Community Service

Those who write about the “politics of diversity” discuss the difficulty of fostering group responsibility to make changes in societal structures among those who are very strongly committed to appreciation of individual opinions and differences (Meeks 2001). Appreciating diversity means Manna encourages its members to come to their own ideas about “gifts,” and “callings,” and their implications for community-service practices via a “personal relationship with God.” Surprisingly, a discourse of diversity is actually an asset to community service.

Korean Americans at Manna negotiate class and ethnic identities differently than those at Grace. Korean Americans at Grace stress their distance from the residents of Old Town. While they are the same professional status as those at Grace, Korean Americans at Manna focus on their similarities with the residents of Old Town, particularly black Americans. Jeremy also told me:

My view is that African Americans and Koreans would get along really well, but that Satan, the enemy, has tried to make it so that we would hate one another . . . I think that we would get along so well because we both go through similar issues. Like debt and poverty and just the whole thing with family and I just think that both are very warm. Like we have warm sides to the parents and a very disciplinary side to the parents as well.
Here Jeremy emphasizes the similarities between Korean Americans and black Americans. When conflicts occur, he uses a religious framework to interpret them; they are simply the work of Satan. Later in our conversation, Jeremy also explains the plight of Old Town’s residents. He told me “the people in [Old Town] are working their butts off to get their kids out of that neighborhood so [their] kids won’t have to grow up in an environment with drugs and violence.” In his discourse, Jeremy stresses that the people who live in Old Town are hardworking and trying to do their best against difficult odds, categories that classify them as similar to Korean Americans rather than “other.”

**Tension in Serving Others**

By helping their members gain appreciation for diversity, Manna creates space for Korean Americans to develop commitment to community service. Yet, there is also space given to appreciation for different political opinions and individual approaches to community service. Sue, a Korean American in her mid 20s, told me the Korean churches she was part of were often uniformly socially and politically conservative. In contrast, she explained that leaders and members at Manna encourage her to develop appreciation for those with diverse political points of view. She gave the example of her respect for a woman at Manna who has “very liberal political views, supports Ralph Nader,” and is often engaged in political protests.

A discourse that links Christianity with appreciating diverse individual ideas about what constitutes good community service does little to foster obligation to participate in specifically church-sponsored community service. Winston, a Korean American in his mid 20s and a leader at Manna, told me he thinks second-generation Korean Americans at Manna and other churches have strong responsibilities to be good Americans and become involved in American society. Winston also said his idea of civic responsibility is to have an “impact on American citizens if I can.” When it comes to collective church responsibility, however, he talks about each person “having a different role.” Sue also told me her church helps her commit to serving in the local community by “encouraging [her] to think about how Christians can influence society and government, *but never we as some kind of group* [italics mine].” Carl, a Korean American in his early 20s, said Manna motivates him to be concerned about community service, but not as a congregation. He doesn’t think participating in congregation-sponsored activities is any more important than other kinds of community service. Winston, Sue, and Carl all gave their church credit for helping them come to believe that, as Christians, they should care for those in their community in ways beyond evangelism. Yet, such a focus also makes it difficult for them to see why they should be more committed to church-based community service rather than other kinds of community services.

Commitment to diverse ideas about how community service should be accomplished makes it difficult for the congregational leaders to motivate participation in church community-service activities. For example, during the announcement time of one church service, a young Asian American man came to the front and gave an announcement about a program the church was sponsoring that would provide tutoring every evening for an hour after school to three children from Old Town. After the service, when I talked to one of the coordinators, she explained that the congregation has a difficult time getting church members to commit to the activity on a regular basis, leaving mainly the church leaders to provide the tutoring.

Korean Americans at Manna saw their church as helping them to develop “thinking” about volunteering, rather than motivating participation in the specific volunteer activities connected with the church. Yet, my participant observations and interviews revealed that most Korean Americans at Manna heavily value participating in some kind of volunteer activity. It seems that providing a framework for connecting diversity to volunteerism, while not making church-based community services more legitimate, is successful in fostering an overall commitment to individual volunteer activities.
CONCLUSION

The discourse for community service that these two groups of Korean Americans developed in their congregations mattered for how they understood what it meant to acquire civic responsibilities and hence for their civic incorporation. Although surveys of civic practices are extremely important for comparing Korean American evangelicals to other Americans, studying discourse provided insight as to how Korean Americans understood and used Christianity to justify or impede civic responsibility. Their discourse for civic responsibility was intimately linked with and flowed from the stories they told about how their Korean and religious identities were different than those of their first-generation parents. This discourse about identity was dependent not only on ethnic history, but also on a certain set of evangelical cultural tools, which made some constructs more legitimate than others.

