

An “Ordinary” Teatime

An Honest Conversation about Peace and Evangelism with South Korean Conscientious Objector SangMin Lee

AN INTERVIEW WITH SANGMIN LEE,
WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF SEONGHAN KIM,
BY SAEJIN LEE¹

SaeJin Lee: *Do you think of your conscientious objection to military service as a witness to the gospel?*

SangMin Lee: I believe that one of the most important teachings of the Christian narrative is the practice of sharing what we believe without violence or coercion. To me, one of the Bible’s greatest teachings is that God has embodied humility through the incarnation. The almighty, powerful God has taken on the form of a lowly human—this act of humility is something truly marvelous and equally mysterious for me to comprehend. Especially on the night when Jesus was captured, he commanded Peter to put away his sword and said, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled,

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SeongHan and SangMin’s friendship goes back to 2008, and both have been a part of Grace and Peace Mennonite Church in South Korea. This interview took place in December 2015, when SangMin visited SeongHan’s then home in Goshen, Indiana, after having been released from prison.

that it must be so?” (Matt 26:53–54, ESV). This passage has given me great insight. Here was a man who surely could have overthrown [his opponents] but instead decided to walk the path of sacrifice and humility.

Currently, there is a lot of military tension and competition between Korea, China, and Japan. But I wonder, What—if anything—can we really achieve and resolve by continually flexing our muscles through military development? How long must we compete with each other? And to this question, though I don’t wish to enforce anything on others, I believe that Jesus has called us to a different path. Consequently, I think that to live nonviolently without engaging in such military competition is a crucial part of Christian witness.

SJL: Some Christians might say that even though your act of conscientious objection was admirable it does not have anything to do with the church’s mission. For these Christians, the church’s mission is about intentionally seeking to convert others to faith. What would you say to them?

SML: To be honest, I have been asked a similar question quite a bit in the past. I’ll share a short story as a response that is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. When others asked St. Francis how we should “evangelize” or share the gospel, he replied: share without ceasing and as often as you can; however, speak only when necessary. I have found this story to be very insightful.

The gospel is truly a marvelous and unfathomable thing—one that cannot be fully articulated or confessed by the human tongue. How important is it, then, that we simply “confess” in words? Is it not more important to allow the gospel to be steeped deep within our lives so it manifests through our actions and thus influences others?

I still remember a particular organization I had a similar conversation with. It was a mission organization at our school, very fervent and dedicated, called Mission Explosion.

SJL: Mission Explosion? What an interesting pair—mission and explosion?

SML: Yes, explosive, indeed! The members of this organization are very dedicated, and their training quite systematic. In any case, some of them approached me as well, and we actually shared a lot of meaningful conversations. My heart always felt heavy, however, at their final question: “Are you convinced of your salvation?” I would always say that answering such a question is a very cautious act—one that is filled with fear and trembling.

To me, salvation is, how should I say it, something that is becoming. It is something that cannot be simply answered with a yes or a no. And thus, even Paul expressed that we are to work out our salvation with “fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). I would ask back to my fellow questioners, “How, then, can hu-

mans so easily argue about matters of salvation?”

My response to your question is similar. When our confession of salvation has no bearing on how we act or live, the discussion feels quite pitiful and isolated. Confession and action surely cannot be separated, and our understanding of salvation must include both. This perhaps is why James confessed that faith without works is dead (Jas 2:14–26).

SJL: You said that salvation (and the gospel) is not something anyone can simply identify but is something to be shared in “fear and trembling.” What if someone were to ask you in response, how can you, then, testify that your act of conscientious objection is a part of the witness of this faith and salvation? How can you be so convinced?

SML: My decision, too, is something that I do not share lightly. I believe that humans make decisions—however big or small—based on convictions, and take actions out of their best efforts based on such convictions. I am the same way.

I cannot easily argue that the way of the conscientious objector is the only way. However, as there are various expressions of one’s faith and conviction and there are fruits of those expressions, I believe we can discern one’s faith based on the fruit of their actions. And most of all, I wonder if the process in which one carries out their action is far more important than the action itself or arguing that my own action is the best path to salvation.

