

ALIVE AND WELL IN CHINA--
How the Church Survived and Prospered

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INTRODUCTION

"The Lord moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform." In trying to figure out the workings of our God in the history of Christian missions, we must humbly admit that the total dynamics of action by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is beyond our understanding. We do not see all that transpires, nor can we ever know the whole story until we reach Heaven. However, it is not beyond us to look analytically at certain facts and think along with the Lord's accomplishments in order to gain insight into the ways of God. This is indeed a discipline needed by all who are serious about the mission of the Church, that we might learn lessons from the past and continue the spread of the Gospel more wisely, more in line with the thinking of God.

The spread of Christianity in China has not been without its ups and downs. From earliest contacts with the Nestorians into the nineteenth century Roman Catholic and Protestant missions, there have been successes and failures. Then finally, when the Church seemed to be really taking an indigenous foothold, the Communists took over control of the government of China, and persecution began. The height of this persecution was Mao Zedong's "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" in which he called upon the youth of the land to rise up and destroy all that was foreign, all that stood in the way of an atheistic "New China." Of course, great suffering and pain broke out upon the Church in China at this point. All church services were closed and buildings confiscated. Foreign missionaries had long since been expelled from the country, but now the Chinese church leaders were silenced by torture, imprisonment or death. Homes of Christians were ransacked in search of Christian symbols and literature, Bibles were taken and burned along with everything else that was found by the notorious "Red Guards."

It was commonly thought by many that this would again be another failure of the Christian mission in China. One author, writing in 1974, said, "there are no grounds for certainty that the historical (though not the eternal) fruits of the fourth great missionary attempt will not ultimately largely or completely disappear. To think otherwise is to

ignore the lessons of the past."¹ And this great silence during that period, with little information trickling out of China about a few small groups of Christians meeting in homes, made that type of thinking seem fairly reasonable.

Then the curtain began to lift. Mao Zedong began to open up slightly to the West with "ping-pong" diplomacy, and soon Nixon made a Presidential visit to the "New China." Visitors, however, did not see any signs of Christianity. And when asking tour guides about the possibility of meeting any Christians, the common response was, "There are no more Christians here." It was in 1972 that the first two churches were reopened in Beijing at the request of a group of Third World diplomats who questioned the validity of China's constitutional assurance of religious freedom.² Religious persecution was starting to slacken off as the hostile attitudes of the Cultural Revolution were waning and then in 1979, with the reinstatement of the Religious Affairs Bureau, churches began to reopen under the auspices and careful scrutiny of the Protestant Three-Self Movement, and later in 1980 under the reinstated Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

But no one was expecting the surprise that came with the lightening of restrictions and the opening of churches. Christians in greater numbers than before the Communist Revolution were filling and overcrowding these newly reopened churches. Moreover, news was spreading that during this time of hardship and persecution, the church had grown by leaps and bounds:

The government relaxation of religious controls can be understood since it is in line with the political exigencies of political life in post-Mao era. But *what happened* when the controls were lifted defies a strictly historical explanation. The vitality of the Christian community was something nobody expected. The church was thought to have died . . .

The extent to which the Christian movement had been kept alive and had grown through small group meetings in homes was a total surprise even to Chinese Christians nearest the scene of the action. Chinese Christians, isolated from one another in very small groups, did not know that similar Christian groups had been meeting all over China . . . Asked to explain what had happened, Chinese Christians have simply replied, "The Holy Spirit has been at work."³

Protestant foreign missionaries spent 150 years working up to the Communist takeover in 1949, and there were less than one million believers in China. One writer states that in the thirteen years from 1969 until the time of his writing the Church increased to twenty-five million. Some estimate as high as fifty million, and now "perhaps three million Chinese every year are joining the ranks of those who

acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior."⁴ What caused this rapid evangelism and church growth when there were no organized "churches" and when fierce opposition caused public Christian testimony to disappear? I believe the search for this answer will reveal some lessons that are crucial for our dealing with any further foreign mission opportunities in China that may present themselves under the presently relaxing governmental policies. And the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in China can reinforce in our missionary philosophy the absolute demand for sound principles of fostering indigenous styles of church structure and growth.

