

CHINA'S  
REFORMING  
CHURCHES



# CHINA'S REFORMING CHURCHES

MISSION, POLITY, AND MINISTRY  
IN THE NEXT CHRISTENDOM

Edited by  
Bruce P. Baugus



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*China's Reforming Churches*

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The characters on the front cover (教会) are standard Chinese for *church*.

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To

“a few significant ones”—

the faithful Presbyterian and Reformed missionaries  
who spent their lives for Christ in China

and the pastors and preachers of China’s reforming churches



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## | PREFACE |

### **Provenance**

This book began with a phone call from Dave Holmlund, a former office mate and good friend. He had a zany proposal about a common interest: to organize a conference of Presbyterian and Reformed folk interested in Reformed church development, or presbyterianism, in China. After a brief time of reflection—probably less prayerful than it should have been—I agreed. We were novices at conference organizing, but God was merciful and brought us many helpers along the way. Not only was the conference well attended and well received, but it also resulted in the book you are now reading, one of many gratifying outcomes.

Without the conference there would be no book, yet the book is not just a reprise of the conference. Most of the chapters were either adapted from papers presented at the conference or drawn from reports and other material presented there. But not everything covered at the conference is covered in this volume, and some things covered in this volume were not presented at the conference. Still, it is appropriate to see this book as an extension of the conference and an attempt to make that content available to a much wider audience, praying God will use it to further the work of the ministry it seeks to serve.

### **Purpose**

That work is the ministry of Reformed church development within mainland China. As this volume makes clear, this work is not a new initiative so much as a renewed initiative to address critical needs within China's Christian community. I will not preview what these needs are or the opportunities for further church development here. Suffice to say, this is a critical moment in the life of China's reforming churches and the Presbyterian and Reformed mission to China.

This volume is not just a report for the curious; we hope it will serve many constructive ends. We certainly mean it to inform you and suspect it will open your eyes to things you would not have expected to be the case in contemporary China. While the contributions that follow will confirm some of the conventional wisdom about China (it is a rapidly changing, increasingly wealthy, heavily polluted land teeming with people and energy), it will challenge a number of misguided but widely held assumptions that are directly relevant to Reformed church development in this remarkable country. The takeaway, we trust, will be more focused action and effective support.

If we have done our jobs, this volume should also serve as a useful guidebook, orienting readers to church development needs and the basic outlines of Reformed Christianity in China today. Of course, anyone heading that way needs to read more than one volume, and there are a number of other must-read books on the market and websites posted online today, most of which are referenced here, some of which have been written or are published by contributors to this volume. We hope this book finds its place on the short list of must-reads.

If you are reading this preface you are clearly already interested enough to have found your way here. We pray this volume not only informs and orients you but also inspires you to various kinds of activity: to pray, to get involved where you are by supporting this mission in various ways, and to go if God is leading you that way. If you are a minister, we hope this might be useful missions-conference fodder for you, but we are also praying God will use this work to stir some of you up to join those already there. The mission to China needs experienced, orthodox, Reformed and Presbyterian ministers and ruling elders on the ground. If you speak Chinese or are of East Asian descent, that much better; if you are a seminary student, get there as fast as you can, as one Chinese pastor has advised; and if you are a layperson, do not despair. The needs on every level outstrip the laborers.

Can't go to China? Look around you. Thousands of mainland Chinese cross the Pacific every day, both ways. Sea turtles surround you (if you're unsure of what a *sea turtle* is, keep reading).

Finally, the papers gathered here also form an argument—or at least provide the premises of an argument. China's churches need further church development for the sake of the gospel and welfare of God's people. Since presbyterianism, broadly construed, is the biblically prescribed order of the church, the need for church development is a need for presbyterianism. Though some doubt whether presbyterianism can work in China, there are at least

four compelling reasons to believe it will: (1) it has worked in the past; (2) it is already taking shape today as an increasing number of China's house church leaders pursue biblical reforms along presbyterian lines; (3) there are significant opportunities to deepen and advance these reforms; and (4) pursuing such reforms is not an option for those charged with the care of Christ's people, but a matter of biblical fidelity before God. The conclusion is not that China's reforming churches exist, but that supporting and assisting this reformation in China should be a central objective of the Presbyterian and Reformed mission to China in this generation. This is not an easy mission to tackle, and contributors to this volume point out many of the pits to avoid. But this is, I believe, one of the great mission projects of our time, and we who belong to the global Reformed and Presbyterian community are the only ones to do it.

