

MODERN CHINESE CHURCH HISTORY AND SPECIAL MINISTRY TO WOMEN, MINORITIES AND YOUTH

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It is wonderful and exciting to see so many old friends and at the same time to make many new friends. I have known many of you for years. I know you have prayed for China and for Chinese churches in China with hearts of deep love. We have been encouraged and always feel your support through this true partnership. My presentation seeks to share something of the simple picture about the Protestant Church in China. First of all, I would like to give you a simple survey of the historical experience of the Chinese Church.

Christian missions to China can be traced back thirteen hundred years. In the 7th century, during the Tang Dynasty, Christianity in a Nestorian form, called Jingjiao in Chinese, was brought to China. It largely disappeared 200 years later. In the 13th century, during the Yuan Dynasty, Nestorian Christianity spread into China again, this time under the Chinese name Yelikewen and disappeared again, this time less than one hundred years later. At the close of the 10th century, Catholic missionaries came to China and enjoyed some success, but were banned by the authorities at the beginning of the 13th century. Not until the Opium War did Christian missions to China resume with the signing of the unequal treaties. During the 1960s and 70s, Christianity was almost extinguished under the ultra-leftists of the so-called Cultural Revolution. The church in China that you see today is the result of a mere 20 years of restoration. So the various kinds of work of the church in China are still in their preliminary stage and set for rapid development.

What caused these ups and downs in Chinese Christianity? I think the main reason was that the missionary presence depended on the favor and power of the imperial authorities. As David Bosch said “the very term used for this ecclesiastical and cultural expansion, namely ‘mission’, was conceived as a concomitant of Western imperial outreach.” (p274. English version) Once out of favor or at the change of ruler or dynasty, the church found itself at once in a precarious condition. The rulers of Yuan Dynasty were ethnic Mongols. When they lost power, Yelikewen Christianity was considered an alien religion and suppressed. There was a time when the Qing Dynasty forbade missionary activity and missionaries then relied on the power of their native countries to infiltrate into China and conducted underground missionary activities, resulting in massive suppression and confrontation. Such practices were detrimental to the image of the church and of Christians.

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The question of alternatives is: mission by peaceful and lawful means, or mission through authorities and militaries? This question concerns our faith in God. The gospel of Christ is not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of God. We firmly believe that the Word of God is the Word of eternal life, and can only be disseminated in the economy of God. The methods of flesh and blood do only disservice to the church. The history of the church in China proves that development by human ways can be demolished by human ways. Today, having gone through many ups and downs, God's church in China still exists and is growing. We feel deep in our hearts that this manifests the power of God.

Second, it has now been fifty years since the founding of the Three-Self patriotic Movement. Some friends do not quite understand the Three-Self Movement or have misgivings about it because of things they have heard. I feel the perception of this movement will be decisive for the attitude to and comments on the church in China today, including the church in Sichuan where I am from. Here then are my thoughts about it. If we can reach consensus in this way, we will be closer to each other.

As I mentioned above, from the mid-19th century onward, Christian missions in China were more and more dependent upon the might of the western powers and the superiority of missionaries in China as a result of the unequal treaties. While a cultural confrontation between East and West was inevitable, there were various ways to ease the tension. Some at that time recognized that Chinese traditional culture had tremendous vitality. It flourished in its own soil; its existence was inevitable. Thus it was better to inculcate as far as the fundamental doctrines of Christianity would allow. Others saw a strong West and a weak China and feared how the weak might adapt to the strong.

These are two absolutely different approaches, with different consequences. Unfortunately, the latter dominated at the time. As a result, Christianity was not accommodated to local culture and society and was rejected as an alien religion by the great majority of Chinese people. First of all, the Christianity that came into China the third time followed the Western military, so Chinese people in China think that Christianity is like imperialism. Secondly, as to Christian faith, most missionaries did not realize that theology is supposed to be contextualization. As David Bosch said:

“This is, in fact, what has happened in Western missionary outreach where theology, contextualized in the West, was in essence elevated to gospel status and exported to other continents as a package deal.”
(*Transforming Mission*, p428)