LESSONS OF THE PAST

Considering the distance of China from the geographic origin of the Christian faith, the Gospel reached China fairly early on. In 635 AD the Nestorian Alopen and his message was well received by the Emperor of China, so much so that by the 800s there were several Nestorian monasteries in China. But these works did not, as Buddhism did in China, incorporate the Chinese culture into their functioning. The Nestorian monastic movement remained "foreign," and when the winds of political climate changed in 845, persecution all but wiped out 200 years of effort. The Nestorian influence made a weak comeback between 1271-1368, but they never overcame their obstacles to establishing the Church in China: "a foreign community, foreign leadership and support, immense distances."⁵ And during this second Nestorian missionary effort, a new problem naturally arose by the presence of Franciscan missionaries: sectarianism. The Chinese were seeing two groups, with essentially the same doctrine, negating one another's validity and right to represent Christ. The Franciscan effort paralleled the failure of the Nestorians with most converts being non-Chinese people, no Chinese being trained for the priesthood, and the vast distance separating them from their foreign support. The Franciscan work vanished also in 1368 with the fall of the Mongol dynasty with which they were identified.⁶

The Jesuits made much more progress two hundred years later. The notable Roman Catholic missionary Matteo Ricci and his associates adapted their lifestyles to conform to that of Chinese scholars and studied the Chinese and Confucian classics in order to relate better intellectually with the Chinese. This won them favor with the court, but later, in

the early 1700's, papal discontent with the Jesuits' accommodation of Christianity to the Confucian ancestral ceremonies caused division in Catholic ranks. The emperor's wrath was kindled on being confronted with distant foreign decrees by a "pope" who, as far as he was concerned, had no authority in China. The disaster of this "Rites Controversy" marked a decline in the strength of the Christian mission of the Jesuits and represented an historically transcendent problem. "At an international conference on China held in Montreal, Canada, in October 1981, Roman Catholic bishop Michael Fu Tieshan of Beijing cited the issue posed by the Rites Controversy -- foreign interference -- as a problem which still affects relations between Chinese Roman Catholics and the Roman papacy."⁷

Protestant missions arrived in China late, in the early years of the nineteenth century. The West was making demands on a weakened China to open up to foreign trade, and missionaries were taking advantage of this opportunity of openness to get into China. However, the corruption of the Western trade dealings and the missionaries' identification, often very directly, with the West's imperialism and colonialism, brought disrepute to the Gospel in the eyes of many Chinese. The sin of the shameful Opium Wars and "the infamous unequal treaties signed at Nanking in 1842" demoralized and humiliated the Chinese. Their national pride was transgressed again and again by these stronger foreign powers until the anti-foreign sentiment crystallized in the terrible "Boxer Rebellion" in which more than 30,000 Chinese Roman Catholics, 1,900 Chinese Protestants, and 186 missionary family members were slaughtered.⁸

As can be seen through this brief chronology of the Christian mission in China, the stigma of "foreignness" stands out as a crucial problem for the stability of the Chinese Church. During the late 1800s and early 1900s there certainly was more transfer of ecclesiastic responsibility to Chinese leadership, and Protestant missions were advocating, at least in word, the ideas of indigenoussness for their mission churches. However, it has been observed that the "same planners who were committed to the ideal of a self-governing, self-propagating, self-supporting church had also set up other institutional structures which continued to depend on foreign grants, experience, and administration. Thus the emphasis on institutions with Western standards negated the emphasis on a self-sufficient, self-reliant church."⁹ Moreover, the whole educational scheme of the

foreign mission "perpetuated the foreign nature of the Christian Church," so that, as one Chinese minister has said:

For years, our theology was nothing more than a poor repetition of western theology. While assuming ourselves to be loyal to the apostolic tradition and catholicity of the Church, we entirely ignored the fact that we should learn how to talk intelligibly to our people in their mother tongue so that the Word of God could really come alive amongst them . . . We seem to have become pitiful strangers in our own country and among our own people.¹⁰

Unknowingly, Western missionaries were overlooking a very important issue. It is the principle of "wineskins." The Gospel is the ever-new wine that always requires a new wineskin to contain its ability to expand according to its nature. Bringing the Western church structure to China was mistakenly trying to contain the new wine of the Gospel in China in an old vessel. The ultimate result would be a burst vessel whereby both the vessel and the wine would be lost (Matt. 9:17). God, however, was not going to let that happen. He was preparing a "new wineskin."

