



China and the Future of Christianity

Is there a promising future for the Christian church in China? Or should we think of the less than promising outcome of the church's experience in recent German history? Despite the real contributions of the church to the atmosphere of renewal that led to the collapse of the German Democratic Republic; despite the hopes that the active commitment of East German Christians, who were church members because of something other than cultural expectation, would somehow spill over into the west after reunification, we have now been forced to admit that, for many in the east, church participation was very "thin," perhaps only a way to show dissent; that the Stasi really had infiltrated the church at significant levels; and that the materialism of the west seems to be having more effect in the east than the commitment of the east is having in the west. Church membership in the former GDR has plummeted since *die Wende*.

In Germany, as in China and anywhere else, the relationship between church and culture is always messy and, to a large degree, unpredictable. (The good news about that is that it may be the best proof we have that incarnation actually works!)

We give thanks, of course, for the unexpected renewed life of the church in China. But there, too, things are uncertain. As seen by authors in this issue, is the Three-Self Patriotic Movement an attempt by the communist state to infiltrate and control the church? Or is it a hopeful new indigenous movement, within which are to be found true believers in Christ? Yes. Is a Chinese church that has limited contact with the church universal in danger of developing strange and troubling heterodoxy? Or is it a place where a new form of non-western (but genuine) Christianity might take root and flourish? Yes.

There is reason enough to be concerned about what is going on in China. There is as yet little evidence that economic development will inevitably give rise to democratic liberty, despite the hopes of the American State Department. Scenarios of internal oppression and external conflict have an unhappily high level of plausibility. Chinese officialdom probably won't kill the economic goose that lays golden eggs in Hong Kong, but it shows every willingness to go after such troubling things as freedom of assembly, freedom of association, and other human rights.

Still, in that messy world, the Holy Spirit seems to be alive, building the church and empowering the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is hope in that. We might worry over the development of a church that is no longer "under our control." Where might it go? Will it be faithful? Will it be like us?

But should it be like us? After all, "we" are hardly like the churches that sent missionaries to serve or convert our pioneer foreparents. And, God knows, the church in the United States is at least as compromised by its various interactions with the culture as any church anywhere has ever

been. Is the Christian church inherently and primarily a conservative moralistic movement? Or a liberal movement of social activism? Or an avenue to social and financial success or the healthy life? Or a source of personally meaningful spirituality? You would have a hard time proving any of these from the Bible and orthodox Christian tradition, but each shows up in American cultural Christianity. Nevertheless, we would not argue that the church in the United States is not the church.

Thus, if we can rejoice in the relative strength of church life in the United States, surely we can rejoice in the church's growth in places like China, despite our relative lack of control over developments in those places, our uncertainty over the "thickness" of people's faith, and our questions about the degree to which Christian faith has accommodated itself to various Chinese traditions and current ideologies.

If we can trust the Holy Spirit's ability to work in our culture, we can probably trust the Spirit's ability to work in any culture. If we can acknowledge that the church in the United States is not under our control, we can feel less uneasy about a loss of control over the church in China. The gospel can probably take care of itself.

Trusting in the gospel and the Spirit does not, of course, imply apathy or inaction. If we are to continue to pray God to "prosper the labors of those who take counsel for the nations of the world," to petition that we and others "may lead a peaceable life of integrity," we will continue to offer ourselves as God's instruments of counsel and peace, doing our best to identify and support efforts that will lead to developments in China conducive to human life and to the proclamation of the gospel and the promotion of the love of neighbor, while, at the same time, identifying and supporting efforts at home that will lead to peace and harmony—a couple of things that China has traditionally held in high regard. The essays in this special issue on China are offered as tools toward such mutual understanding.

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