

# 46 - Questions on the Church Response to the Opening of North Korea

by Ben Torrey

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*The Church needs to come to grips with the legacy of land ownership in North Korea and resolve questions surrounding property titles and the rights of former owners.*

**Duration:** 6:57

**Scripture:** Leviticus 25:23, Proverbs 14:21, Isaiah 1:17, Matthew 22:21, Luke 12:48, Acts 2:44-45, James 2:14-17

**Topics:** "North Korea"

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## Description

In this sermon transcript, the speaker discusses the importance of addressing questions related to the Church's response to the opening of North Korea. They emphasize the need for both spiritual and practical readiness in order to effectively share the love of Jesus Christ in North Korea. The speaker specifically focuses on the issue of land ownership in North Korea and the responsibility of Christians who hold claims to land. They raise questions about whether Christians should publicly cancel their claims to promote peaceful land distribution and justice for the poor. The speaker emphasizes the need for the Church to come up with compassionate and just answers to these questions before it's too late.

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## Transcript

Good evening, this is Ben Torrey back again with more thoughts on questions. Over the past several weeks we have been discussing various questions that should be considered and researched in order to give us a better understanding of North Korea so that the effort to share the love of Jesus Christ there will not be hindered by misunderstanding and false assumptions. We feel an urgency to answer these questions as soon as possible because we believe that the day when North Korea will be open to the Gospel is not far away.

Perhaps even closer than we expect. This evening I would like to start discussing a different type of question. Rather than questions about North Korea, I want to look at questions that are equally as important.

Questions pertaining to the Church's response to the opening of North Korea. Some of these might be questions of strategy, but more, I think, will be soul-searching questions related to the readiness of the Church for this mission. Readiness in both spiritual and practical terms.

To start with, I want to pick up where I left off just a month ago when I spoke about land, economics and justice. I asked what those who held claims to land in North Korea should do about those claims in the light of the biblical nature of an economic system that treats land fundamentally different from all other property and either charges rent or taxes based on its value, not its use. There are many churches and families who owned land in what is now North Korea.

Many of these former owners hope someday to get their land back. Let's take a brief look at the history here. From the time that the Reverend Samuel Moffat first purchased a tract of land in Pyongyang in 1895 to found the Presbyterian Mission Station, the Church in North Korea grew steadily.

Just over a decade later the Great Pyongyang Revival broke out in 1907 and Pyongyang gained its famous nickname, the Jerusalem of the East. As the Church grew in numbers, it also grew in wealth. To Moffat's first purchase, others were added until in the 20s and 30s the Presbyterian Mission compound included residences, schools, churches, a seminary, industrial shops and a hospital.

It became the largest and most populous in Korea. At the same time, the Methodist Church was growing in the eastern part of the country and the Roman Catholic Church, with an even older history, was building churches, schools and monasteries. Over time, the Mission properties were turned over to the Korean churches.

At the same time, as more people became Christian, there were wealthy converts. There were also those who became wealthy because their lives were transformed through faith in Christ to lives of honesty and hard work. Finally, as individual church members, churches and church organizations began cooperating with the Japanese authorities, some to the point of outright collaboration, they benefited from these relationships through the acquisition of large tracts of land.

By the time the Communists entered North Korea in 1945, the Christian Church and many of its members were firmly identified with the landed wealthy. A tragic corollary to this was that the landless poor became more and more isolated from and disenchanted with the Church. They slaved as tenant farmers, responsible to turn over 70% of the produce of the lands they worked to the landlords, many of whom were Christians.

They were able to retain only 30% for themselves. These farmers and the non-farming population of urban workers and domestic servants had little time to think of the Spirit. They were forced into working all week long, unable to attend church, prayer meetings or Bible studies.

This was generally the situation when Kim Il-sung arrived on the scene and declared a change from 70% for the landlords and 30% for the peasants to 30% for the landlords and 70% for the peasants. This immediately endeared him with the peasants even though he eventually took all the land for the state in the name of the people. From 1945 to 1950, there was a steady stream of Christians and the wealthy leaving North Korea for the South.

Many of the Church, school and monastery lands were confiscated by the Communist government and distributed among the people or incorporated into communes. Then in 1950, following the fall of Pyongyang to the UN forces and the jubilant reopening of churches, only to be followed a few short months later with the return of the Communist forces, there was a massive exodus when whole churches moved en masse to the South and thousands of landholders fled. Many of them were able to take their property titles with them.

Others whose titles had been destroyed by the Communists or lost in the vicissitudes of war re-established ownership through demanding that others who had lived in the area vouch for their ownership. Many of these titles, both original and recreated, have been passed down in families in close regard and in the hopes that one day, with the overthrow of Communism, they may once again return to claim their former property. I also understand that there are churches in the South who look forward to reclaiming their properties and rebuilding the original church.

Tragically, some of these congregations have since split and now two or even three groups all lay claim to being the legitimate owners of the property in the North. These properties are not abandoned, sitting there waiting for the rightful owners to come and claim them. No, they are used as farms, industrial sites, homes, buildings and so forth.

They have been lived in, farmed and used for over fifty years now. If the old owners were to return, what would happen to those now living and working there? Would the land be redistributed? Would the present tenants be turned out or charged rent? Would former owners be given some form of restitution in lieu of their land? There are many questions surrounding this issue. As we contemplate the eventual opening of North Korea, the church needs to come to grips with this legacy of land ownership and all the myriad related issues.

Many people feel that Christians who have titles to property in the North should publicly cancel all claims so that a new process of peaceful land distribution and use can begin. Others claim that would be unjust to those whose lands were confiscated by the Communists. But that then raises the issue of how those lands were obtained by the owners who lost them.

In any case, the church does have responsibility to come up with answers that will reflect the compassion of Christ and God's justice for the poor and all men. And we need to resolve these questions before it's too late. I will leave you with these thoughts about old claims and property in the inaccessible North.

Good night.

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