

44 - Family Structure and Culture in North Korea

by Ben Torrey

The North Korean family structure is fundamentally different from the South Korean family structure, with a focus on organizational life and the great leader providing eternal life, challenging the biblical understanding of family.

Duration: 8:25

Scripture: Genesis 1:27-28, Matthew 6:33, Ephesians 3:14-15

Topics: "North Korea"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of understanding the social and family structures in North Korea in order to effectively share the good news of Jesus Christ and integrate societies. The speaker emphasizes the need to gain a deeper understanding of what family means to the people in North Korea, considering the complex history of indoctrination and change. The role of biological parents in providing for their children is highlighted, but their influence diminishes as the child enters various organizations and leagues. Additionally, the impact of South Korean television dramas and movies on shaping the image of family is mentioned, raising questions about the messages being sent to North Korea.

Transcript

Good evening once again. This is Ben Torrey back with more questions. As we continue to think of the various questions we need to consider in preparing for the opening of North Korea, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ there and eventually integrating our societies, we need to look at social and family structures.

What has happened to the family in North Korea over the past 60 years and how does this affect society? How does it affect fundamental assumptions and perspectives on life and faith? It is, I believe, quite easy to gain a false impression that there is no real difference in North and South Korean ideas about family. As we see tearful reunions at the Diamond Mountains Resort or set up using technology, we feel our hearts go out to those who have been separated for so many years. We think how we would feel in similar circumstances and see those on the North Korean side responding much as we think we might.

We see the same sense of family, love for parents, brothers and sisters, the grief of separation, and think that there really is very little difference in the North Korean and South Korean sides of these families. But this is only a very limited window through which we see the North Korean family. The members of divided families remaining in the North are considered by the North Korean authorities to be members of the lower classification of people, those who are hostile or enemies.

They hardly represent most present-day North Korean families. We need to look much more deeply and examine our assumptions about family and society even as we seek to understand those of the North. While we know certain things about the family in North Korea, we do not know very much about how deeply these factors go into the fabric of North Korean life or what the ramifications of them are for society in general, for the future of North Korea, and especially for future efforts to reunite the people.

Also, fundamental assumptions about family affect how a person comes to view his spiritual family, his brothers and sisters in Christ, and his view of his Heavenly Father. We know that the family registration system set up during the Joseon period, and still important in South Korea, was abolished by Kim Il-sung in the North. Many people have lost track of what clan they belonged to, and marriages frequently occur within the same clan.

There appears not to be a strong sense of extended family as everyone has been living in state-supplied small housing units or apartments for several generations now. Of course there have been similar changes occurring in the South, with a vast majority of people moving into the cities and leaving their ancestral lands. Yet they still maintain connection with their gohyang, or ancestral home.

A related issue is how land reform and the collectivization of agriculture have affected any remaining sense of gohyang. Do people still think of their ancestral homes? Do they know where they are? Very basically, what do they do, if anything, at times like Juseok? North Koreans are taught that the family unit is only one organization in a large all-encompassing net or web of organizations. Everyone belongs to some organization, and this provides the real identity of the North Korean person.

According to the teachings of North Korean Juche ideology, parents provide a person with biological life that comes to an end. The Korean Workers Party provides the organizational life that provides a place for every member of society. And the great leader provides political life that is eternal.

Only through being celebrated by the leader and remembered for one's deeds does one attain everlasting life. This is political life and it comes from the head of the people. Kim Il-sung is referred to as the parent, the oboe of all the people.

He is the head, the brains. The people are his hands and feet. Without the head, the hands and feet die.

Without the great son, the oboe Suryong, the people will perish. For this reason, it is more important to care for and protect the leader than one's own biological parents. North Koreans are educated to be willing to die for the leader while informing on their own parents and family members if they speak or act against the head.

Not only does this contrast seriously with South Korean concepts of family, it is diametrically opposed to the biblical understanding of the family. We see in Genesis 1, 27-28 that it is man and woman together bearing children that is the image of God, and that that image is to be spread throughout the earth. God created man in his own image.

In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

We also see in Ephesians 3, 14-15 that the very concept of family, its name, comes from our Father in Heaven who is the head of the Holy Trinity, quoting, For this reason I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. It is the family that is the image of our Heavenly Father. We, my wife, my children and I are that image as are yours.

And it is he who gives us eternal life. We do not need to die to protect him. Rather he sent his only begotten son to die for us that we might live.

To return to the concept of organizational life for a moment. After a person's biological parents have given birth to him, they serve as a channel for the gifts that the oboe suryong provides to the child, his food and clothes. The parent's role rapidly diminishes as the child gets old enough to enter the nursery, then kindergarten and finally elementary school.

The child now joins the boys league or the girls league. Later they become members of the youth league and their mother is a member of the women's league and the father a member of whatever organization relates to his trade or profession. Everyone belongs to an organization and all organizations are controlled by the party.

This is the real family that the North Korean grows up in. The situation has been complicated in recent years, first by the death of Kim Il-sung. There was a great and genuine mourning by the people of North Korea upon his death.

The brain had died. How can the people live? Much of this grief seems to have been wrapped up in fear for what would come next. Of course life went on after Kim Il-sung, largely as it did before.

This began to modify if not undermine some of the basic assumptions about these things. More recently with the famines and massive movements to and from China, people began to see other models for family and society. And most recently another factor has entered the picture, South Korean television dramas and movies.

You may remember that President Roh gave to Kim Jong-il at the recent summit visit a set of popular dramas. One of the favorite gifts to give in Pyongyang these days is a DVD of South Korean movies and dramas. Think of the image of family that is reflected in your average TV drama.

What messages are we sending North? How are they being received? We need to gain a much deeper understanding of what people in North Korea mean, what they think of when they speak about family. How has this complex history of indoctrination and change affected the fundamental assumptions about what is family and how will they affect what it means to be part of the family of God? We need to understand. As you retire tonight, you might offer a prayer of thanks to our Heavenly Father for both your biological family, His image, and the greater family that He has given in your brothers and sisters in the faith.

And rest well tonight.

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