There was therefore a broad movement attempting during the 1920s and '30s to oppose Christianity in China. In the 1940s, as revolution was progressing toward success, every social entity in China was faced with a more explicit choice, and the Christian church was no exception. While many things about the Communist-led revolution were difficult to understand, its objective won the hearts of the majority of the people to deliver the Chinese people from the humiliation and poverty of the past hundred years. With such a serious issue

before them, Chinese Christians should not focus only on otherworldly concerns, turning a blind eye to the world we live in. Only when our destiny is knitted to that of our compatriots can we communicate with them and channel the Good News to them. Whether to be deported along with the foreign forces as an alien religion, or to be faithful to God and stay in the land to continue to spread the seeds of Gospel and the Word of eternal life: Chinese Christians were at the crossroads.

The Three-Self patriotic Movement was established on this basis. Its significance lies in two areas. First, politically, it manifested our love for the nation and our co-existence with the people. Theologically, it meant dependence upon God and independence from foreign powers, to bring down the wall between God and humankind: thus, face to face with God. Although the church later suffered from the so-called Cultural Revolution because of leftist influence within the Communist Party, when darkness finally faded away and light dawned, the church in China had cast off its image as an alien religion, arising as the Chinese people's own church and religious faith. We have stuck to the principle of self-government, self-support and self-propagation, relying on the grace of the Lord to restore the Body of Christ in China. I believe you will also agree with our conclusion as to the necessity and rationality of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, if you consider our situation.

Three-self, however, does not mean self-isolation. We firmly endorse the oneness of the church. There is one Christ, so it is with the body of Christ. The church is also indigenous and individual. Catholicity is manifested in the communion of churches of different places and nations. Hence the richness of the truth of God and the comprehensiveness of the grace of God.

Secondly, I would like to share something of an update on the church in China. First, the churches keep growing in mission. In the past twenty years as the church in China, the church has developed rapidly under the grace and guidance of God and the prayers of Christians all over the world. Today there are over 14,000 Protestant churches in China as well as 25,000 to 30,000 meeting points. We define a meeting point as a place of worship without full-time pastors or church leaders. Three churches were begun every two days from 1979 to 1989, and from 1990 to the present, five churches have been either re-opened or newly established somewhere in China every two days. This is a considerable achievement and testimony to the reality of God at work among us. Appropriately, 70 percent of the churches or meeting points are newly established. The membership of congregations varies from place to place, from dozens to thousands. It is very interesting to recall that when the first missionary, Robert Morrison, came to China in 1807, he spent 7 years before he saw one convert, then he won ten more in the following 20 years. By 1900 there were about 95,000 Chinese Christians and in 1949 there were about 700,000 Protestant Chinese Christians, representing about 0.15 percent of the whole population. There are reasons why the church in China has developed and is developing so fast. But nobody would deny that the effective testimony of a Christian life in the new context, being salt and light, has made

a difference. It is exactly like the church at the time of the apostles “praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” (Acts2:47)

Christians in China experience the gospel as a source of empowerment, for meaning in life and hope, not only for themselves, but also for others who are non-believers. The China Christian Council challenges all Chinese Christians in China with the motto “Be a good Christian and a good citizen.” A church that bears no witness cannot glorify God, and a church that has no testimony is separated from the people. So then farmers were required to dig irrigation ditches; those dug by Christians were dug well and deep. Christians had the best grain when paying the compulsory grain tax. In most villages Christians are law-abiding citizens. Some government security officials have remarked that if all the people were Christians they would be out of a job.

Secondly, the laity play a major role in the life of the church. Due to the limited number of ordained ministers in the churches, the priesthood of all believers has become the prevailing feature of the church. The influx of new converts into the churches has created a major shortage of pastors. Lay leadership has become strong and active in the Chinese church. Sichuan province with a population of 95 million, in which there are around 400,000 believers in 300 churches, has only 256 clergy and only 135 of them have been theologically trained. Christ said, “I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” In China the sheep may know the ministers or pastors but ministers cannot know all of them. So, the emphasis on lay training at the grassroots level is very important for the formation of the church.