I started this work by asking whether Korean American evangelicals at Grace, a second-generation Korean church, or Manna, a multiethnic church, would more readily assimilate to American civic life. I expected that Korean Americans at Manna, due to their participation in a multiethnic church, would be more assimilated than those at Grace. Instead, I found that a narrow framework of assimilation did not succeed in explaining the complexity of religious, ethnic, and generational identities among these Korean American evangelicals. Second-generation civic responsibility was more accurately understood as an issue of the broadening contours of identification and nonidentification with co-ethnics and others. These contours were not easily arranged on a continuum of assimilation, but built around particular models of civic responsibility in local congregations.

It is important also to reflect on why different models of civic responsibility were developed among Korean Americans in second-generation Korean and multiethnic churches. Most of what these congregations had in common, as related to civic life, came from their religious institutional location as evangelical congregations. These resources included sets of doctrines, spiritual literature, and patterned sets of practices. Both groups had elements of what Christian Smith has identified as an individualistic American evangelicalism that is nevertheless constructively engaged with American civic life (Smith et al. 1998). These Korean Americans were strongly evangelical; each group talked about the importance of having a “personal relationship with God.” Yet, as Smith contends is the case for other American evangelicals, each group also used evangelical Christianity to establish a civic consciousness.

What was different about the discourse for civic life in each of these churches and different from many other evangelical congregations came from different interpretations of how evangelicalism ought to link with ethnicity and civic responsibility. Each church was filled primarily with ethnic minorities. Grace was a second-generation Korean and Manna was a multiethnic church, with the largest group being Asian American. They used the resources of evangelicalism to make these differences spiritual and to legitimate group boundaries from other evangelical churches of certain types. Grace wanted to be a distinctively evangelical congregation and, because it was second-generation Korean, distanced itself from first-generation Korean churches, which it perceived as developing a cultural Christianity that was less pure. Because mainly second-generation people from various ethnic backgrounds attended Manna, and the leaders and members of the church had difficult experiences with ethnic-specific churches, it wanted to be a distinctive kind of evangelical church—a multiethnic church—that was different from ethnic specific churches.

The way Korean Americans negotiated the tensions regarding ethnicity and generation influenced how they thought about the link between Christianity and civic responsibility. Korean Americans in each church developed different, yet equally legitimate, evangelical models for civic responsibility. In their desire to be distinctively evangelical, each congregation borrowed cultural resources from other evangelical churches. Grace borrowed practices from white evangelical churches, such as worship songs and ministry resources. As the leadership often explained to me, using these broader evangelical tools was part of becoming a purely Christian
congregation, rather than a Korean congregation. Trying to be distinctively evangelical had implications for their model of civic responsibility. Korean Americans at Grace were heavily committed to an evangelical mission and felt obligated to participate in church-sponsored community services. They also reified class expectations of the first generation and had difficulty in relating to those who appeared not to work hard.

In a desire to appreciate diversity in its myriad forms, Manna saw itself as a minority church within American evangelicalism. Even though both of Manna’s pastors attended well-known evangelical seminaries, they did not have much help in developing their mission of diversity from the resources of American evangelicalism. By connecting appreciation for ethnic diversity with Christianity, Manna saw itself as doing something “new” within broader American evangelicalism. Although it perceived this focus as novel, a language of individual differences as appreciated by God is certainly within the range of legitimate evangelical discourse. In terms of civic responsibility, even though Korean Americans at Manna were similar in class position to those at Grace, they emphasized their commonality with other minority Americans and had an easier time developing relationships with ethnic minority groups in Old Town, particularly those with black Americans. An appreciation for diversity and individualist understandings of Christian mission also meant Korean Americans at Manna stressed commitment to community services—but individual rather than church-based ideas of the community services in which members ought to participate.

