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Contested South Korean Identities of Reunification and Christian Paradigms of Reconciliation

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Abstract
South Koreans, including church members, remain deeply divided about the pathway to any future reunification with North Korea. One form of division lies in the contested South Korean identities regarding North Korea and their implications for national identity, policy, and how South Koreans must change for a peaceful future with the North to become possible. This article identifies four prevailing South Korean identities regarding North Korea and reunification: Enemy Nation, Another Country, Disadvantaged Sibling, and Ruptured Family. We then consider five paradigms from the Christian tradition as responses to the contested identities via the biblical priority for peace and reconciliation.

Keywords
Korea, unification, identity, reconciliation, church, Christian

> The Pyongyang people are the same as us, the same nation sharing the same blood . . . they have deep love and a longing for their compatriots in the South. . . . I have returned with the conviction that sooner or later, we will become reconciled with each other, cooperate, and finally get reunified.
>
> —President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea, returning from Pyongyang in 2000 after the first-ever summit between leaders from North Korea and South Korea

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Beginning in the late 1960s, my parents served as missionaries to South Korea with the Presbyterian Church. Over my twelve years of growing up in Seoul, I heard many painful stories from the war that erupted in 1950. Many outside the Korean Peninsula do not understand how intensely and tragically the two nations are divided. For over seventy years, ten million people have lived permanently separated from their families; a formal peace agreement to end the war was never signed, the border is heavily militarized, and there has been no progress toward peace; and travel and communication across the border has been forbidden by both countries. Koreans in North and South have lived almost completely isolated from each other.

Nevertheless, the desire for the reunification of all Korean people, what Koreans call *tongil*, lies deep within the Korean consciousness. The country was united for 1,300 years before the Korean War, sustaining a unique language and a flourishing culture, despite being constantly squeezed by superpowers in every direction: Japan to the south, China to the west, Russia to the north, and the US, a dominant twentieth-century actor, to the distant east. This resilience as a small country over many centuries of suffering nourished the Korean identity of a common sense of ethnohistorical "weness" and chosenness for a special purpose. The deep sense of Korean peoplehood has kept alive the hopes of many for the day of reunification.

In South Korea, however, people do not share a monolithic understanding of which pathway will actually lead to a new future with North Korea. Three years ago, I made an unexpected return to live in the land of my upbringing to serve with an international Christian NGO in relief, development, and peace work in Northeast Asia, including multiple visits to North Korea.[1] I have discovered that, as time has passed, South Koreans are more divided than ever regarding North Korea, and this discord is especially true within the church. One critical task for any breakthrough to a new future between North and South will require the church to engage hotly contested identities regarding the "threatening other" of the North.

Four identities regarding North Korea and reunification

Four prevailing identities regarding North Korea can be delineated in contemporary South Korean society: Enemy Nation, Another Country, Disadvantaged Sibling, and Ruptured Family.[2] Each identity carries contrasting implications for and approaches to the future between the two divided countries. As is true of any long history of conflict, these identities often overlap and mix within individuals and society to concoct a turbulent and often volatile climate.

The first South Korean identity regards North Korea as *Enemy Nation.* From 1950 to 1953, over 2.2 million Koreans were killed during the war, mostly civilians. Sebastian Kim, a contributor to this issue, describes the wounds that emerged: "The war caused a deep scar of resentment toward the other side in the hearts and minds of both South and North Koreans. And until today the memory of cruelty by both parties has haunted any attempt at reconciliation. During the brief period of occupation of the other's territory, both parties committed killings, torture and kidnapping of civilians,

accusing them of being either 'communist aggressors' or 'collaborators with the American imperialists.'"[3] In the long decades since 1953, with no opportunity for healing the scars of resentment through encounter with the other, a deep sense of victimhood in search of justice took root among many in the older generation who experienced trauma. In South Korea this sense manifests itself in a dominant identity of a holy pursuit to resist the evil of atheist Communism.

The identity of North Korea as enemy nation seeks a vision of reunification via collapse of, or regime change in, the North—understood as a just and sometimes even holy cause. Coexistence is not seen as possible until North Korea is cleansed. The corresponding vision of the future is regime change in North Korea, whether brought by collapse, military force, or evangelization. With an estimated one million North Korean troops across a border that lies just thirty-five miles from Seoul, this identity is supported by the pervasive militarization of South Korean society. (By law, every South Korean is conscripted for two years, and a National Security Law regulates "compromising" activities, including any pro-North public commentary by its citizens.)