So, if someone were to ask me if my own action is “correct,” I would respond: This is my best—at this very state and moment, this is the best of my effort, though it may differ from others’ [efforts].

SJL: I resonate with your expression of “best effort”—to try to live according to our utmost best, even though we may have questions.

SML: Yes. It’s as if to say that we are journeying on a path to the fullness of salvation. Perhaps I use this expression because I am from a Methodist background.

SJL: Ah, you are from a Methodist background?

SML: Yes, a part of the Holiness tradition. That’s Wesleyan, I believe.

SJL: Let’s continue on with our next question: How do you understand Jesus’s words at the end of Matthew (the “Great Commission”): “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:19–20). Is courageous social and political witness a part of this “Great Commission”?

SML: I think this is a bit obvious. As I shared earlier—through the story attributed to St. Francis of Assisi—I believe that one of the most effective means of witnessing to the message of Jesus Christ is by intentionally living in a way that is based on our faith convictions. There is nothing more powerful than convicted people living courageously according to their convictions.

What I find a bit sad about groups like Mission Explosion and their questions is that their interpretation of the Bible (such as the Great Commission) is a bit too simplistic and rigidly literal. Even though living courageously based on our convictions may be one of the most effective ways to demonstrate Christian discipleship, I see more often Christians programmatizing the gospel. Churches create evangelistic programs that are so-called discipleship movements and focus their energy too internally—further categorizing the church structure by “regions” and “cells.” I wonder if this tendency creates and perpetuates the illusion of church as a perfect community; our energy is focused on maintaining the “happiness” of our internal community while remaining blind to the needs of the world beyond.

When I see such tendencies within churches, I am left feeling sad and confused, asking whether such structures continue to insulate the church from the world.

SJL: *What about the inverse? What can you say to the people who tend to be deeply devoted to social justice but regard Jesus as an admirable ethical teacher and do not confess him as Lord or Savior?*

SML: I feel a bit uncomfortable trying to make a definite statement about that, although of course I do have my own reflections. I think Paul says that people who die without knowing Jesus are granted another way, and the Bible also states that Jesus descended into hell and pleaded for the “spirits in prison” (1 Pet 3:19). It’s difficult for me to draw a conclusion, but to me it feels a bit disrespectful to judge whether or not someone is “saved” based on what he or she confesses (or not) about Jesus.

SJL: *The response may differ based on how one defines salvation.*

SML: Yes, that is also true. As a fellow Christian, I think the question can make someone feel ashamed. When I hear my Christian friends arguing with each other about whether someone is saved or not, I am very tempted to talk back to them: “How about you? Are you so sure of your own salvation? We also won’t know for sure until we die, will we? You confess Jesus as Lord, but do you have fruits worthy of your confession? You call Jesus Lord, but would you have the courage to face him when you finally meet him and he says that he does not know you?” To be honest, these questions bubble up in my heart.

I don't think we can judge very easily. What I do think is that even people who are sure of their salvation should continue to work toward the fullness of salvation, and such continued efforts are incredibly precious.

SJL: *What is your understanding of “salvation”?*

SML: My understanding of salvation...well, that is also very difficult to answer. I have encountered so many different theories and forms of what salvation is. My own understanding of salvation ultimately comes down to the actualization of what I believe are the important values of Christian teachings, here on earth. I would like to say, salvation is God's reign coming here on earth.

One of my favorite scriptures is a part of the Lord's Prayer: “Thy kingdom come.” I eagerly desire for the coming of God's Kingdom on earth and believe that is my ultimate image of salvation. That is why I think it is important for us to continue to strive for it.

SJL: *What do you see as the primary calling of the church in South Korea today? What do Anabaptist Christians have to contribute there? But before you answer that question, I'm curious, do you think of yourself as an Anabaptist?*

SML: Actually, that is also a difficult question for me. I do not come from an “Anabaptist background,” but I sought out the Anabaptist-Mennonite church in hopes of being guided during the process of becoming a conscientious objector. It is also an issue of my personal attitude and outlook in life, but I am a bit sensitive to being defined—both by myself and others. So, I think some people might see me as an Anabaptist, while others might not. And my own answer would be...well, I'm not totally sure.

