

China And The Gospel

Will China open its borders for the Gospel? This is no longer a moot question today. Seldom in history has an entire nation made such an abrupt switch in policies. For years, China has vilified the United States and preached against the cruelties of the U.S. imperialistic aggressors. To the surprise of the whole world, the U.S. and China have now reached the point of mutual recognition. The U.S. laid out the red carpet for Vice-Premier Teng Hsiao-ping. The Vice-Premier became *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year." Taiwan is still smarting under its changed relationship to the U.S. It now fears for its very existence as an independent nation. It feels betrayed and forsaken by the West. Southeast Asian nations continue to build up their own armed forces and develop military alliances, as they watch the U.S. withdrawing troops from Taiwan, and listen to the debates about further troop withdrawals from South Korea.

Peking, the austere capital of Red China, seems destined to become one of the great business centers of the world. Americans, Japanese, Germans, Italians, Britons are rushing to China to profit from its new mood. Huge deals are being signed by China's new leaders.

Unquestionably, there have been dramatic outward changes in Red China. Some of these changes have been for the better, others have retarded improvement rather than helped the lot of the Chinese. For 27 years until his death in 1976, Chairman Mao's dictates and practices ruled the nation. Mao laid down the line that China would develop as a nation in isolation under its own efforts, without foreign loans or capital investments. Mao's social and economic policies were geared to meeting the most basic needs - food, shelter, health care. Illiteracy was tackled and conquered; elementary education was established. The cost of social improvements has been exuberantly high in lives and loss of liberties. To achieve his goals, Mao took away basic human rights. He laid claim to the total person. His doctrines were pounded and drilled into the Chinese population through wall posters, newspapers, political meetings, theater, dance, school, etc.

Mao wanted to create a new man for his new world. He sought to mold the Chinese mind. No criticism of policies was allowed. There was no room for personal freedom to express one's feelings to follow the teaching of one's religion or the dictates of one's conscience.

China now has a new and more relaxed atmosphere. Mao is no longer the infallible Messiah. Criticism, within limits, is now permitted. Small demonstrations are staged. The extreme leftists appear to have lost their influence on the power base within the country. The average Chinese is obviously pleased with this new trend. More consumer goods are now available. Life is not so drab anymore.

Is China moving towards democracy and capitalism? There may be a change in the communist traditions, but the present Chinese leadership is still committed to the communist vision and party principles.

To assess the new developments in China is extremely difficult. The world has changed so dramatically since Mao "liberated" China in 1949, and Westerners have been so effectively sheltered from any real contact with China, that the scale and depth of change within China's population of 800 million is hard to grasp and analyze.

Since the American overtures to China, and the historic China visit of former President Richard Nixon, Christians from all over the world have been praying for resumption of Christian ministries and witness within China. Diplomats, businessmen and tourists are now flocking to China. The miniscule Chinese hotel industry is booming.

Will missionaries also get the opportunity to enter China? What are the prospects with respect to Christianity in China - a nation so influenced by materialistic atheism and so anti-Christian for so many years? I have heard of Christian leaders and prospective missionaries from the West who are praying for an opening to start a ministry in China. I doubt very much whether "professional" missionaries will ever be allowed to enter China once again.

Jesuit Scholar Father George H. Dunne, expressed this possibility very concretely: "in a certain sense I do not believe the missionary will ever return to China ... In my judgment, a missionary cast in the common mold of the recent past, that is, the religiously inspired dedicated man or woman coming to China for the sole purpose of preaching the Gospel 'to the heathen Chinese,' and making as many converts as possible, will not have a place in China's future. Nor do I think this is a matter of regret."

Do not forget the persecuted church! A bishop from Slovakia, who spent many years in prison, asked: "Why do we venerate the martyrs of the first centuries and forget the martyrs of the 20th century? Why do we hush up today's witnesses for the faith? Why do you call the church whose members they are, falsely, the Church of silence, although she doesn't keep silence at all, but cries out loud and clear for help and support?"

Have we forgotten the persecuted church? The secular press is virtually silent about the many Christians who spend a large part of their lives in concentration camps and prisons. Even Christian papers report scantily on the plight of Christians living in communist controlled countries. Yet the Bible says, "When one member suffers, all the members suffer with it." (I Corinthians 12:26)

Chinese communists have made life hard for Christians. In Mao's China, violence was a vital ingredient of the revolution. Mao claimed that a revolution is an act of violence whereby one class overthrows the authority of another. He said that a revolution is not a dinner party. In his famous "Hundred Flowers" speech, Mao boasted that the total number of those liquidated by security forces numbered eight hundred thousand up to 1954.

The policy of the Chinese Communist Party, which controls every level of government is the faithful application of the Marxist-Leninist theory of religion, as interpreted by Mao.