The second dominant South Korean identity regards North Korea as *Another Country*. Over seventy years of complete separation under two drastically different systems of life, ideology, and government, an identity has developed that sees the two Koreas as two different cultures. Especially the younger generation thinks this way—they never knew a united Korea, did not experience war or trauma, and have no family members in the North.

This identity is reinforced by reports of the astronomic economic cost of reunification. Living in a highly success-driven culture, South Korean youth ask, "Why bother? What's in it for us?" In addition, despite the threatening rhetoric between North and South, daily life in South Korea carries on as usual without the urgency of a clear and present danger. The status quo of two different nations and cultures with different interests has come to seem normal, natural, and even inevitable. This identity of another country does not find reunification to be a compelling vision worth the sacrifice. The corresponding vision of a future with North Korea is one where the peninsula remains divided, that is, a kind of benign apartheid that leaves the status quo intact.

The third identity, which regards North Korea as *Disadvantaged Sibling*, undergirds a pro-unification impulse in South Korea. South Koreans emerged from postwar poverty to develop, with only fifty million citizens, into what is now the world's eleventh-largest economy, with their cars, phones, K-Pop music, and K-dramas valued across the world. The corresponding understanding of unification is described by Korea scholar Andrei Lankov: "It is always accepted that the new unified state will be run in accordance with the South Korean economic and political model. No serious concessions to the North Korean model, widely seen as inferior, are going to be allowed or considered."[4]

This identity—which includes churches that believe the South's greater prosperity is due to faith in God[5]—looks across the border with confidence and sees an isolated and disadvantaged country that, if the chance was given, would enthusiastically embrace the South's way of life. The related vision of the future is one of unification

by absorption, namely, a process of assimilation through which the people of the North are gradually welcomed into the system of the South.

The fourth and final prevailing South Korean narrative regards North Korea as *Ruptured Family.* This understanding is seen in President Kim Dae-Jung's words in 2000 after returning from North Korea: "The Pyongyang people are the same as us, the same nation sharing the same blood." Deep down, South Koreans affirm this understanding of a fundamental Korean *we.* But they vehemently disagree over the political form this perspective took in President Kim's so-called Sunshine Policy (i.e., an iceberg of hostility melts by warmth and engagement, not by cold war), which reversed the previous fifty years of South Korean antagonism. Kirsteen Kim describes the starkly different approach: "[The Sunshine Policy] changed the rhetoric completely by recognizing the humanity and dignity of North Koreans and engaging with them. . . . This policy aimed at peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas, in which the South pledged neither to provoke North Korea nor to seek to absorb it."[6] The corresponding vision of the future with North Korea is one of mutual respect, which recognizes the sovereignty of both countries and seeks economic cooperation leading to a federation. This approach lasted from 1998 to 2008. Reunions were intensified between divided families, economic cooperation was established, and South Koreans engaged in humanitarian work with North Koreans.

Contested identities and the South Korean church

While these four South Korean identities regarding North Korea conflict with each other, they also have fluidity; the multiple identities can be held together in paradoxical tension, much like a kind of "love-hate" association with North Korea. (For example, resist the North Korean government, but provide humanitarian support for ordinary North Korean people.)

Nevertheless, these identities are bitterly contested, given their enormous implications for national identity, values, and policies.[7] The "another country" identity can be seen as fleeing from tension that must be squarely faced. Approaching North Korea as disadvantaged sibling is criticized as a version of colonialism, as seen in the well-documented difficulties of the 30,000 North Korean refugees now living in the South—welcomed not as equals but treated in practice as a different ethnic group struggling in a strange land they do not readily embrace.[8] The strong social forces of anti-Communism find the notion of respect for North Korean sovereignty abhorrent. Similar to the power of the terms "Uncle Tom" or "Commie" in certain contexts in the US, terms of contempt such as *jong buk*, (follower of the North) and *bbal gaengi* (Red partisan or Communist) have been used to label pro-engagement politicians and activists as unpatriotic and to turn public opinion against them. Indeed, following President Kim Dae-jung and his protégé Roh Moo-hyun were two conservative presidencies that effectively dismantled the Sunshine Policy.

Tragically, the churches in South Korea are fully and emotionally caught up in the hostile climate of disunity.[9] Many Christians from the North who experienced great

suffering before and during the war fled to the South, where they established churches, many of which became what are now the largest churches; over the subsequent decades they have historically aligned themselves with conservative governments.[10] A small but vocal minority of other church bodies have kept the "ruptured family" identity at the forefront and instead pursued channels of engagement with the North. The church's disunity stretches to conflicting views over the US's long-standing military power and presence in the South.[11] An added source of intensity for the church is the prevailing belief among all parties that God and the Gospel are on their respective side.