FRUIT THAT REMAINS

At the time that the missionaries were forced to leave China, the sincerity and sacrificial devotion of their ministry was not without wonderful spiritual fruits. "Despite all the wood, hay and stubble of much missionary effort, God used missionaries to plant and to nurture that which was becoming a true expression of the Holy Spirit's activity -- the Living Church of the Living God."¹¹ There had been some very exciting revivals under the preaching of men like Jonathan Goforth, and hundreds of evangelical churches had been established by dedicated missions such as China Inland Mission, Christian Missionary Alliance, and many other denominational works. But even more impressive during the time of the missionary testimony was God's raising up of mighty Chinese preachers and the launching forth of totally indigenous movements that were started and led through Chinese leadership alone.

One of the first groups that began to grow and gain wide success was the True Jesus Church established by Paul Wei in Tianjin and Beijing in 1917. Under another leader, Barnabas Chang, this Group began to flourish in the Shandong province where dynamic revivals with supernatural signs marked the early 1930's. In this movement strong emphasis was placed on witnessing, tithing, and local church government, and the

members believed in, expected and experienced many divine supernatural manifestations, such as physical healings, exorcism of demons, speaking in tongues, etc. By 1949 the movement had grown to 125,000 with many works established among Chinese abroad in Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

"In just over thirty years under Chinese leadership it had become almost as large as the Church of Christ in China, which had well over one hundred years of missionary effort behind it."¹²

Another group with a dynamic impact on the Church in China was the Little Flock churches brought into being through the ministry of Watchman Nee (Nee To-sheng) in 1926. Nee was a "persuasive exponent of Scripture" and his assemblies had a "unique spirituality which held a strong attraction for Western admirers . . ." and "induced many churches founded by foreign missions to transfer their allegiance to him."¹³ These churches followed a pattern similar to the "Plymouth Brethren" with no centralized government and emphasized Bible study and evangelism, local church leadership and local financial support. In 1938 Nee wrote and published his book *Rethinking Missions* which had a dramatically destabilizing effect on the churches of missionary-oriented denominations. It held three main theses: that denominations were unscriptural, that the local church is sovereignly beyond extra-local government, and that the churches in China ought to return to the Apostolic pattern of Scripture. The Little Flock churches grew to 700 with over 70,000 members in little more than twenty years.¹⁴

In Shandong province in 1921 another powerful indigenous work called the Jesus Family arose under the leadership of Jing Tianying. After conversion and the infilling of the Holy Spirit, he and his wife, with only the Bible as their guide, sold all their possessions to give to the poor and established a "uniquely Chinese" agricultural commune whose policies providentially prepared them for the later persecution of the Communists. The Jesus Family had no central government, would accept no foreign funds (so that they might not themselves be robbed of the blessing of giving to the poor), and they had no church buildings. This communal movement spread throughout Northern China and East into the interior, bringing with them a hearty belief in daily worship and supernatural manifestations. "Casting out of demons, the ministry of angels, speaking in tongues, divine healing, miraculous supply of every need--these were part of the accepted

normal worship of God." Their generosity in giving to the poor, sometimes up to 90% of their harvest, was a dramatic Christian testimony. In the words of the movement's founder, "He has raised us up for this purpose, that the Communists might see what Christianity is."¹⁵

It is impossible here to mention all the many Chinese evangelists and Bible teachers who were the first fruits of an indigenous Chinese Church. Of note is John Sung under whose dramatic preaching "missionaries and Chinese alike found themselves kneeling together in humble repentance for sin and spiritual failure and seeking God's fullness of blessing."¹⁶ David Yang, another dynamic Chinese worker, established a fruitful ministry called the "Spiritual Work Team" and his message "emphasized that the believer must know the experience of the Cross in daily life and needs to be totally abandoned to God's disciplinary processes . . ."¹⁷ Wang Mingdao, "in no way a product of direct Western missionary effort," was a self-educated minister of the Gospel whose outspoken evangelical stand "permitted no compromise with sin." From his pulpit in Beijing and through his published ministry Wang fought against liberal theology and apostasy courageously until he too was incarcerated by the Communists. During his many years of service it is said that he "preached to more Chinese than any other man."¹⁸

These movements and leaders seem to have been raised up just in time for the building and nurturing of the Body of Christ remaining behind after the missionaries were expelled. The work of these godly men and those who followed their lead has been a great part of the answer to the question of how the Church in China survived and prospered during its time of severe Communist persecution.

