

SUNSHINE, FOOD, AND GRACE

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INTRODUCTION

To recap the facts first, reports tell us that since its inauguration in early 1998, the Kim Dae-Jung government has graced North Korea with more than 235,600 tons of food, an amount that can feed 20 percent of the famine-stricken country's children aged six or under for four years.¹ The same source alerts us that the estimation shows that at least one North Korean generation would have starved if it were not for the food donated by South Korea. Despite its domestic economic complexities, the South Korean government has actively participated in such humanitarian relief programs sponsored by UN organizations such as the World Food Program (WFP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) from 1996.²

Another heart-aching fact is that although the general population of the North has slightly increased to 22.25 million this year, compared to 21.54 million in 1995, the number of children under six years of age has decreased by more than 500,000 during that period primarily because of tighter birth controls and a lack of needed medicines.³ To worsen the predicament, North Korea has been facing natural calamities rather frequently. As a result, it is identified as the worst country in the world according to some socio-political voices.

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¹North Korea consistently lacks an estimated 1-2 million tons of food annually. This is partially a result of the structural problem in the state-planned economy. Its first request for food assistance from international agencies was made in 1995.

²On March 3, 2000, the ROK participated in an international effort to fight infectious disease in the North by providing \$500,000 worth of aid for prevention and treatment of epidemic diseases in North Korea. See *White Paper on Korean Unification*, Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea (Seoul: Jungmoonsa, 2001), 146-147.

³See *Korea Herald*, September 3, 2001.

Moreover, Catherine Bertini, executive director of the World Food Program (WFP), presented a negative view during a press conference in Beijing, saying that in terms of food the North would never become self-sufficient. “Even with improved harvests, even with good weather, there will be a need for food aid (in North Korea),” Bertini said.⁴

ISSUES AT STAKE

Knowing all this, the aid to North Korea seems futile. Or as some suggest, it is one of the greatest ethical tests of the twenty-first century. Is such a statement a mere delusion or an exaggeration? Should the churches give up the task? Can we with a clear conscience say, “No,” to our people in the North? If anyone should say, “No,” he should not be a member of the Christian community. After all, have we not been taught repeatedly to love the marginalized and even our enemies? In fact, our life should be exemplary as Jesus emphatically voiced. Yes, the whole issue certainly generates divisions in perspectives among the people in the South. Some wonder if it is ever worth the effort. They further argue that though Kim’s Sunshine Policy is a great project, it is only a theory. In practice it seems entangled between Scylla and Charybdis; that is between giving without receiving anything and being absolutely indifferent, which jeopardizes the political relationship of the South with its neighboring nations.

What it comes down to is this: Are we willing to take the risk and continue to give food aid to the North despite its crafty and depreciative response at times? The answer is an emphatic “Yes!” I believe that the book of Romans in the New Testament gives clear guidance on the subject.

ALL IN VAIN OR ALL IN GAIN?

One of the antagonistic views against the aid maintain that our aid does nothing but increase the length and depth of the North’s addiction to strict isolation from the international community. I once came across a letter, which stated that North Korea is very much like an “alcoholic.” The letter suggested that by giving the North food and other aid, we allow them to buy their “alcohol”, namely weapons. Pyongyang’s recent purchase arrangement with Russia to replace tanks and fighter

⁴See *Korea Herald*, August 25, 2001.

aircraft is a prime example. According to this view, the South's Sunshine Policy is only allowing Kim Jong-Il to hide the failure of his state-run economy. It is enabling him to strengthen his military and give him enough food to head off civil unrest. Furthermore, the food aid is used as a weapon and distributed according to the citizens' perceived party loyalty.

Does this mean that we should stop the aid and investment? Certainly not! If we stop it, we are merely torturing the people, not the government. It is not a political sanction that we ought to keep in mind. It has all to do with humanitarian aid and is precisely a soul-feeding issue. It has also been noted that Kim Jong-Il has agreed to give some aid agencies a bit of freedom to distribute food. This suggests that he is aware of the potential for instability should too many people starve. It is not all bad after all. Very recently, the North desired our aid. This is the time to give and give it freely.

The South Korean government's policies are not doomed to fail, mainly because North Korea is touched and the sunshine is shed all over the place in North Korea. Still many are in the shades, not willing to come out but gradually they will come out to the sunlit places. It is not North Korea's superiority, but its vulnerability, which has kept it out of control and given an ache to every South Korean official devising North Korea policies. The Roman letter says that "bearing" is needed, not to try to please ourselves but to seek their interests first.