The Party sees religion as a hindrance to progress. Believers must be liberated from their religious shackles that hold them in bondage.

As China began its drive for ideological leadership of the Third World countries, it intensified its efforts to induce its population to accept Maoism. In this ideological struggle, every form of religion was rejected, the old traditional religions as well as Christianity. The Christian church was forced underground. Many lives were lost for the sake of Jesus Christ. Missionaries were forced to leave the country. However, Christians should not overlook the fact that China has never known genuine religious freedom. Furthermore, missionaries have been expelled on at least three previous occasions.

The anti-Christian sentiment is deeply rooted in the history of China. China has always had a state religion. Traditional China had its Confucianism and neo-Confucianism. The whole pattern of life was determined by Confucian principles. Traditional China was never adverse to limiting the number of temples, churches, seminaries, etc. It also sought to discourage public proselytization.

Nineteenth century traditional China allowed the ministries of Christian missionaries. It didn't have much choice. The colonial powers often served as protectors of the missionary enterprise. But persecution and riots hindered the cause of missions. The anti-Christian feelings were often reinforced by Confucian scholars, who wanted to preserve historic Chinese culture from the influence of Christianity.

As China attempted to regain full independence, it drastically changed the old system. In 1905, the historic civil service examinations were abolished. Thus one of the bulwarks of Confucian civilization collapsed. In 1911-1912 the second coming bulwark was destroyed when the Manchu rulers, and with them the Confucian monarchy, were swept away.

Republican China replaced Confucianism with its own state ideology. San-minism (Three Principles) of Sun Yat-sen, later mixed with Western liberalism and neo-Confucianism of the Wang Yang-ming school, became the dominant force. This ideology was replaced by Maoism.

Religions in China have faced some measure of official opposition. Jonathan Choa of the Chinese Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong comments: "Religions were tolerated so long as they posed no threat to the ruling authority of the state. This was true with traditional China, early Republican China, and early Communist China. Religious persecution of Buddhism during the T'ang Dynasty in A.D. 845, for example, was not due to religious reasons so much as to the growing economic power of Buddhism. The persecution of Catholics during the Ch'ing Dynasty from the time of Emperor K'ang-hsi (1663-1772) to the late nineteenth century was also carried out because of the challenge of Catholicism against the sovereign rule of the emperors over the lives of their citizens; it was a conflict of authority over the people's loyalty. Republican China's drive for the Restoration of Education Movement in the 1920's and

its consistent control in the realm of education even in Taiwan today reveal the state's self-appointed right over the thinking of its citizens and, through education, over the loyalty of the people. In this regard the Chinese state has always looked upon foreign religious initiative, whether proselytizing or merely teaching, with much suspicion."

What are the opportunities for spreading the Gospel in China? What is the attitude of the post-Mao rulers towards religion? The changes that are taking place within China must not be underestimated. There are dramatic turnabouts. Confucius, once China's most respected ancient philosopher, was vilified for years. In Mao's book, *Confucianism* stood for everything he tried to destroy. Confucian thought is now revived.

Long forgotten cultural and social patterns are coming, back in the process of modernization. Shakespeare is once again taught in the schools. Bach and Beethoven can be heard at concerts. Religious buildings, temples and shrines, are being painted and repaired. Fortune tellers are practicing openly and are often considered as key people in the community. In early 1978, the Institute for the Study of World Religions was opened in Peking with an initial student body of 24. With a Buddhist director and a Christian associate, the institute symbolizes the new openness towards religions in China.

The door to China is now gradually opening for the message of salvation. China's Christians are now enjoying some relaxation of thought control. They can worship together with less fear, but there is still no freedom of religion.

What happened to religious freedom in China since "liberation" in 1949? Paper documents are very patient. You can write down anything you like. Article 5 of the Common Program (1949) and Article 88 of the first Constitution (1954) stated that "every citizen of the People's Republic of China shall have freedom of religious belief. " These articles never meant much in practice. Communists have tried to crush the Christian church by persistent atheistic indoctrination, outright persecution and social pressure. The Chinese Christians have gone through fiery trials. Many have been martyred for their faith. But the communists have never succeeded with their efforts to wipe out the Church.

After liberation, the communists tried everything to strangle the Church. In 1958, government regulations forbade worship services, prayer or Bible reading, except in regular church buildings at announced hours with a representative of the state present to report on the sermon. That year also saw the closing down of all but 12 or 15 of the 200 church buildings in Shanghai. It was reported that in Peking only 4 out of the 65 churches remained open for services.

In the 1960's, the Red Guards, with their fierce action and bitter opposition to any religion, drove the church underground. Christianity as an Institutional religion (also with other religions) disappeared from the Chinese scene. On the surface, China had become a completely secular, materialistic, atheistic state.