SJL: *It feels a bit similar to the way you answered the salvation question.*

SML: Yes, how should I put it? I think I tend to invest my energy in matters I feel very certain about. I am not entirely sure what salvation is, and I am not certain that I am an Anabaptist, but I need to and do act when I feel convinced about something. In that sense, I have been deeply touched and influenced by Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and believers during my process of becoming a conscientious objector, and perhaps therefore could be seen as an Anabaptist-Mennonite. However, some may see me differently in terms of [my] commitment to church membership.

Returning to your earlier question about the primary calling of the church in South Korea and that of Anabaptist Christians, my way of thinking might be triggered by my experience of becoming a conscientious objector, but I think a lot about those who are social outcasts and how important it is to be in solidarity with them. I also hope that the church in South Korea will step up as

forerunners of bringing about peace in society—peace that is immanent and concrete instead of distant or abstract.

Unfortunately, the church in South Korea often instigates and perpetuates hate toward others. The church’s attitude concerning homosexuality, other religions, and North Korea can be quite negative and hateful and makes me seriously question if this is truly the role of the church. I feel quite devastated. How can the church, this “body,” be so proactive in breeding hate and furthering separation? Don’t we have to focus our energy on how to love, how to embrace, how to forgive? No, shouldn’t we?

In this turbulent time in South Korea, the people have a growing interest in learning and sharing the Anabaptist faith. I hope those interests can continue to develop and that the Anabaptist tradition’s faith and commitment to peace can be shared to strengthen the South Korean church.

SJL: *Do you see your experience as a conscientious objector as part of a longer tradition of Christian witness amid persecution in Korea?*²

SML: I don’t know if I can easily answer this question. I’m not a theologian, but I do think my experience is a bit different. The reality that conscientious objectors are not welcome within the South Korean church is, how should I put it, a kind of accident.

SJL: *What kind of accident?*

SML: It’s a kind of “accident of delivery,” if you will. It’s an accident that took place in the process of delivering Christian faith from one context to another—a kind of a tragedy that left out some of the most valuable heritage of the tradition. Witness to peace is an intrinsic part of the Christian heritage, and yet somehow it was excluded in the process of passing on the faith within South Korea. Therefore, I think it’s not very fitting to identify my experience as “persecution”; rather, I would call it an “accident of delivery,” a tragedy. Christian witness to peace, such as practicing conscientious objection, did not come out of nowhere all of a sudden. Throughout the two-thousand-year history of Christianity, and even within the history of Christianity in South Korea, there have been numerous accounts of Christian peace witness. And yet, people are [only] now viewing such witness as a strange abnormality? I think that is definitely an accident.

In some way, I feel convicted to strongly defend my own choice of being a conscientious objector. I did not come out of nowhere! Isn’t it a fact that I, a believer who is not originally a Mennonite or from another peace tradition,

² Examples of past Korean witness include the Catholic martyrs in the early nineteenth century and the MingJung theology movement in the twentieth century.

have decided to be a conscientious objector, a witness to the Christian message that professes peace? Isn't this an example that peace, too, is an important dimension of the Christian gospel? Peace has been an integral part of Christian history, and the fact that we continue to remain silent about it might be a greater problem.

SJL: *When do you think this “accident of delivery” started?*

SML: I'm guessing we'd have to trace back to the time of Constantine...?

SJL: *Right, but what about within Korea? Are you suggesting that we have to trace back to the time Christianity was first introduced to Korea? My original question was trying to challenge the idea that practical witness to peace was somehow left out during the course of Korean Christian history.*

SML: In my opinion, I think the most crucial point was when the church started holding hands with the government. When the church blessed and prayed for a leader who started a military coup d'état and then compared him to Joshua, [for example]. I suspect that some of the “ancestors” of Korean Christianity had a strong desire—a hunger—for power.

Of course, I think there is always a process of “localizing” when introducing thoughts from outside of our context. For example, the fact that Henri Nouwen struggled with his homosexual inclinations has for a long time been hidden within Korea and is only recently being talked about. Or, in the case of John Stott—a theologian well-known to the South Korean church—despite the fact that many of his books are translated into Korean, it is hardly known that he was a conscientious objector. The same happened with Father Reuben Archer Torrey III. It would have been possible to include in the translation of his writings and biographies that he was a conscientious objector, but that was not talked about, and it makes me wonder if it was purposefully left out.³

Well, I am not entirely sure when it all started, it seems like this is SeongHan's expertise. Shouldn't we trace it back to Syngman Rhee?⁴

SeongHan Kim: For what—the accident of delivery?