COOPERATION WITH CAESAR IN THE NEW CHINA

Humiliated by years of Western imperialism, the new Chinese government of the Communists desired the demise of those institutions connected with the West. But also, being an atheistic regime, the Communists wished to see the disappearance of religion, especially the religion of the West, Christianity. However, in the early years, New China's promise was going to be tolerance and freedom of belief. In the words of Zhou Enlai in 1950,

So we are going to go on letting you teach, trying to convert the people . . . After all we

both believe that truth will prevail; we think your beliefs untrue and false, and therefore if we are right, the people will reject them, and your church will decay. If you are right, then the people will believe you, but as we are sure that you are wrong, we are prepared for that risk . . .¹⁹

However, there was to be a certain cooperation demanded of the Christian church if it did not want to be swept away with all other reactionary elements that the Communists were purging from the new China. Ties with the West must come to an end. The Christian Church in China was to come under the careful scrutiny of the government if the promised freedom was to be experienced. The Communists had to insure that the Christians would be "patriotic" and not hinder the goals of the Revolution.

Many Chinese Christian leaders of the liberal camp welcomed this emphasis of a long overdue liberation from the Western Christian "paternalism" and willingly submitted to the composing of a Christian Manifesto in May of 1950 under Zhou Enlai's direction. Eventually 400,000 Chinese Protestants, about half the Protestants in China, submitted to signing the document. The object of this document was not only to consolidate a favorable political attitude within the Chinese churches but also to let the missionary constituency know that it was time to leave:

. . . It is our purpose in publishing the following statement to heighten our vigilance against imperialism, to make known the clear political stand of Christians in the New China, to hasten the building of a Chinese church whose affairs are managed by the Chinese themselves, and to indicate the responsibilities that should be taken up by Christians throughout the whole country in national reconstruction in New China.²⁰

In order to supervise religious activity the government established the Religious Affairs Bureau under which each religious group was variously overseen by a separate organization representing its interests. Roman Catholics were to adhere to the policies of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, while the Protestants were all combined into the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, with which this paper deals more particularly. With the establishment of the TSPM, those churches who joined and complied with the government's restrictions were allowed to continue to worship openly. When any pastors or congregations refused to comply, the Movement was required to "accuse" them as "reactionaries" and submit them to the government's wrath. Pastors and Christian leaders of those Churches were arrested and confined to work camps for "thought-reform" until they would comply with the TSPM. Lack of compliance eventually sent many faithful

saints to long prison terms and brought about the closing of many churches. Christians identified with the Movement were also required to attend long hours in "accusation sessions" where they were to accuse themselves and others of any "wrong attitudes" or "reactionary feelings" against the government's policies. The TSPM then, was obviously not really a vehicle for truly representing the churches, but a channel by which the Communists duped several Christian leaders into administering the persecution and political indoctrination of the Body of Christ.

This sham of religious freedom continued for a decade or so, with the policies of the TSPM fitting perfectly into the Communist government's plans for absolute control of the visible Church. Expansion was out of the question. No, on the contrary, since the Christians had so many buildings, and since church attendance seemed to be on the decline, it was deemed necessary to close down some churches and have their congregations meet in the same building:

It is not surprising that, under strict control, church attendance decreased, and churches ceased to exercise an effective Christian witness. By late 1958, only four churches were left in Beijing where previously there had been 64; in Shanghai 200 churches were reduced to 23 . . . On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, therefore, the TSPM had already reduced the institutional church to a shadow of its former self.²¹

But those leaders of the TSPM were themselves not to escape the suffering which they had perpetrated on Christians who had resisted governmental control. Wang Mingdao had "warned the people and liberal Christian leaders of the dangers of cooperating with an atheistic regime. He was later proved right. Eventually, all church doors were closed and the puppet leaders of the Three Self Movement were thrown in jail or sent off to forced labor,"²² in the wake of Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Those who had chosen to side with Caesar had been mistaken, and the price in Christian suffering had already been high. However, this persecution was only a foretaste of that which came at the hands of Mao Zedong's young Red Guards.

FEELING AT HOME AT CHURCH . . .

The Red Guard believed that all that stood in the way of a great China were the cultural clings of the past, and these they set out to destroy all over China. The Christian churches were targeted as part of the cultural rubble that stood in the way

blocking their ideological path:

All churches were closed, sealed and confiscated. Church leaders, like many political personalities, were humiliated and sometimes physically assaulted, including leading figures in the Government-sponsored Three Self Movement. Some Christians are known to have been killed by the youthful zealots. They also sacked Christian homes in their search for Bibles which, with all Christian literature, were systematically destroyed. The Christian Church became a Church without buildings and without buildings and without Bibles.²³

The organizational structures and the institutional remains left by the Western missionaries had finally been totally eradicated.

