

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Making Dictators Immortal

By definition, dictators are not voted into power. They do not rule by consensus developed within a legislative body. They do not run for the political office they hold by making promises or developing a campaign platform. They rule by raw power, usually military in nature. Such rulers often take on the image of divinity or at least quasi-divinity. Historically, one thinks of the Caesars of the Roman Empire. One reason you would obey them as your Caesar is that they were gods. The Caesar cult became a very powerful and effective tool for keeping the population of that vast colossus called Rome in line. One also thinks of recent communist dictators—e.g., Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung. While they were alive, their statues were everywhere. In stone statues or in pictures or photos, these dictators were ubiquitous. You could never get away from their peering eye or presence. Even after these three communist dictators died, their bodies were hermetically sealed and placed in a transparent chamber for all to see. In effect, they continued to live! In fact, today you can still visit the Kremlin Wall in Moscow and see Lenin's body. (Stalin was removed from the Kremlin by Nikita Khrushchev, who desired to deflate the Stalin myth.) One can go to Beijing and see the body of Mao as well. These respective dictatorial regimes are attempting to keep their founding leaders alive and forever "present" in the eyes of their people.

North Korea, a brutal dictatorship of the 21st century, seeks to deify its founder, but in a different manner. Kim Jong-il, the son of North Korea's founder, Kim Il-sung, was never a very popular dictator. His rule was marked by floods, drought, mass starvation and significant international sanctions because of North Korea's nuclear program. He almost always appeared aloof and never seemed popular with his generals or his people. Few ordinary Koreans ever heard him speak. Now that he is dead, his son, Kim Jong-un is formulating a very different posture. Reporter Chloe Sang-Hun argues that "by contrast, Kim Jong-un is striking a confident posture that recalls his grandfather, who is often depicted in North Korean textbooks and murals as a leader surrounded by children and workers. . . [Kim Jong-un] grinning, sampling soup in a school kitchen, linking arms with workers, clambering onto a tank with soldiers, embracing young pilots rushing to his chest in tears and pulling weathered army generals closer to give them words of advice, looks at home in his new role as the national *eobeoi*, or 'parent,' as his grandfather and ancient Korean kings were regarded by their subjects." The new regime clearly wants its people to see Kim Jong-un as Great Leader Kim Il-sung reincarnated. In terms of his weight, his haircut and, apparently even after some plastic surgery, they want him to look just like his grandfather. In addition, from the way he claps his hands, walks with his shoulders thrown back and even his double-breasted greatcoat, high-trimmed sideburns, double chin and full cheeks, he is his grandfather. Kim Il-sung was deified and if the regime can succeed in having the population view him as the reincarnation of his grandfather, they will re-legitimize the regime, which lost so much legitimacy under Kim Jong-il. As Sang-Hun suggests, "In this

hybrid Stalinist-Confucian dynasty that his grandfather and father created, he is presented as having a divine right to rule because of his blood ties to Kim Il-sung.” He is the new “Dear Leader” who looks just like his grandfather. But will North Korea really change that much? The nation is one of the poorest in the world but continues with its nuclear program and building of nuclear weapons. It has made overtures to the world that this might change, in exchange for food for its needy people. But this dictatorial, Stalinist regime has been losing legitimacy for decades. It is doubtful that this attempt to present a reincarnated Kim Il-sung in the person of his grandson, Kim Jong-un, can really change that!

How do we think biblically about this desperate regime of North Korea—or about other dictatorial regimes that have attempted to deify their rulers? Obviously, each attempt at deification is to foster a utopian vision, to give life and history meaning and purpose. For the communist ideologue, it is to bring in the communist utopia through the power of the state! In each case where a communist dictatorship developed, the state did not wither away; a communal society where “each receives according to their needs” never emerged. Instead, the power of the state was enhanced and human suffering increased. The failure of past totalitarians and the silliness of the current North Korean regime should drive us to Jesus Christ. Only in Him will we see utopia. Only in Jesus will we see the perfection and fulfillment we all long for! In Colossians 1:15-20, the Apostle Paul paints a compelling word-picture of Jesus Christ. He makes several major claims about Him that make all human rulers by comparison insignificant and petty. He is the Lord, His kingdom is eternal and He rules as its Sovereign.

1. Paul argues that He is the “image” of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15a). Paul’s point is actually quite clear, for it summarizes what Jesus declared in the Upper Room discourse with His disciples—“He that has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).
2. In v. 15b, He is declared to be “the firstborn of all creation.” The term firstborn is *prototokos*, which means a position of authority and power, not a term of origin or beginning.
3. Why is Jesus in this position of authority? Paul offers three reasons:
 - V. 16—Because He is the creator of all things. The language Paul employs here leaves absolutely nothing out of Christ’s creative activity. Indeed, “all things have been created through Him and for Him.”
 - V. 17a—He is eternal. Paul’s words are “He is before all things.” But the point he is making focuses on Jesus’ relationship to time. When referring to Jesus, what verb tense do you use—“was,” will be?” No, he “is.” Jesus is forever present, which is the key element of eternity as an attribute of God.
 - V. 17b—Jesus is the sustainer of all He created: “In Him all things consist.” Whether we are speaking of the galaxies that characterize the heavens or the sub-particle elements of physical matter, it is Jesus who holds everything together. Jesus is the “cosmic glue” of the universe.
4. Colossians 1:18-20 describe Jesus in relationship to His church. He is its “head” and Sovereign Lord. In fact, v. 19 declares forthrightly that Jesus is the “fullness” of deity in a body (see Colossians 2:9). Jesus is the Godman!

Human history is filled with failed attempts to deify rulers who promise some form of human utopia by means of their charisma and their power. How futile! Only Jesus can do that! Part of humanity's declaration of independence from God (i.e., sin) is an attempt to build a human utopia without God. A false kingdom and a false set of promises that have characterized dictators from Hammurabi to Kim Jong-un have resulted in unimaginable human suffering, atrocities and holocausts. Only Jesus offers a legitimate kingdom characterized by peace, love and joy (see John 14-15). Those of us who have placed our faith in Him are now His representatives. Our values, our ethics, our lifestyles are all demonstrably different than the world's. As His representatives, we are the salt (preserving the culture from further decay) and the light (exposing the darkness for what it really is). We do not represent the false utopia characterized by human effort and human failure; we represent the true king and coming Lord of the Universe who will soon set up His kingdom and rule! His rule has begun in our hearts and lives. May we reflect that rule everyday!

See Chloe Sang-Hun in the *New York Times* (2 February 2012).