SML: Yes.

SHK: Well, if you name it an “accident of delivery,” I think the conversation brings us back to the earlier discussion. For instance, you said that people have asked you if your decision to be a conscientious objector is truly based on your

³ Torrey was an American Episcopalian missionary who founded Jesus Abbey retreat center in the mountains of Gangwon Province, South Korea.

⁴ SyngMan Rhee was the first president of South Korea after the country was divided. Rhee was Methodist.

faith conviction, your commitment to the gospel. The question may feel very uncomfortable, even rude or disrespectful, but I believe that it is precisely such questions that we need to wrestle with the most. The questions that make us most uncomfortable are often the questions that touch the deepest part of us. It may be these questions that unlock something within us that needs confronting or sharpening.

SJL: *That's why it's so uncomfortable.*

SHK: Precisely. So going back to what SangMin said, if you consider the absence of a peace witness within the South Korean church to be an accident of delivery, then you are suggesting that at one point there was an original version of the gospel. And whether it was Constantine or Syngman Rhee, we have manipulated and appropriated the original gospel for our own need and taste. And therefore, we are now reacting against that [misappropriation]. Well, then, let's go back to what might be the original gospel of Jesus—to what Jesus “commissioned” us to do. We will likely go back to the Great Commission in Matt 28:19–20 and the call to discipleship. Of course, we are assuming that this call for discipleship is a holistic witness—one that includes peace.

But the tension I sense within the Christian peace and justice movement is that when it comes to confessing Jesus as the center of our faith and salvation, we become reluctant. Because that confession can be exclusive; it can push someone out. So now there's a tension.

SML: Right.

SHK: I do not deny this tension. And I think the tension is even inevitable. However, my fear then is how can we follow or live after someone who we do not confess as Lord?

It is in this similar vein that I said earlier that the “rude questions” some Christians asked you are touching something deep within you—and in us. It is true that we need to share the gospel through our lives and actions (as much as words), and it is true that we must not force the gospel onto others. However, I also ask how are we articulating our commitment to the gospel of peace within our community of faith? How are we passing it on to our next generation and to those around us? Does our inner conviction and confession line up to what we do and how we live? Are we preparing to answer why we are living the way we live? I think this is a real challenge, and I can see it within the current North American Mennonite Church.

SJL: *Yes, I agree.*

SHK: Without the external challenge that formed our conviction (i.e., the

draft during the world wars), I sense that peace is somewhat “up in the air” within the North American Mennonite Church. In some ways, I think we’ve cultivated a responsive peace—maybe a reactive peace—but a proactive peace is diminishing. And then, peace related to Jesus is becoming even more abstract.

SJL: *Or, you see peace that is not connected to Jesus within the church.*

SHK: Right. You see the contours of the peace tradition, but Jesus is missing.

SJL: *Yes, that is why I asked you, SangMin, about how you understand salvation.*

SHK: So, peace becomes a bit fuzzy, and the church comes to a point where we don’t necessarily have to reference God when talking about peace. And it becomes OK if we talk about peace solely from a humanistic point of view. As with many things, conversation about peace is on a spectrum. Well, if we, as a church, really insist that the story of Jesus is somehow relevant to how we talk about peace, then we have to answer why and say what we mean by that. By asking these questions, I’m not forcing you and saying, “Confess something right now!” But I am saying that perhaps our conversation and practice of peace should center around Jesus.

It is only within this center that we can, then, talk about an accident of delivery or the coming of the kingdom of God. But if we lose this center, we haphazardly hold on to the Christian identity while continuing to pick and choose parts of the gospel.

This is actually my own struggle. How can we nonviolently confess that Jesus is Lord? Christians during the first and third centuries had to wrestle with this very question, and they confessed that Caesar is not their king—however, they did so without force or weapons even till the point of death.

SJL: *And so, well, they died.*

SHK: Right. But I believe that the center of their confession was clear. If we muddle that center, our conversation becomes futile.