### **Acknowledgments**

The conference, and thus this book, would have never come about without the helpers God brought to us. First, I would like to thank the Reformed Theological Seminary community, beginning with the administrators, who took the risk of sponsoring this project and providing institutional and human resource support from the beginning. The support and encouragement of Ric Cannada, Mike Milton, Ligon Duncan, Lyn Perez, Guy Richardson, John Sowell, the admissions directors at the various campuses, and my overworked but always available dean, Miles Van Pelt, are much appreciated. So also is the encouragement I received from my fellow faculty members at the Jackson campus—it is good to serve in a place with joyful teammates in the work of this wonderful ministry Christ has given us. Among them, Guy Waters and Elias Medeiros were especially helpful and encouraging. No colleague, however, put up with more updates than Andy Hoffecker over our weekly lunches, a few of which I had to miss along the way. Ken Wiandt, Stephanie Hartley, and Wanda Rushing were always patient and careful helpers.

I dare not overlook my students, some of whom made the long trip to Maryland to attend the conference, many of whom took a real interest in it and in this book, and all of whom motivate me daily to become a better teacher and servant of Christ. Among them, Zach Garris was a reliable, hard-working, and delightful assistant who tended to many tedious tasks and gave up part of his Christmas break to work the conference; Trevor Almy stepped up at crunch time over the lonely summer months when the manuscript was due; Derek Moore, exceptionally reliable, has lightened my load considerably; and Peter Whitney was especially helpful at certain points along the way.

Second, I am very grateful to all the churches and individuals, most of whom would not want to be named here, who shared our vision and generously backed this project financially. I recognize and take seriously the call to faithful stewardship that comes with your support. To the long list of those who supported the conference, I would like to add Dr. and Mrs. Randy Randall for their support of faculty projects at RTS, this book being one of the many things their generosity helps make possible.

There is an even larger circle of people who prayed for the project, encouraged me along the way, or stepped in to help at critical junctures. Among these are the wonderful people of Wallace Presbyterian Church, who were fantastic, enthusiastic, and seemingly tireless hosts and fellow workers. I especially want to thank Stephen Coleman, Karen Frank, and Chipper Miller—the conference would have been a disaster without them. On another front, Born Zheng and Hsiao-wen Kao were eager helpers when translation questions popped up.

The contributing authors, whose names appear elsewhere in this volume, were genuine partners in ways that go well beyond donating a chapter (or two). I am grateful to Joel Beeke, Jay Collier, Annette Gysen, and the rest of the people associated with Reformation Heritage Books for their support and service to the church.

That brings me to a class of people to whom I am perhaps most indebted and least able to express my gratitude here: China's reforming pastors, preachers, missionaries, and those who actively support and minister to them. I admire you and your work and hope the conference and this volume somehow further your ministry and help swell your ranks.

Finally, as a husband and father, I am aware that no one has supported this large and, at times, consuming project with currency more precious than Tricia, Nathanael, and Bryant. Tricia has helped in several direct ways and innumerable indirect ways, including putting up with me talking through knotty problems on our too few walks together. Thank you for your love. As for Nathanael and Bryant, you are remarkably patient and understanding sons; I am blessed deeply, daily, to be your father.

## | INTRODUCTION |

# China, Church Development, and Presbyterianism

*Bruce P. Baugus*

“More people go to church on Sunday in China than in the whole of Europe,” *BBC News Magazine* recently reported.<sup>1</sup> China is now home to more evangelical believers than any other nation, and the church continues to grow and make inroads in every level of Chinese society. Today, tens of millions of Chinese profess faith in Jesus Christ. Such dramatic growth, against the backdrop of modern China, has produced profound and urgent church development needs. As faithful Chinese ministers strive to meet these needs, an increasing number are discovering the rich biblical and theological resources of the Reformed tradition and presbyterian polity.

The turn toward Reformed theology and church polity is geographically widespread, but far from enveloping the majority of congregations. Arising out of the practical demands of pastoral ministry and the church’s mission, this movement is as vibrant and vigorous as it is young and tender. Crucially, it is an actual reformation of the church.<sup>2</sup> We are not talking about a pocket of evangelicals who have just discovered Reformed soteriology, as good as that sort of thing is. What is happening in China is of a different order, embodying a clear ecclesiastical form with concrete confessional and institutional dimensions—and this, in turn, is reshaping the nature and scope of the Reformed and Presbyterian mission to China and is likely to have deep and long-lasting influence on Chinese and, in time, global Christianity.