Christian sources for the transformation of identity

Anywhere the church stands in disunity, especially in contexts of deep social division, the challenge Christianity faces can be understood as *metanoia*, that is, a collective turning of hearts and minds toward reformation. What paradigms of wisdom and faithfulness derived from the biblical priorities of peace and reconciliation provide sources of *metanoia* to respond to the contested South Korean identities? In what follows, I suggest five areas of consideration.

First, what lessons can be learned from similar contexts? Speaking of her research into the horrors and healing in Northern Ireland after centuries of segregation, hostility, and violence, Cecelia Clegg contends that three turning points are required for the "social reconciliation" that makes possible a new future between deeply divided people: *a corporate will to embrace a threatening other, a willingness to renegotiate identities*, and the realization that a *new future of peace requires all parties to change*.[12] What immediately comes into view here is how the prevailing identities regarding North Korea largely do not require such radical changes in the minds of the South Korean people.[13] As the focus within these forms of identification is on South Korea as *subject* and North Korea as *object*—as enemy, as disadvantaged, as another country—they do not call for a profound turn to embrace the threatening other.

Yet Clegg's three turning points find deep resonance in a second source for *metanoia*: stories of reconciliation in the Bible where identity in God's people is transformed to engage the threatening other. Such stories include the reunion between Jacob and his brother Esau (Gen. 32:3–33:17), Jesus crossing social divisions to interact with outcast Samaritans (John 4:1–42), and his making a Samaritan the lasting image of hospitality to the stranger, which cannot be separated from love for God (Luke 10:25–37). They also include *agapē* love for the enemy at the heart of Jesus's teaching and witness, washing the feet of those who would go on to betray and deny him the night before his death, and the nonviolent life of the new postresurrection community of the early church seen in the book of Acts, with the Holy Spirit turning hostile ground into holy ground, expanding the disciples' "we" from Jews alone to include Samaritans, Gentiles, and even Roman military commanders (such as Cornelius, Acts 10). Developing a willingness to engage communities who are threatening is at the core of these biblical stories.

A third source of wisdom for the challenge of contested identities is the stories of South Korean witnesses who experienced identity transformations regarding North Korea, such as Rev. Syngman Rhee.[14] Rhee grew up in Pyongyang, and when the Korean War began, his pastor-father was killed by North Korean troops. Rhee fled to the South with his brother and was separated from his mother and other siblings. Following service in the Korean Marines, he studied in the US and eventually became an ordained Presbyterian minister. Rhee was bitter toward North Korea because of what happened to his father. But serving in the US during the civil rights movement, Rhee said the visits of Martin Luther King Jr. to his city confronted his existing victimhood identity with an uncomfortable truth: "The key to creating a new history lies in the hands of the oppressed, not the oppressor." In 1978 this conviction led Rhee to become one of the first Korean-Americans to visit North Korea, which resulted in widespread criticism from many South Koreans. Rhee learned that a new identity of reconciliation can be costly, risky, and personally painful: "To be a reconciler is to be a bridge. And bridges get walked on from both sides."[15] In this way, we see that one community's vision to break the powers of mutual demonization can be seen by other communities as a traitorous threat.

Stories like that of Rhee suggest a fourth source for addressing the challenge of South Korean identity regarding the North: the emerging field of restorative justice, which is gaining influence in South Korea.[16] Forgiveness to communities who have harmed us (such as, for South Koreans, the Communists) represents a destabilizing change in identity because the dominant understanding of justice has had to do with punishment: evildoers and those who oppose our community deserve retaliation. But there are different means of pursuing justice available that hold justice together with forgiveness, seeking not to punish but to restore. The claim is that while forgiveness is not denial, not forgetting, and not automatic, forgiveness can be the catalyst for a new beginning. [17] Indeed, there is no future of hope without it. This catalytic power is seen in the work of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu facing the evils of apartheid and Dr. King facing deep racial injustice.[18] When people have been trampled over, contended King, the temptation is to become bitter, to hate, to retaliate. But if this happens, said King, the new order sought will be little more than a duplication of the old order.[19] Restorative justice contends that forgiveness is the consummation of justice. While insisting on actions of repair to correct social wrongs, King redirected the ultimate telos of justice toward restoration of relationship: "The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community."[20]

