

## Brother against brother

Could South Korea's mega-churches ultimately pose a bigger threat to the North Korean underground church than Kim Il-Sung?

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### Abstract

This fictional North Korean liberation scenario contemplates South Korea's mega-churches, not North Korea's dictators, as potentially the more dangerous enemies of an emerging North Korean underground church.

**Keywords** South Korea, North Korea, underground church, mega-church, persecution, church politics, fiction.

It would be odd behavior for any pastor to look critically over the heads – and beyond the collective wisdom and rage – of the pastors of ten of the eleven largest churches in the world seated around his conference table angrily brandishing cups of brown rice tea back at him.

Unless, that is, the pastor doing the overlooking was the pastor of the largest church in the world – which he was, which explained perfectly, at least to the Korean mind, why these ten pastors, also Korean,<sup>2</sup> were gathered around his conference table rather than he around theirs, and why he could sit quietly even as they howled and hurled the demand at him that he render a decision immediately on what was quite likely the major matter of his lifetime.

Ignoring the President of the Republic of Korea and his aides, all hunched around one corner of the same table, came much more easily. Before President Kim was President, after all, he was simply Elder Kim, one of hundreds of elders in the largest church in the world, a powerful position, of course, but with a power different in kind rather than degree from that of the world's most qualified shepherd. Besides, President Kim always stood down in theological debates like this, prefer-

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<sup>2</sup> Eleven of the twelve largest churches in the world are Korean churches, including the world's largest church (Chuang 2007).

ring to be silent as long as possible so as to defer to those louder and more certain than he. Pastor Lee, however, just preferred to be correct.

This drive for correctness was perhaps what had Pastor Lee searching the ring of scalloped wood-framed portraits on the conference room walls for wisdom rather than the ring of fellow pastors seated around his conference room table. He had always fancied himself a Reformer of the highest order and perhaps not-so-secretly hoped others would, too, which is why Zwingli, Luther, Calvin, and Henry VIII's portraits surrounded his own. Unlike theirs, his was constantly in motion: multiple portraits of himself, cycling quietly through their digital sequence in the world's most expensive picture frame, a gift from the President of Hyundai<sup>3</sup> for bailing Hyundai out of the public relations debacle that ensued when the company had first begun its investments in North Korea.<sup>4</sup> All it took was his church – the world's largest church – giving money to the North Korean government just like Hyundai had, but this time for the sake of building a hospital, not a tourist park like Hyundai's.<sup>5</sup> It lent a kind of holy legitimacy to the previously scandalous idea of handing money directly to the North Korean government. And Hyundai was appropriately grateful for the cover of compassion.

That was what Pastor Lee himself needed today: a compassionate cover under which to act against this self-professed North Korean underground bishop, something that would not even hint at the awkward presence in this room of the South Korean president nor, heaven forbid, the men presiding over South Korea's mightiest churches.

Pastor Lee found himself doubting that he could discover a successful strategy for such a move from the lives of the men whose portraits haloed his own. After all, Zwingli's public witness against the Anabaptists Manz, Falk, and Reiman led to the trio's death by drowning. Luther pled stridently for the execution of fellow Protestants he regarded as false teachers. Calvin secured the same fate for Michael Servetus and was joined roundly in the matter by his Protestant contemporaries. And Henry VIII's church famously served his state with scripture and sword in tandem, and vice versa.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The world's most expensive picture frame, a wooden frame surrounding a digital matting, was manufactured by Korea's Hyundai Corporation and is currently valued at \$70,000 USD (Mack 2011). Like the other personal details in this story, the idea of Hyundai gifting the frame to a mega-church pastor is entirely fictional.

<sup>4</sup> Hyundai was among the first external investors in North Korea (Noland 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Hyundai's Mount Kumgang tourism project reflected Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy push toward commercial investment in North Korea by South Korean companies (Noland 2001); meanwhile, South Korean churches undertook a different series of investments, giving money to the North Korean government for the establishment of hospitals, orphanages, and noodle factories (Chae 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of each of these Protestant-on-Protestant persecutions, see Cloud 2005.

On the other hand, blood-drenched as these Reformers' hands were, Pastor Lee mused, not one of them was today associated with anything more than the blood of Christ rightly restored to its doctrinal primacy. Perhaps they could be of some inspiration to him after all.

He could hardly wait four hundred years for his vindication, however. No – he would need to do as they did, insisting that persecution of fellow believers was itself as righteous a righteous act as had ever been undertaken, no mere necessary evil. He paused at Luther's visage. How had this father of the faith phrased it?