Many pessimistic predictions have failed as we evidently observe right at the present day the North Korean regime desiring to enter into a sincere dialogue with the outside world. All in all, now is not the right time to scrap the Sunshine Policy, because it has been making noticeable contributions in partially stripping North Korea. There is no real alternative to it. It is desirable to maintain this policy because it has gained support from the international community and carved a very positive image of the Korean peninsula.

WHAT THE BOOK OF ROMANS SAYS

I now turn to the book of Romans in search of the underlying biblical principles behind our aid to the North.

The most obvious, frequent and formally consistent element of the Pauline epistolary conclusions is the *karis* (benediction). There is a clear reason as to why the apostle Paul repeats the *karis*. Grace is there to share with others who are not entitled. Though grace benedictions

are phrased in letters other than Paul's, the undisputed Pauline occurrences stand out by reason of their steady three-member pattern, which includes the genitive qualification and the personal reference to the addressees. Within this pattern, Paul exercises freedom in giving the Christological phrase in various manners, in naming the objects of the blessing and in expanding the benediction. Thus, regardless of its origin, the expression of the wish was not rigidly fixed. I take that as a proper motif to include North Korea as an object.

Being intended for the Roman church, the book of Romans had specific motivations: announcement of Paul's plans to visit the Roman community, to establish a diplomatic relation with it, and to provide a conciliatory theological framework. For our purpose, however, the attention should be given to the last two chapters of the letter.

The first verse of the fifteenth chapter of Romans speaks piercingly to our hearts: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." Paul tells us that it is our obligation to help the weak, the North. No one says it is an easy task. "Bearing" is carrying a burden on your back and it takes heart and sweat to do that, especially when it is the "failings" of the other. Whatever fails the North to correlate itself to us, we need to bear it and endure exactly that. Paul interestingly enough puts together two concepts and weighs them—"bearing others" and "pleasing ourselves." It sounds as if the latter is the opposite of the former. He continues in the second and third verses by saying we again are obliged to please others and not ourselves. It is an un-selfing process. It is a praise-inciting process that brings the Gentiles to Christ. And the Gentiles are the Northerners (15:8-9). It was the will of God that the Gentiles should also be offered God's grace and mercy; the prophets prophesied it.

Certainly there is no partiality with God. Many scholars rightly consider Rom 1:16-17 as the key verse. The book of Romans as a whole deals with Jewish-Gentile problems. Paul was particularly equipped to deal with this as a result of his education. On the one hand, the Jews believed God gave up on Gentiles (1:13). Because of their moral descent, there was no salvation for them. The Jews resented the preaching of the Gospel to Gentiles. Further, they were bitterly prejudiced against Gentiles (cf. Acts 13:45-47). On the other hand, Gentiles thought that Jews had no salvation because they had rejected and crucified Christ and hardened their hearts against the Gospel.

As the book reminds us implicitly, Christianity should blot out all

national enmity (between Jews and Gentiles) and bring them (in Christ) to love one another. If non-Christian organizations are doing so much to help the North, how much more should the Christians get involved in the process?

For God's grace, offering righteousness unto all, has been extended upon the same conditions or requirements without respect of persons (Rom 6-8). This indeed is the core of the argument of Romans.

The eighth verse of the thirteenth chapter points out that God's moral law is based upon the principle of "love thy neighbor as thyself" and exhorts us to be aware of the consideration and the duty they owe to each other.

CONCLUSION

A few days ago, the North's Kim Jong-Il and the South's Kim Dae-Jung agreed again to allow separated families to meet, to repatriate political prisoners, to promote economic, athletic, and cultural exchanges, and to advance reunification "in a manner that respects and recognizes each side's formula." Contentious issues such as the North's nuclear and missile development programs and the 37,000 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea were sidestepped in this heart-stirring meeting.

Over the past several decades, there have been precious few secret diplomatic exchanges, no family reunification programs, no telephone or rail connections, not even any spy swaps. Instead of selling their dissidents to the South in exchange for hard currency, as East Germany once sold its dissidents to the West, the North Koreans have preferred to lock them up, along with their wives and children, in some of the world's most ghoulis labor camps.

But however distant actual unification may now be, the pertinent question is now in the air, and we will hear more about it.

All in all, the ultimate basis for our help is that the South owes the North for its "spiritual blessings." What most of us do not realize is the sheer fact that the early churches of Korea had laid their foundations in the various places of North Korea. In fact, the South owes the North the very spiritual blessings and Paul pivotally points out that if we owe such blessings, we are to return them with "material blessings." And intriguingly enough, Paul is specifically speaking of financial help (Rom 15).

North Korea's continued recalcitrance is something we have to put

up with, something we must bear. We should just do our part as Jesus commanded. After all, the principle is as simple as grace. You give without thinking about anything else. We shine like Jesus shines, and we give as he commanded, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will be working as a transforming power in our midst.