The organizational forms of some 150 denominations and missions, imported from the West, were completely erased from the religious map. But despite all the persecution, the Church remained active and alive. Many Christians kept the faith against all odds. Their courage in the face of martyrdom is an inspiration for every Christian in the West. A Methodist bishop boldly said to his accusers, "I have thrown in my lot with Christ and his Church. I'm not going to be on the fence. If I have to, I'm willing to die for him." Such faith makes a strong church. The famous Watchman Nee (1903-1972), the leader of the Little Flock movement, was arrested on September 7, 1955, and sentenced to 15 years of Imprisonment on April 20, 1956.

Chinese Christians appear to have survived the cultural revolution with strength and conviction. But only the independent, indigenous churches showed gain. The gain was in fact a dramatic one as their numbers almost tripled while the Western oriented denominations lost ground.

Is the Church moving forward in China? It is reported that the Chinese Church is surprisingly youthful. It seems that the majority of Christian worshippers are young people. Why are these young people turning to Christ? Atheistic materialism can never satisfy the longing of the spirit. Man is religious by nature. But the young people do not come to faith in Christ just through verbal witness alone. They are attracted by the witness of the Christian life. "Why do you seem to be happy even when life is difficult?" "How can you remain so calm when there is so much turmoil all around?" The life-style and attitude of the persecuted Christian often make a deep impression upon communist youth.

The Chinese Church is growing. Visitors to China report of 40 having been baptized at a single service. Gatherings up to 500 Christians are now being testified to by eye-witnesses in various parts of the country.

What is happening in China today reminds me of what the Lord said about his Church, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18b)

"How tragic it would be to let loose on a suspicious, even hostile Chinese population, a motley horde of ill-prepared, ill-equipped, disorganized and blundering, if enthusiastic, 'missionaries'- Asians, Americans, Europeans! The thought of hundreds of societies all flying different pendants and using different shibboleths walking into the Communist tiger's lair makes the mind boggle." - Leslie T. Lyall

The question is not "when", but "how" the Gospel can be spread in China. The Mainland Chinese are going to be increasingly in contact with the Western world through their government's new modernization program. Not only are Westerners entering China, but many Chinese are going to the West for study or business.

What should the Church do with these new opportunities? How should she reach the Mainland Chinese with the Gospel? Let me make a few suggestions for discussion.

1. A coordinated effort is needed. North American based mission agencies should not think of entering China and conduct mission work according to former patterns and programs. At the "Love China '75" seminar held in Manila, Dr. Theodore Marr of the Chinese Graduate School of Theology, Hongkong, called for an end to competitive efforts on behalf of the evangelization of China. David Wang, general director of Asian Outreach, urged the seminar participants to move in complete unity with God. The grievous mistakes of the past must not be repeated. He said that it would be frightening to contemplate many organizations working completely independent of each other for the evangelization of China.

Evangelical missions must plan and work together. The work is too great to do alone. Fragmented evangelicalism will not make an impact. The Chinese situation reminds me of the building of the wall by Nehemiah. "The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another." (Neh. 4:19)

The new opportunities in China call for evangelical co-operation.

2. Are we praying for China? This nation needs our intercessory prayer. The Church lives by prayer. The Gospel will not advance without prayer.

3. There is a great need for Bibles. Reports are coming through, telling of a desperate lack of Bibles. A few Bibles are shared by many Christians. It is told that one young person hand-copied the whole Bible from one which was not destroyed by the cultural revolution.

4. Radio broadcasting is an excellent way of reaching the Chinese masses. The Chinese on the Mainland do listen to the radio. They want to hear other news and views besides what they are getting from their government radio programming.

5. Hard thinking and careful long range planning are needed if we want to see a new future for the Gospel in China. The new political climate must be taken into account, and mission strategy must be planned accordingly.

Jonathan Chao of the Chinese Graduate School of Theology observes, "Conservative Christianity, with its emphasis on individualistic personal salvation, and condescending humanitarian institutions provided no answer to China's national and social plight. Liberal Christianity with its social gospel and educational institutions provided no solutions to China's national predicament or giant-sized problems."

What is the message the Church needs to bring? How can Christians function within the Chinese communist society? Chinese Christians have gone through the fires of persecution. They have developed a new life-style and a new ministry as a result of their suffering and endurance. The Chinese church is growing on her own. Shouldn't ways and means be explored to help our Chinese brothers in Christ?

6. The coming of 10,000 students from Mainland China to the Western world imposes upon Christians both an opportunity and responsibility. These Chinese visitors will be, in many cases, mature scholars, who will be expected to assume positions of leadership in their return to China. The Chinese students plan to live apparently in dormitories and will not live in isolation in special housing. What a challenge for university chaplains!

God has opened once again a window for the Gospel in mainland China, the most populous nation on earth. May the Church be ready to enter through that window with the claims of Jesus Christ.

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