On the obstinate, hardened, blinded peasants, let no one have mercy, but let everyone, as he is able, hew, stab, slay, lay about him as though among mad dogs, . . .so that peace and safety may be maintained...<sup>7</sup>

Peace and safety demanded the withholding of compassion – certainly South Koreans, and especially South Korean Christians, should be able to understand that, given the untrustworthiness of the North Korean defectors they had all thus far encountered in Seoul. And Pastor Lee could understand it, too: If Calvin had a Servetus, how could Pastor Lee not have one as well? Reformers had enemies because reform itself always has enemies, and if those enemies were fellow Christians was it really so serious a matter, to be contemplated in fear and trembling? There is a name for a twenty-first century Christian enemy – “cultist” – and that name permits (demands, really, for the sake of the church's integrity) the sword to be drawn more swiftly than when they went by a different name in Luther's time: “heretic.” Modern Christians don't want to see heretics mowed down. The world is far too libertarian for that anymore. But cultist? No one has sympathy for a cultist.

And that is exactly what this self-proclaimed North Korean Bishop Ahn was, in Pastor Lee's opinion: a cultist, nothing more. The hero of a few college students in South Korea. A North Korean bereft of even a day of formal theological training who had survived concentration camp life longer than most – long enough to endure to the Liberation three months ago. A savvy political strategist, Pastor Lee mused, who no doubt was motivated to undertake this most political of actions – peaceful but persistent occupation of the campus of the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, the purported site of the long-ago destroyed Robert Thomas Memorial Church<sup>8</sup> – in order to derail the South Korean Church Council's Plan for the Evangelization of North Korea.

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<sup>7</sup> Cloud 2005.

<sup>8</sup> The Pyongyang University of Science and Technology is a university built on land leased by Kim Jong Il to a Korean American, Dr. James Kim, to build an entirely secular university funded by evangelical Christians on the site of the martyrdom of Robert Thomas, missionary to Korea. The site once housed

If he really was a bishop with any kind of a legitimate claim at all to the Robert Thomas Church site, thought Pastor Lee, Ahn would certainly laud the public launch of the Council's plan at the site with loud cheers rather than opposing it via the cellphone cameras of a few college kids standing around to record his stern denunciation. Surely the Korean government would want nothing less than to have to adjudicate every claim of what land belonged to whom and to return every parcel confiscated over seventy years of dictatorial rule. And that was what the challenge amounted to: a land grab. South Korean Christians had received a legitimate lease to these million square meters in the Nak Lang section in Pyongyang. Heaven knows churches like his had poured money like concrete into the building and operation of the university that had been built upon it, sighed Pastor Lee. Over the years they had more than paid the price hundreds of times over to be able to use the place for the ceremonial launch of the evangelism campaign.

And Ahn? He had not so much as a dime invested in the property, not so much as a scrap of paper laying any claim to it legally, not even the pretense of a legal entity capable of disputing the matter in court. No, Ahn had only a moral claim – a ridiculous one, in Pastor Lee's view: The land, said Ahn, belonged to the North Korean church – whatever or wherever that was legally, Ahn could not say. Instead Ahn spoke plainly and simply in noting that this nonexistent church had never deeded the land to the North Korean regime. It had been taken from them like Naboth's vineyard, he said, the holiest of Korean Protestant shrines snatched away like the lives of all the martyrs who dared publicly denounce the theft.

Pastor Lee paused momentarily to contemplate that he had no portrait of Robert Thomas on his wall. That would have been a nice touch – Robert Thomas, the Welsh missionary who sailed into Pyongyang aboard the Sherman trading ship and laid down his life with a shout of "Jesus!" and the offer of a Bible to the captors that beheaded him. Every Korean Christian knew the story. It was the creation myth of the Korean church. That's why the Korean Church Council's Plan for the Evangelization of North Korea had to be officially launched there. And if every Korean Christian knew the story and felt its power, reasoned Pastor Lee, then so did Bishop Ahn. And that is exactly why Bishop Ahn was staging his hunger strike right on a filthy blanket on the manicured lawn of the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology: If he won this PR battle, he'd knock the South Korean church – and thus the South Korean way of life – right off the peninsula, accomplishing what his compatriots had failed to do in the Korean War and its seventy-five years of subsequent hostility.

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the Robert Thomas Memorial Church, which had been long before destroyed by the communists see Price 2012.