A fifth and final source that speaks constructively to the contested South Korean identities regarding North Korea is traditions of Christian peacemaking that have tended to be overlooked. While the decades since the war brought vast economic and church growth to South Korea, in recent years mainstream Christianity has come to be associated with power scandals, public distrust, and nonpeaceful approaches to conflict.[21] In Christian seminaries and universities, peace studies has been marginal in institutional research and curricula.[22] Yet, while Anabaptism has historically had little influence in Korea, in recent years a number of scholars have begun looking to this

tradition for sources of correction in areas of concern for the Korean church, such as the relationship between evangelism and discipleship, the communal (versus hierarchical) nature of the church, resistance to materialism, and the core of the Gospel being a message of peace, with special implications for North Korea.[23] In this vein, Methodist scholar Joon-Sik Park contends, "The Anabaptist understanding of the gospel as a message of peace is crucially pertinent to South Korean churches. . . . [Yet,] a strong anti-Communist position . . . has kept them from engaging reunification issues from a biblically informed perspective of reconciliation. . . . It is crucial for the Korean church to construct a theology of reconciliation based upon the peace message of the Gospel, for without forgiveness of the past history between the North and the South, genuine reunification is not likely."[24] Indeed, the task of developing such a theology of reconciliation to address the divide with North Korea might best begin with a theology for South Korean Christians to peacefully address divides in the South itself—in the church, between left and right, between haves and have-nots, and between younger and older generations.

Reconciliation and the renewal of the church

Each of the dominant South Korean identities toward the North carries a powerful element of truth: "enemy nation" reveals that many people suffered deep trauma, which must be healed; "another country" reveals that engaging the divide is an immense cross-cultural challenge; "disadvantaged sibling" names the reality of a profound economic gap; and "ruptured family" reveals the truth that the divide between South and North is not normal or natural. Together these truths illuminate that the challenge of Korean reconciliation is enormous and the pathway to a new identity of peacemaking carries a high cost. Why bother?

Indeed, Clegg writes that in Northern Ireland seeking reconciliation has been "extraordinarily difficult and demanding." Yet, she contends that in this journey a surprising and precious gift was discovered: "In perceiving that call from God to change, to metanoia, we suddenly become aware that, in some paradoxical way, the other whom we perceive as threatening and whom we are invited to embrace is not only my Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Nationalist neighbor, it is Godself."[25] In the costly transformation of identity to embrace the threatening other, Clegg describes nothing less than a journey into holiness, into deeper intimacy with the Messiah who initiated reconciliation from the cross—not after humanity fell to its knees in surrender, but to a world still in rebellion, that is, "while we were yet sinners" (Rom. 5:8). Precisely in entering the risky spaces of hostility, the church learns that what is at stake in the transformation of its identity is more than reunification, it is the healing of the church itself.

Perhaps new signs of such transformation will emerge from the next generation of certain young Christians of South Korea who yearn to respond to social problems, who were active in the 2016 "candlelight" movement, which led to impeachment of a scandal-ridden president, and who find themselves restless for a different kind of church.[26] Such as our friend, a woman in her twenties who did not grow up feeling the trauma

of the Korean divide and had no passion to seek a different future. For her, North Korea was another country. In college, however, she joined an InterVarsity Korea visit to the China–North Korea border. Their student group took a boat ride to view the North. Suddenly, for the first time in her life, she saw two North Koreans up close, two soldiers sitting on a beach. "One of them looked exactly like my brother," she said. "Only then did I understand that we are one people." After that encounter she returned to the South, changed her vocational direction, and redirected her life toward pursuing a passion for reconciliation.

These days the divide between North Korea and South Korea can seem like "an incurable wound" (Jer. 14:17 NABRE). It certainly does to my Presbyterian pastor friend divided from his family in the North who said, "Unless God does a work in this situation, I don't think I will see reunification in my lifetime." Yet here perhaps, in search of God's power to transform the identity of God's people into peacemakers, is the very ground that could inspire a new kind of reformation.