While several naive writers of the liberal ecclesia in the West took upon themselves to adulate the godly virtues of the Cultural Revolution,²⁴ Bible-believing Christians were left in suspense and dread over the long silence from inside the closed doors of China. News would trickle out from time to time that there were still Christians meeting in secret, but with most of the former leadership silenced out of fear or cut off by imprisonment, what was the state of the Church?

What happened was that the Church in China became a family affair. The Body of Christ began to meet in homes. Often this would start quietly just with a Christian family by itself. Neighbors might be invited who were believers, or friends who were interested in the faith might be screened carefully and brought to the meetings. There was no organization to such groups, but as it was becoming a recognized pattern, leaders who were being raised up began to utilize this structure and work with it. One of the last missionaries to leave China, Hellen Willis, told of a woman visiting her Book Room who had "started thirty-six house meetings, one of which had an attendance of two hundred."²⁵ These "house churches" were arising everywhere, and Chinese people who were hungry for God were joining them in great numbers without any public evangelistic testimony other than that given on special occasions of weddings, funerals, birthdays, etc.

The house churches, though having very little, if any, direct connections with one another, display many of the same characteristics. 1) They are totally indigenous, unaffiliated directly with any outside organizations. 2) They are family-centered, oriented in structure to Chinese familial relationships which often include neighbors and close friends. 3) They are extremely flexible with no buildings other than the home, no set times for their meetings, and no paid ministerial staff. 4) They emphasize the absolute

authority of the Lord Jesus Christ as their guide, even in matters of obedience to the state's demands. 5) They believe in and have testimony of God's sovereignty in the protection and preservation of His people in times of severe trial and testings. 6) They are in love with the Word of God and many have copied it out by hand, memorizing large portions by heart. 7) They are simple in faith and fervent in prayer, expecting and often seeing God answer them in miraculous signs of physical healing, deliverance and special grace through times of suffering. 8) They are "caring and sharing churches" whose attractive, giving spirit toward those in need has been a source of testimony and spontaneous evangelism among non-believers. 9) They are led by laymen and laywomen raised up by the Holy Spirit in the midst of their own fellowship, although many of these dedicated leaders use their gifts of teaching and evangelism by itinerant sharing in other house churches. 10) They have great needs for sound Biblical teaching, especially in remote country areas, to avoid extremes and heretical tendencies into which some isolated house churches have already fallen. 11) They contain few if any nominal Christians, because under the threat of persecution only those have joined who are willing to risk suffering in their "genuine desire to know Jesus Christ." 12) These house churches emphasize personal evangelism and have grown entirely through "intimate contact between friends or family members" as their membership demonstrates zeal in "sincere one-to-one sharing of faith."²⁶

Generally, there are four types of house church meetings that have evolved to meet the needs of the worshiping community of believers: prayer meetings, Bible studies, witnessing or testimony meetings, and practice-in-preaching meetings.²⁷ In a typical regular meeting for worship, the believers might begin with the quiet singing of hymns that are memorized, hand-copied, or even reproduced on photographic developing paper from an original transparency. The brother or sister who is recognized as spiritual leader might begin a Bible study where the Scriptures are read slowly enough for each member to make their own hand-copy on one side of a notebook page while noting the teacher's comments on the other page, so that when the meeting is over the person would have their own Bible commentary. In other styles of meeting the Word might be read aloud and commented on by all in the meeting, or each believer might testify about what that Scripture means to them and how it has worked in their own spiritual life. Some meetings

are characterized by long and fervent times of prayer, while other meetings to which new-comers are usually invited are dedicated to giving Christians the opportunity for testimony as to how the Lord has saved and blessed them. Some house churches meet several days a week, and one meeting might be set aside for training in teaching or preaching, as all believers are expected to know how to explain the Bible to others. There are often meetings held regularly and at different places for training of leadership and serviced by itinerant teachers or teams of teachers. The house church meeting is a very versatile and flexible structure for creatively filling whatever ministry the believers are led to pursue.

We in the West with our often elaborate church edifices and efficient organizational church structures cannot boast of a higher rate of evangelistic success or a greater depth of spiritual development in our congregations. In fact, we are ourselves in need of learning from these Chinese believers the importance of the family as the unit around which church life is structured, the necessity of expanding lay leadership, and the need for the entire membership of our churches to be equipped and motivated to witness and teach the faith.