But North Korea hadn't succeeded before, Pastor Lee straightened, nor would Bishop Ahn now. Pastor Lee had been among the first to preach against the so-called "North Korean Underground Church" cells in South Korea when they had first started springing up around Seoul during the economic struggles of the 2010s. Other pastors had viewed these informal groups of South Korean college students as little more than harmless mischief by the overly holy, but Pastor Lee had rightly discerned that even in such an incipient form they represented a full frontal assault on everything the South Korean church – and thus South Korea – held dear. Pastor Lee had even at that time been dealing with the decline in attendance of the South Korean church, long enough that he knew a serious threat when he saw one. Your religion doesn't lose three to four percent of its members annually simply because your marketing campaigns aren't good enough, Pastor Lee knew.<sup>9</sup> Your religion loses three to four percent of its members annually because its fundamental premise, that faithfulness to God is the path of prosperity,<sup>10</sup> rings hollow when young people can't get jobs out of college even though their mothers and fathers tithe and show up every day at 5 a.m. for morning prayer.

That is why an accelerating number of young people walked away from the Protestant church in the 2010s, with many turning to Catholicism's more compassionate social ethic<sup>11</sup> (and, thought Pastor Lee, its more lenient approach to drinking, smoking, and tithing). But many turned in a new direction – North. As North Korean defector young people interacted more and more with South Korean young people in South Korean universities and other social settings, South Korean youth became exposed to a different formulation of Christianity. They liked it, thought Pastor Lee, because they didn't understand the importance of working productively with the South Korean government, something he and his fellow pastors had always done, whether that meant overlooking the distasteful behavior of dictators or the equally distasteful pro-North Korea policies of the Sunshine Policy presidents. Young people could turn their nose up at all the money, buildings, and hierarchy, Pastor Lee sniffed, but they and their North Korean defector friends were still bankrolled by Christian families and Christian churches, even at the same time as they were dropping out of them. A phase, other pastors said. But Pastor Lee called it like he saw it: It was communism and irresponsibility – another sign of how selfish and spoiled

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<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive discussion and statistical quantification of the historic rise and decline of South Korean Protestant church membership and attendance, see Gwak 2000.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between Korean churches, the prosperity gospel, and the economic condition of the nation at the time of the Asian economic collapse, see Ro 1998.

<sup>11</sup> The Korea National Statistical Office shows in 2006 that the number of Protestant Christians in Korea dropped to 8,766,000, a 1.6 % drop over the past decade, while the number of Catholic Christians in Korea rose to 5,141,000, an increase of 74.4 %, in that same time period (Jung 2006).

South Korean youth could be. They were turning their backs in increasing numbers on the South Korean churches that had raised them and were instead setting up informal intentional communities in college dorms, coffeehouses, and workplaces. Who would cover the cost of the mega-church buildings in fifteen years?, he wondered. Why did we build the basketball courts and light shows if not for them?

So he spoke against the movement from his pulpit and through his church's TV and radio station, his web portal, and his publishing house. Other pastors said he was strengthening the movement by legitimizing it. He shot back that it was they who were legitimizing the movement through the special workshops and events and worship forms they started offering to reach those disaffected youth in what they claimed were less institutionalized ways. And through it all these "underground" youth scoffed at all of them with pious and immature disdain, talking of him – Pastor Lee! – as their enemy to love and bless. It was ridiculous, and he had been right: They were a threat, and now ten mega-church pastors were shaking their fingers and tea cups at him about this Bishop Ahn, absolutely blind to their role in raising up Ahn and others like him in the first place through their talk of underground this and underground that. These pastors had foolishly joined other pastors in backing away from the first principles of the South Korean church in what could only be described as a desperate attempt to lure young people back to the buildings and to the yoke of institutional support.

At least his was a principled institutionalization, he thought. How in the world did people come to believe that prosperity theology had failed? The thought pained him enough to crease his almost-never creased forehead. After all, no one had ever promised record rates of return every quarter – just the obvious truth that if we work hard for God, he will of course work hard for us.

And God had, hadn't he? It wasn't Kim Jong Il sitting in this chair. It was Pastor Lee. Kim Jong Il was dead. Kim Jong Il's Juche philosophy was dead. What in God's name would possess South Korean young people to want to follow anything North Korean when even North Korean people themselves had cast it off wholesale as refuse? If North Korean underground Christianity was such a worthwhile thing, then why did North Koreans call, email, write, defect, and otherwise embrace in every conceivable manner the South Korean Christianity of buildings, pastors, and hierarchy that South Korean youth had labeled so intrinsically evil? Follow a North Korean holy man without so much as a single seminary credit or ordination certificate to his name and that would lead you out of unemployment and back to prosperity? The whole line of thought was repulsive to him.