SML: Ah, [then] I’m doomed.

SJL: Why do you say that, SangMin?

SHK: I think to have a humble attitude about our own certainty of salvation could be helpful as an existential confession. As you said, I also don’t have all the answers about salvation, and I also wait in fear and trembling.

Nevertheless, even in that state of fear and trembling, I think we are called to—as you said earlier—live and confess out of our best effort. And in that process, however, we might find ourselves walking toward salvation nonviolently.

[SeongHan exits]

SML: SeongHan is right. My own struggle to clearly define what I believe has a big impact on how I live. I think that is precisely why I hold tightly onto what I have come to decide as true.

I said I was doomed because I recognize that it's a bit contradictory for me to not clearly define what salvation or the gospel are, and then to say that there was an accident of delivery in how the gospel was passed down within Korean Christianity.

But I still stand by my earlier assessment that the gospel was somewhat skewed when it was handed down in Korea.

SJL: *You mean, at some point, the vital witness to peace was lost?*

SML: Yes, and I think it can be traced back to the time of Syngman Rhee—the “Father of the Country.”

SJL: *Here's something I find interesting from what you've shared so far. Even though you struggle to define your own beliefs regarding salvation and the gospel, it's out of this struggle that you decided to be a conscientious objector.*

SML: I used to say that I might be someone who agrees with Jesus more than who believes in him. Salvation ... or the gospel... ? I was not entirely sure, but Jesus's values and the way he modeled his values touched me deeply—as if that was the only answer. And for the method of his reign to be made visible on earth, to me that seemed like salvation.

That's why I also liked the phrase “Jesus follower...”

SJL: *As SeongHan mentioned, I also recognize that the reason for our commitment to peace within the North American Mennonite Church has become somewhat vague. And so, when your story of becoming a conscientious objector first reached the United States, I was personally a bit worried that people here would idealize your story too much. Not because I questioned the sincerity of your commitment to peace but because I feared that we Mennonites in the United States would be quick to celebrate your story as part of our great heritage, while remaining slow to acknowledge our need to articulate a peace witness that is centered on the Christian narrative, as well as our need to address the issues of violence prevalent in our own context.*

SML: In that sense, I want to offer another perspective. The matters we think are no longer relevant to us are sometimes the most pertinent.

Even though people are not being drafted in the United States anymore, those who volunteer to join the military tend to be of non-Caucasian and lower income backgrounds. These volunteers are then sent to various US military bases around the world, including South Korea, and unfortunately their crime rates have been increasing exponentially.

Even though Mennonites have a strong heritage of diligently working to establish the conscientious objector position during the past world wars, the United States’ world-wide military complex continues to perpetuate systems of violence in our own time—both locally and globally. And South Korea is one of the ongoing victims of the US militarization.

It is not yet over; violence in its many forms is present everywhere.

SJL: I sense that you are a bit hesitant, perhaps even ashamed, that you are not able to clearly articulate what you believe at this point in life, but I’m personally deeply touched by the fact that your decision to become a conscientious objector grew out of that very struggle.

I sense that you are—how should I put it—very human. You strike me as a deeply ordinary person. I don’t mean that belittlingly, but to recognize that your decision to become a conscientious objector was a deeply honest and human struggle. Here is an ordinary man putting forth his best effort to answer the questions that came across his ordinary life. And in struggling with self and with the help of your church community, somehow you found yourself here—having gone to and back from jail for becoming a conscientious objector.

I am excited that the ordinariness of your story might touch the hearts of us ordinary readers. I pray that it will challenge us to put forth our best effort in struggling with the hard questions of our own ordinary contexts.

SML: To always hesitate and ask questions, to always be cautious, that is definitely characteristic of my outlook in life.

SJL: You did not choose this path [when you were] full of conviction. You struggled in your ordinary life and step by step put forth your best effort, and yet when you look back, you find yourself having done what you had never imagined—something truly extraordinary.

SML: Perhaps that is why people say that “when you look back, there was grace.”

SJL: Yes, *perhaps*.

SML: Though, whether it was grace or an accident, I am not so sure!

SJL: *Thank you very much.*

SML: Not at all. Thank you.