No one can give an accurate number of training classes initiated and sponsored by the Christian Councils or local churches, or the number of believers at different levels who attend these classes each year. You must believe that there are hundreds of the short-term courses going on here and there everyday. Actually some training classes are like attending a theology class or like attending an elementary or intermediate Bible school class. Here I want to represent Sichuan Christian Council and the local churches, which have been supported through finances from CEE (China Educational Exchange) and Mennonite Christians from the United States and Canada, and to express my thanks. Yet, there is a long way before us and we will continue to uphold the three-self principle. In the meantime, the church in China is still in its preliminary stage, arising from the debris of the past, and burdened by many problems, among which I would like to state the major ones:

First of all, is the imbalance between pastoral and evangelistic work. The ratio of theologically trained pastoral workers and believers is 1 : 4000. The Great Commission that Jesus gave us has two aspects, namely, evangelization and pastoral work. The two aspects should be synchronized and balanced like our two legs: when the left leg takes a step, the right leg must take another step so that we can move forward in balance. Now there seem to be many channels for evangelism, for example - overseas broadcasting programs, secret

missions and even various heretical teachings from abroad - but pastoral work is lacking. This one-sided emphasis on evangelization leads to a blind man guiding a blind man and causes splits in the churches, a surge in heresies, and disturbances harmful to the church.

Secondly, China was traditionally a backward agricultural country. Since China reopened for international trade at the end of 1970s, industry has developed rapidly, but the rural population still constitutes 75 percent of the total population. There is still a big gap economically between people who live in the cities and those who live in the rural areas. Most Christians are living in rural areas, so their incomes are much lower than the people who live in the cities. In the meantime, because of their lower education, many lay church workers who have been trained only in short term programs are now serving in churches and meetings. They cannot satisfy the Christian spiritual need due to the shortage of pastors. We are trying our best to find ways to open some short training classes for lay leaders and lay workers to help the local churches. I would nevertheless like to acknowledge that CEE has given some help for our local training classes.

Thirdly, how could we help our young pastors to get further theological training? There are more and more young people who would like to follow Jesus Christ as their Savior, but our young pastors lack further theological training, once they have graduated from Chinese theological seminaries. Therefore, it is very hard to keep the young people in our churches.

Forth, there are quite a number of Christians in Sichuan province who have been strongly influenced by the fundamental belief that personal spiritual growth must be pursued above all else. Therefore they tend to separate their Christian faith and witness from society. This creates a major challenge for the church and her leaders.

Fifth, the sharing of resources among the rich and poor and among urban and rural churches is a challenge. Christians need to be educated and to understand that it is more blessed to be a giving church than a selfish one. They need to realize the blessing of sharing financial resources to help enlarge church buildings in rural areas.

Finally, I would like to say that it is not enough and not good for a church to be preoccupied constantly and narrowly with its own selfhood. The selfhood of any one church is bound to be impoverished if it does not originate in and relate to the universal church, which gives particular churches spiritual nourishment. Universality and particularity means the two dwell in each other and enrich each other, to the end that the church throughout the world and throughout history enters into the full richness of Jesus Christ.

As Chinese churches in China, we desire to be related to any overseas church or church organization, which respects our three-self principle and treats us as equals for the purpose of strengthening bonds between Chinese Christians and Christians abroad. We welcome true partnership with a heart of openness and by the way of legality, so that the collaboration will benefit both of us spiritually, theologically and financially. We are seeking true partnership, a partnership for "God's mission in Christ's image" to proclaim

the Good News of love, justice and reconciliation; not an organization or relationship which comes from an outdated pattern of missions which plagued, bound and blinded the Chinese church for over a century.

I was very happy when I heard from Myrrl Byler that I could come to Eastern Mennonite Seminary to study, helped in 1997 by CEE. Before that Myrrl had told me many times that it was a good opportunity for us to increase mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation through such communication. When Dr. George Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury of Britain, visited Sichuan Christian Council and Sichuan Theological Seminary in 1996, he remarked that evangelism in today's world should be responsible evangelism, which assumes an understanding of the culture in which it is set. But it does not mean to go everywhere just simply repeating what one has heard elsewhere. Therefore, we seek to strengthen the fellowship with the universal church in bonds of love through Jesus Christ. As St. Paul said: "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph.4:15-16). Thank you all.