God had done his part. Now Pastor Lee would do his, exposing this cultishness to the ridicule it deserved. The young people would return to the church when they returned to their senses – and when their parents started making them have to

earn a living, for once. There were not two churches in Korea any more than there were any longer two countries in Korea. North Korea was gone, collapsed under the weight of its ideological impracticality, isolation, and self-absorption. North Korean Christianity would follow the same path, and Pastor Lee wouldn't make the same mistake the South Korean government had to prolong the silliness of the North Korean regime by showing it respect and treating it as something real. Yes, the South Korean church had given money to the North Korean government – hence one of Bishop Ahn's favorite diatribes: "You turned your back on your own flesh and instead rode Babylon the harlot right over our backs" – but it had done so to build hospitals and noodle factories and orphanages to thus pave the way for a warm reception for Christianity among the North Korean population once the country opened, a reception that Bishop Ahn was inconceivably focused on spoiling, along with his South Korean communist college friends.

And so it had all come down to this – this room, this meeting, this President, these pastors. At stake: A twenty-five year savings and missionary training plan to lavishly pre-fund the evangelization of an entire nation for a decade, unprecedented in the history of missions. All the established denominations cooperating, the funding fully accumulated, the number of missionaries needed oversubscribed. Everything ready for launch within weeks of North Korea's collapse.

And now everything was being held up by a liberated North Korean prisoner who was claiming that the land on which the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology campus was built – the former site of the Robert Thomas Memorial Church, the future site of next week's North Korean Evangelism Campaign – belonged to the (legally nonexistent) North Korean underground church, with the (ecclesiastically uncredentialed) Bishop Ahn its self-appointed spokesperson. On a hunger strike not, mind you, to receive the keys to the building or a seat at this table of pastors but to request simply that the plan not be launched. "We are the North Korean church," Bishop Ahn said evenly and softly into the shaky high-definition phone video of his South Korean university student flunkies, playing moments before on the mega plasma screen in Pastor Lee's conference room. "Let us evangelize North Korea according to the plan we developed not in twenty-five years of fund raising but in seventy-five years of faithful witness to our Lord's name in prisons, concentration camps, and before the principalities and powers of our nation. We do not have your money, your missionaries, or your buildings. But we do not need them. We have, as we always have had for the last seventy-five years of captivity, the Lord. We have learned to rely on him wholly and only, and to rest content in him and his direction for us. And his direction to us is clear: not to reject you, but to insist that you recognize that we are the duly constituted church of this nation. We ask for nothing – no money, no missionaries, no construction projects, no rallies – nothing except

for your patience. By the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony we have stood faithfully here while our brothers and sisters were slaughtered for bearing the name of Jesus. Now stand faithfully there in the South, we beseech you, and pray for us. Our hour has come at last. We are few, but we are battle hardened and ready to reach a nation. The only thing that can prevent us from doing so . . . is you.”

It was video posted and reposted not only by members of the so-called underground movement but, ignominiously, by other sympathizers as well: non-Christians, Buddhists, even Catholics, in South Korea and around the world. “It has gone viral!” the pastors around the conference table shouted, sloshing their teacups at Pastor Lee accusingly, while President Kim, stoop-shouldered, silently slumped in his seat. “What can we do now?”

Pastor Lee at last drew his glance from the portraits of Zwingli, Luther, Calvin, Henry – and Lee – downward and leveled a piercing gaze directly at his (junior) peers, first one and then the other. They quieted quickly. Lee’s eyes settled at last on President Kim.

“I believe, Mr. President,” he said in a voice of confident innocence, “that Mr. Ahn is indeed a Living Human Treasure as defined in the 2003 UNESCO guidelines developed by the South Korean government.<sup>12</sup> Our country has always honored its master basket makers, tea pourers, and traditional dancers – those who faithfully plied the trades and crafts of old. It will certainly want to honor a few old men who bravely stood up to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in their time.”

He sniffed. “Regrettably the health of these patriots is so poor that they may never be able to appear publicly again in this lifetime, but what a fitting tribute that they be given accommodation and a generous living allowance in one of Kim Il Sung’s former villas.”

“And,” he added, looking down to sign some paperwork placed next to his elbow for next week’s launch, “a twenty-four hour security detail firmly committed to guarding his safety. Whatever you do, for God’s sake, don’t let him die of anything heroic.”

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<sup>12</sup> South Korea’s designation of “Living Human Treasures” – one per cultural practice – was successfully proposed by South Korea to UNESCO for global adoption in 2003. See UNESCO 2003 for the full proposal.

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