**Implications for Institutional Change**

I have shown that the congregational model of civic responsibility is one kind of cultural resource that Korean Americans used to create identities and strategies of action surrounding civic responsibility. Congregational models did not completely determine civic life for the Korean Americans in second-generation and multiethnic churches. Rather, as a resource they meshed with other resources individuals used to create identities and shape practices. This way of looking at the interactions between their congregations and these two groups of Korean Americans provides broader insight to how second-generation immigrants in basically the same structural location in terms of race, class, and education could develop different approaches to civic life. By implication, this work broadens understanding of the mechanisms by which Korean Americans and other new Americans might bring change to the institutions of American evangelicalism.

As American evangelicals, Korean Americans at Grace and Manna are part of a religious tradition to which recent polls estimate approximately 30–40 percent of Americans currently belong (Gallup Polls 1998, 2001). American evangelicalism is also a religious tradition in which other groups of second-generation immigrants, particularly Asian Americans, are increasing in number (Min and Kim). Further, there is evidence new Americans are beginning to enter leadership in American evangelical seminaries (Lee 1996). If found among other Korean Americans and other second-generation immigrants, the categories discovered here show two distinct possibilities for ways that new Americans could influence American Christianity. One might expect those who are part of ethnic-specific congregations to retain identities that are more like the immigrant generation. Yet, listening to how Korean Americans at Grace constructed identities reveals that it may be more important to them to be distinctive from the first generation than from other Americans. Because of such identity constructs, remaining part of an evangelical co-ethnic congregation may actually be a force for civic integration. Many evangelicals are involved in caring for the needs of their own congregation members. Yet, Korean Americans at Grace and other second-generation churches may add strength to the growing number of American evangelicals who are also becoming involved in community service.

At Manna, because personal discernment was valued, it was difficult to keep members accountable to doing specific church-sponsored activities. The perspective of these Korean Americans was somewhat reminiscent of Shielaism, the religious individualism of Shiela Larson,
who sociologist Robert Bellah and co-authors quote as saying: “My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Shielaism. Just my own little voice” (Bellah et al. 1985:221). In another sense, however, it is important to note that, unlike Shielaism, the form of religious individualism at Manna was situated in the context of evangelicalism rather than being completely negotiated by individuals.

If borne out in practice—this shows the ability of individually negotiated religious ideologies to actually sustain broad commitments to remain involved in local community service. Commitment to community service in the context of valuing diversity implies devoting personal attention to thinking about caring for the poor and needy at all times, not only in the context of specifically church-supported activities. These sorts of obligations do not stop within the walls of the church. Rather, a clear understanding of one’s personal mission was something that traveled with members to all situations, not limited to those where the church sponsors a program.

That a form of religious individualism has the potential to sustain more commitment to community service than a communally legitimated approach should also change how we view religious individualism. It is possible that particularly for the children of immigrants, many of whom wish to retain conservative Christian commitments yet escape from what they perceive as a strict, obligatory, immigrant church, an evangelicalism that legitimates individual choice may have potential to sustain civic involvement. Evangelicalism thus emerges as a religious institution that uses both a religiously-based communal and individual rhetoric to foster commitment.

Korean Americans at Manna also found a way to link appreciation for diversity and the concerns of American minorities with Christianity, while remaining distinctively evangelical. Although the complexity of this perspective is a topic for another article, it is important to note that Korean Americans at Manna adopted an approach to civic life that connected Christianity to fairly liberal ideas about social justice and ethnic diversity while retaining conservative ideas about sexuality. Like those at Manna, if Korean Americans and other second-generation immigrants find a way to link such ideological understandings to practices, they will strengthen an alternative to the current relationship between evangelical Christianity and civic responsibility.

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NOTES

1. I build on research sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trust initiative on religion and the new immigration in the Gateway Cities. My work expands this research by focusing on the relationship between religion and civic life among a second-generation immigrant group as well as studying congregations that are ethnically diverse. (See Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000 and Foley 2002 for a further discussion of the Gateway Cities projects.)
2. Russell Jeung’s (2002) work on pan-Asian congregations is a notable exception to this statement.
3. To my knowledge there are no systematic national data of religious participation among second-generation Koreans. See Smith et al. (1998) for a more exhaustive discussion of evangelical Christianity in America.
5. For this larger project I conducted over 100 interviews with Korean Americans in nine different congregations and did a survey, \( N = 227 \), of non-Korean and Korean members of Grace and Manna.

REFERENCES