BIG RED IN THE HANDS OF OUR GOD . . .

The Word of God teaches that the Lord Almighty is sovereign over the affairs of men. The formation of the Communist People's Republic of China did not slip past unauthorized by His decree. And we know that, in His goodness and wisdom, the suffering of His servants by His permission during times when evil reigned in history is always recompensed in Heaven's reward, if not in earthly blessing. The persecuted Church in China was covered as if with a large blanket of secrecy from the eyes of the world for a decade. But in God's timing He has allowed the blanket to be drawn back so that the world may see what the effort of the ungodly has actually done to the Gospel's light in China. The suffering of the Body of Christ in China has been like the birth pangs not only of a truly indigenous Church but a Church whose numerical growth and spiritual character is phenomenal, considering the short time in which this has taken place.

The old saying "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" applies in China as it has throughout the history of the Christianity. But there are some very clear

socio-cultural reasons why the nature of the Communist persecution contributed to this rapid expansion of the Chinese Church.

For one thing, in its ideological restructuring of Chinese society, visible Christianity was not the only institution to suffer condemnation. Buddhist and Confucian traditions were also under castigation. This was a situation never before present during the time of missionary endeavor in China. Missiologists have had "little doubt that the greatest single obstacle to the growth of the Church was the Confucian family and clan system, associated as it was with ancestor worship, which Protestants, at least, regarded as idolatrous."²⁸ Leslie Lyall quotes a Jesuit author who likewise acknowledged this phenomenon:

The Communist occupation of China will one day be seen to be a providential preparation for the Gospel. The Chinese culture was almost impervious to the Christian Gospel. It had to be broken up and opened to new questions and new answers before the Christian message could be given a hearing. That is what Communism is doing.²⁹

Mao Zedong, the great charismatic leader of the Communists' "New China" had much to offer in ideological promises to those who followed him in the Revolution. The evolution of a new society with a "new man" were to be the results of Mao's Marxism. In a measure there were several substantial moral improvements under totalitarian Marxist rule. It ended unjust feudalistic practices (at the cost, however, of many landlords' lives). It elevated the status of women, eliminating pornography and organized prostitution. It dramatically decreased gambling, drug traffic, and crime. However, as D.R. Davies, the former Communist, said, "Marx without knowing or intending it, revealed the ultimate bankruptcy of mere humanistic thinking at its best."³⁰ The transformation of humanity requires a spiritual change in the human heart, and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution explicitly demonstrated the spiritual depravity of the Communist movement. The Communists halted this outrageous display of destructiveness too late--already there was rift with the Chinese people, a "crisis of faith" among many who had believed the flowery promises of Mao, following the words of his *Little Red Book* religiously in a frenzied "Mao cult."

Then the prison doors began to open with the relaxation of a post-Mao administration, and out into this spiritually empty New China came those tried and faithful saints who had suffered so patiently for Christ so many long years. Their

testimony was like the sweetness of ripened fruit to the starving young generation who were discouraged and hopeless.

An entire generation of young people, most of whom had been caught up in the maelstrom of the Cultural Revolution, became disillusioned with the entire political system. Education had passed them by while they struggled for the revolution, and now there were no jobs. The death of Premier Zhou Enlai and Chairman Mao Zedong and the arrest of the Gang of Four completely shattered their foundations. An unprecedented spiritual vacuum was thus created. Into this vacuum came the impact of these godly men and women who held no bitterness against their persecutors. They demonstrated a peace and joy that became the envy of thousands of these lost young people. Soon reports of high percentages of young people in the house meetings all over China were confirmed. Today they make up the majority of Christians as indeed they make up the majority of the population.³¹

And the house churches were ready to receive this influx, for the persecution not only had multiplied the number of churches physically by driving them into the homes, but had mandated a prolific increase in the number of leaders for these house churches. The Church was now in a place where it could potentially receive into its flexible structure the whole population of China if all Chinese were to convert to Christ.

