

47 - Integrating North and South Korea

by Ben Torrey

The Church in South Korea must reach out to North Korean refugees and learn from their experiences to develop strategies for integrating their society with the North when it opens.

Duration: 7:04

Scripture: Matthew 25:35

Topics: "North Korea", "Integration", "Compassion for Refugees"

Description

Ben Torrey addresses the challenges of integrating North and South Korea, focusing on the struggles faced by North Korean refugees and Chinese Koreans in adapting to life in the South. He highlights the cultural and social disconnect that leads to feelings of loneliness and depression among these individuals, as well as the inadequacy of current support systems. Torrey emphasizes the role of the Church in reaching out to these communities, suggesting that churches adopt North Korean families to foster integration and understanding. He calls for a compassionate response that acknowledges cultural differences and promotes love and support for those in need. Ultimately, he believes that such efforts could pave the way for future integration when North Korea opens up.

Transcript

Good evening once again. This is Ben Torrey back with you. For a number of weeks now, we have been thinking about questions and North Korea.

Last week, I started to talk about questions we should answer that relate to our response to the opening of North Korea. We looked at the sensitive and controversial issue of ownership of land in North Korea by those who fled to the South. Tonight, I would like to discuss something that is really much closer to home, a situation that exists right now and that can be seen as a prelude to the future when the North is open.

How easy will it be for our societies, North and South Korea, to truly integrate? Present experience is not giving us much hope that this will be easy. There are now over 12,000 North Korean refugees living in South Korea. There is an even larger number of Chinese Koreans at Joseonjeok, many of whom are here illegally.

These people have come to the South in the hopes of finding freedom from hunger and a better life. For all too many of them, the majority I believe, what they have found is something very different. Most who come have found it very difficult to adapt to Korean society with its very fast pace, its wealth of choices, the

demand that each person make it on their own, and many confusing new customs, laws, and assumptions.

True, China has been moving down the road of consumerism and capitalism for several decades now, and all North Korean refugees spend time in China before coming here, but China does not prepare them for South Korea. Both North Koreans and Chinese Koreans are inundated as never before when arriving here. Things that we take for granted are totally beyond their experience.

The government provides three months of orientation for North Korean refugees at Hanawon, but this barely scratches the surface of what they need to learn to adapt. It does nothing for the underlying social disconnect that so many suffer. In addition to all the cultural language and social hurdles that they have to negotiate, there is for most an almost unbearable loneliness.

Suspicious of others for so long and cut off from all that is familiar, North Koreans in the South fight an uphill battle with depression, fear, and isolation. Many have lost loved ones, parents, siblings, and even children in North Korea or in China during the months and years of flight, hiding, and abuse. Some hope against hope that they will find their lost loved ones.

Recently, the story of a North Korean woman who plunged to her death from a tenth-story window made the news. As she was struggling with her own depression, the thing that kept her going was the hope of returning to China to get her young daughter. When that was denied her, it became too much to bear and she leapt to her death.

The situation that the Chosunjok find themselves in has its own set of seemingly insurmountable problems. For those who do not have legitimate worker status in South Korea, there is little more than exploitative day labor available to them to keep heart and soul together. Many of these Korean Chinese work, as we say in the U.S., under the table.

They work for cash and crowded in unhealthy conditions with no one to champion their cause. When injured on the job, as happens frequently, they have no medical insurance and are often abandoned at the hospitals by their erstwhile employers, who now have no idea who they are. Word of how tough it is in South Korea for both North Koreans and Chinese Koreans makes its way back to the North.

The border with China is increasingly porous as more North Koreans get permits to travel back and forth to China, and many Chinese now work and live in North Korea coming and going freely. As people cross the border, so does the news. The picture that is painted of the once longed-for land of wealth and freedom, South Korea, is no longer so attractive.

Many people are deciding to stay and endure the evil they know than to brave the evils that they do not know. The flow of refugees into China, intent on coming to South Korea, is slowing down. What does all this say about South Korean society? Especially, what does it say about the Church? A number of years ago, as the flow of North Korean refugees began to accelerate, many churches began to reach out to them, starting various types of ministries for North Koreans in the South.

A few of these continue and have been touching the lives of our North Korean brothers and sisters, drawing them into the love of Christ, but all too few. What happened to all the rest? They foundered on the shoals of culture and language. I have spoken in the past about some of the significant differences between Korean as it is spoken in the North and as it is spoken in the South.

It is not just a matter of vocabulary and accent, but of how the language is used. To make a long story short, many South Koreans are insulted by the bluntness with which North Koreans address them, and North Koreans are confused by the roundabout ways that Southerners speak to them. Neither side realizes that they are dealing with a cultural and linguistic gap, and both end up hurt and insulted.

Communication breaks down, and efforts to reach out are forgotten. So what is to be done? If we cannot deal with a few thousand North Koreans and Chinese Koreans among the 44 million South Koreans, how can we hope to carry the love of Christ into the North? The Church must reach out to the North Koreans among us in the South before launching any kind of mission to the North. The tragedy is that the answer may actually be very simple, but people are too blinded by the past or consumed with their own affairs to see it.

What better way to solve the problem for both North Koreans and Chinese Koreans than for each of the tens of thousands of churches in South Korea to adopt a North Korean family, several single people, or some of the children and youth who are here without families? If each church took in a few people, befriended them, helped them, comforted them, in short, loved them, the problem would go away almost instantaneously. Of course those reaching out to their Northern brethren would have to understand something about the nature of the cultural divide, but this could be learned quickly by anyone with a mind to do so. The important thing would be to realize that there was such a divide.

That's over half the battle right there. If we as Christians reached out to our Northern brothers and sisters living among us, we could integrate them into our society. But more importantly, we would be learning from them valuable lessons about integrating our society with theirs in the North when North Korea opens.

Think about that. Good night.

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