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Notes

1. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is a North American ministry serving in about fifty countries. From the 1950s to the 1970s MCC worked in South Korea establishing a school for war orphans, and since the mid-1990s in humanitarian work in North Korea.
2. After developing these categories, I discovered the research of Sarah A. Son. Son uses an "identity lens" to analyze South Korean materials from the Ministry of Unification, major newspapers, and interviews with organizations working on unification. The identities developed by Son are similar to my four: North Korea as Self, Tainted Self, Enemy Other, and Foreign Other. See Sarah A. Son, "Unity, Division, and Ideational Security on the Korean Peninsula: Challenges to Overcoming the Korean Conflict," *North Korean Review* 11, no 2 (Fall 2015): 45–62.
3. Sebastian Kim, "Reconciliation Possible? The Churches' Efforts toward the Peace and Reunification of North and South Korea," in *Peace and Reconciliation: In Search of Shared Identity*, ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim, Pauline Kollontai, and Greg Hoyland (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2008), Kindle book, location 2366.
4. Andrei Lankov, "The Conquest of the North: Problems with Reunification by Absorption," *NKNews.org*, https://www.nknews.org/2017/10/the-conquest-of-the-north-problems-with-reunification-by-absorption/.
5. Matthew Bell, "The Biggest Megachurch on Earth and South Korea's 'Crisis of Evangelism,'" *PRI.org*, May 1, 2017, www.pri.org/stories/2017-05-01/biggest-megachurch-earth-facing-crisis-evangelism.
6. Kirsteen Kim, "Reconciliation in Korea: Models from Korean Christian Theology," *Missionalia* 29, no. 1 (April 2007): 23–24.
7. See Gilbert Rozman, "South Korea's National Identity Sensitivity: Evolution, Manifestations, Prospects," in *Korea Economic Institute Academic Paper Series on Korea* 3 (2010): 67–80.

8. See Byung-Ho Chung, "Between Defector and Migrant: Identities and Strategies of North Koreans in South Korea," *Korean Studies* 32 (2008): 1–27; Jiyoung Sung and Myong Hyun Go, "Resettling in South Korea: Challenges for Young North Korean Refugees," *Asan Institute for Policy Studies: Issue Briefs* 24 (August 8, 2014).
9. An overview of debates between South Korean churches over reunification is provided in Gil-Soo Han and Andrew Eungi Kim, "The Korean Christian Movement towards Reunification of the Two Koreas: A Review in Retrospect," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 3 (2006): 235–55.
10. Ibid., 237, 245–46, 249.
11. Many US citizens remain unaware that, since the end of the Korean War, the largest permanent presence of US military troops has been in Northeast Asia—in South Korea (currently about 25,000) and Japan (about 40,000).
12. Cecelia Clegg, "Embracing a Threatening Other: Identity and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland," in *Peace and Reconciliation*, ed. Kim, Kollontai, and Hoyland, location 1433.
13. One major exception is the decades-long work of the Korean National Council of Churches, representing Christians who have persistently sought to engage counterparts in the North. Their 1988 "Declaration for Peace and Reunification in the Korean Peninsula" included "Confession of Hatred of Fellow North Koreans since the Division of the Peninsula" (Han and Kim, "The Korean Christian Movement," 242).
14. The first president of South Korea was also named Syngman Rhee. This other Syngman Rhee was elected in 2000 as the first-ever Asian-American moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA). From 1992 to 1993 Reverend Rhee served as president of the National Council of Churches in the US. Rhee passed away in 2014.
15. See Syngman Rhee, "Martin Luther King Gave Me a Dream for Korea," *Peace News*, no. 2451 (June–August 2003), www.peacenews.info/node/3957/martin-luther-king-gave-me-dream-korea. See also Gustav Niebuhr, "A Leader's New Focus: Reconciling Differences," *New York Times*, July 2, 2000, www.nytimes.com/2000/07/02/us/a-leader-s-new-focus-reconciling-differences.html.
16. See Howard Zehr, *Changing Lens: Restorative Justice for Our Times*, 25th ann. ed. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015); Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). The Korea Peacebuilding Institute (KOPI) is a small but influential initiative. See http://kopi.or.kr and http://kopi.or.kr/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/Brochure_2016_eng.pdf.
17. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 255–84.
18. See Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).
19. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr*, vol. 4: *Symbol of the Movement, January 1957–December 1958* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 213.
20. Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 1.
21. Bell, "The Biggest Megachurch on Earth." See also Jason Strother, "The Rise of Café Churches in South Korea," *The Atlantic*, May 8, 2017, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/south-korea-christians-election/525606.
22. Even so, there are small yet significant initiatives both inside and outside major institutions, such as the Border Life Peace School, as well as efforts of grassroots Christian teachers and activists. See Syntiche Dedji, "The DMZ and the Border Peace School," *World Church Relationships*, May 20, 2016, https://worldchurchrelationships.wordpress.com/2016/05/20/the-dmz-and-the-border-peace-school.

23. Joon Sik Park, "Korean Protestant Christianity: A Missiological Reflection," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 36, no. 2 (April 2012): 61.
24. Ibid., 62.
25. Clegg, "Embracing a Threatening Other," location 1433.
26. Yeon-hyun Cho, "More South Koreans, Particularly the Young, Are Leaving Their Religions," *The Hankyoreh*, February 13, 2015, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/678355.html.

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