

Korean Protestant Pastors and Income Tax: Privileged and Recalcitrant Not To Pay

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Abstract

Religious leaders from Buddhism, Catholicism, and other faiths complied with income tax regulations, while some Protestant clergy resisted, even threatening politicians who supported the tax. This resistance exposed an anti-Christian sentiment, complicating tax negotiations between Protestant pastors and lawmakers. This paper analyses news reports (230 pages in A4) sourced from the Korea Integrated News Database System, Google search and Christian news online.

The effort to tax clergy began with a small group of Christians advocating for Protestant pastors to contribute their fair share, aligning with the government's principle that all citizens with an income should pay taxes. The prevailing anti-Christian sentiment also fuelled the desire to hold pastors accountable for their tax obligations. Protestant pastors have consistently fought for the tax exemptions they desire, even warning of consequences for political parties and politicians who persist in taxing clergy. This stance has not only eroded public trust in Protestant churches but also intensified the anti-Christian sentiment that has persisted in Korean society for decades. The erosion of public trust is a pressing issue that needs to be addressed, as it has made it increasingly difficult for Protestant pastors to regain public trust.

While ordinary churchgoers work hard to earn their income, pay taxes, and contribute tithes, there is a growing disconnect when pastors, who preach about tithing and not withholding from God, refuse to pay taxes themselves. The interpretation of what belongs to the government and what belongs to God varies by era, culture, and country. Pastors must find a balanced position between the values of "Christ" and "culture." If Korean Protestant churches seek reform, transparent financial management is not just crucial, but it is the key to rebuilding public trust and resolving the current issues.

Keywords

Protestantism, taxation of priests, individualistic congregationism, Confucianism, transparent finance management, public distrust.