This brings out an interesting cultural feature in the dynamic Christian revival that is continuing to sweep through China today. As long as the Chinese Church was led by Western influence, it was doomed to slow and very gradual growth. The Gospel in foreign trappings has always been hampered in its spontaneous spread into a culture. China has by lasting tradition centered its life in "the family." The problem for Western missionary evangelism was its stress on the individual's decision to follow Christ, and ". . . in the tight-knit Chinese social system . . . the family, not the individual, is the dominant decision maker . . ." so that "it was usually this family unit which blocked the conversion of many in the missionary era. Furthermore, if and when an individual did accept Christ it was extremely difficult for him to function as a Christian within a largely alien family setting."³² God used the Communist revolution not only "to sever the umbilical cord of dependence on the missionary" but to make the Chinese Church "more culturally contextualized" when it "closed the churches and forced the believers into their homes where a specifically Chinese Church could thrive."³³ Finally, the arrest and incarceration of leaders left behind by the missionaries also backfired for the Communists' strategy.

By separating the pastors from their Congregations, the Communists have forced the Chinese Church to seek leadership from within the congregation. The leaders which

emerged were laymen or laywomen who, for the most part, had not been indoctrinated with the Western concepts of church leadership. The result has been that the Chinese Church has sought its own level, a level in which it could function most effectively. Thus, the Church in mainland China has formed itself into family units, where natural leadership would already exist.³⁴

That which was intended to weaken Christianity has been turned around in the hand of God to strengthen the testimony of Christ beyond the Maoists' wildest fears. But that is not all that the Communists have done. Indirectly, by increasing literacy, unifying the spoken language of China, and building better roads for transportation throughout the land, the spread of the Gospel has been greatly facilitated.

ANOTHER CHANCE FOR TSPM AND FOR US

There are strong winds of change in China since it reopened to the West. Deng Xiaoping's hopes and aspirations for the success of the *four modernization* policies have brought a necessary change in policy economically and socially. Direct dealings with the West would make a continued persecution of religion an embarrassment, especially in view of the freedom of belief still clearly stipulated in China's constitution. So, the Religious Affairs Bureau and the Three Self Movement was resurrected and churches again opened for public worship. However, those who are leaders in the TSPM learned a hard lesson. The liberal element has been greatly purged from among those who pastor the open churches, and the "preaching from the pulpits has been concerned with individual salvation, personal devotion and piety, and the practical matters of the Christian life and witness in the community."³⁵ The churches cannot open fast enough, however, to meet the needs to minister to the number of Christians that now exist. And for obvious reasons of distrust, many of the house church members will not attend the TSPM churches. Beyond that, many believers in the house churches do not want the old wineskin. It lacks spontaneity and life for those who have become comfortable with the rich and warm environment of the family setting. The TSPM would do well to learn from this.

We in the West also have a great responsibility to learn from past mistakes. It is well that the Communists have opened up to the West with the stipulation: *no missionaries*. Given another free opportunity, many mission groups would pour into China and repeat

past errors. As Paul Kauffman says so wisely, "We must recognize the cultural maturation of China's Church and not permit our culture to again infiltrate and thus deform a church that has, at great price, become truly indigenous."³⁶ Indeed, we have more to learn in some areas than we have to teach these Chinese Christians. If God allows Christian workers as such to reenter China openly, we should heed the words of Watchman Nee to some China Inland Mission staff members just before they left: "Next time you come, come not as missionaries . . . but as teaching elders in our churches."³⁷

ENDNOTES

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4. Paul E. Kauffman, *China the Emerging Challenge: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 174.
5. Brown, 16.
6. *Ibid.*, 17.
7. *Ibid.*, 22.
8. *Ibid.*, 41.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Hayward, 37-38.
11. Leslie T. Lyall, *New Springs in China* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979), 163.
12. Kauffman, 139-140.
13. *Ibid.*, 146-147.

14. Leslie T. Lyall, *God Reigns in China* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 35; also Kauffman, 140.
15. Kauffman, 140-143.
16. Lyall, *God Reigns*, 33.
17. *Ibid.*, 43-45.
18. Kauffman, 140-150.
19. Donald E. MacInnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China -- A Documentary History* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972), 24.
20. *Ibid.*, 158.
21. Kauffman, 121.
22. *Ibid.*, 150.
23. Lyall, *New Springs*, 177-178.
24. *Ibid.*, 129-143.
25. *Ibid.*, 171.
26. David H. Adeney, *China: The Church's Long March* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1985), 146-165.
27. Kauffman, 208-209.
28. Lyall, *New Springs*, 244.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 154.
31. Kauffman, 176.
32. *Ibid.*, 264.
33. *Ibid.*, 259-260.
34. *Ibid.*, 262.
35. Brown, 180.
36. Kauffman, 315.

37. Lyall, *God Reigns*, 123.

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