## China

China’s population, now roughly 1.35 billion people, has impressed Western observers for centuries. For perspective, the United States, the world’s third

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1. Tim Gardam, “Christians in China: Is the Country in Spiritual Crisis?,” *BBC News Magazine*, September 11, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14838749>.

2. As I will note in part 3 below, there is another significant driver of interest in Reformed theology in some quarters that is less churchly in its concerns and objectives.

most populous nation, fits comfortably within the .35 part of that figure. China not only has over a billion more people than the United States, but it also has hundreds of millions more than any other continent—more, for that matter, than North America, Europe, and Australia combined or than the entire Western Hemisphere. In China, cities as populated as Seattle, Baltimore, and Dallas are of relatively minor importance on the national scene. China is teeming with people.<sup>3</sup>

Having a disproportionate share of the world's population is nothing new for China. In 1865, Hudson Taylor used similarly impressive statistics in his pamphlet *China's Spiritual Need and Claims*. In this passionate appeal for more missionary zeal, Taylor reported four hundred million Chinese and asked, "What mind can grasp it?" The population has more than tripled since then. Many others have also argued that China's population, among other factors, renders this nation not just a great market for commercial interests but a uniquely strategic mission field.<sup>4</sup>

When Taylor wrote his pamphlet, China was reeling from a series of devastating episodes—among them, the Opium Wars of 1839–1842 and 1856–1860. The opium trade was widespread but illegal prior to 1860. China's attempts to prevent British traders from importing opium were met, however, in both 1839 and 1856, with declarations of war ending in a series of humiliating treaties that forced China to open up, permit the trade, and concede coastal ports to foreign interests, which missionaries promptly exploited. Opium addiction, ensnaring nearly a third of the population at its height, resulted in a severe degradation of China's population.

Meanwhile, the Taiping Rebellion erupted in 1850 and continued through 1864. Perhaps the largest military action the world had yet seen, this violent upheaval, led by the self-proclaimed younger Chinese brother of Jesus, claimed as many as thirty million lives. Revolts in other parts of China around this time added millions more.<sup>5</sup>

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3. It is noteworthy that China's enormous population is located almost entirely in the eastern half of the nation, which is its cultural heartland as well. The western portions of the modern political state consist mostly of the sparsely populated expanses of the Gobi Desert and Tibetan Plateau.

4. See, for example, Kurt D. Selles, *A New Way of Belonging: Covenant Theology, China, and the Christian Reformed Church, 1921–1951* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 33–41, which also discloses the sometimes strong racial dimensions of mission discussions and decisions of earlier generations.

5. Examples include the Muslim-led uprisings of the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877) and Panthay Rebellion (1856–1873).

Since Taylor's time, tens of millions more Chinese have perished as a result of war and misguided government policies. Though precise numbers are difficult to establish, the Second Sino-Japanese War, beginning in 1937 and concluding with the Japanese surrender to the Allies in 1945, claimed close to twenty million Chinese lives. This played out against the backdrop of the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949) between the governing Nationalist and revolutionary Communist Parties. Temporarily suspended during the war with Japan and culminating in the founding of the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong on October 1, 1949, this conflict cost China another three to five million people. It also inaugurated the most destructive era in Chinese history, when an estimated forty-five to fifty-eight million civilians perished as a result of various government programs under Mao's rule.

The Chinese people have suffered greatly, and the magnitude of their losses is as astounding as the size of the surviving population, its growth long checked by the current regime's one-child policy.<sup>6</sup> Today, despite two brutal and tumultuous centuries, China contains roughly 20 percent of the earth's population and is home to both the world's largest language group (Mandarin Chinese)<sup>7</sup> and people group (Han).<sup>8</sup>

Recently, observers have been even more impressed by the spectacular rate of cultural change taking place: China is arguably changing faster than any national culture in history not at war. Cities are bulging, skylines are soaring, industry is booming, money is flowing, demand is growing, transportation systems are expanding, and her global influence is rising. China is already the world's second-largest economy and is predicted to overtake the United States

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6. Adopted in 1978, the current family planning policy restricts many urban couples to just one child, though many rural citizens can apply to have a second child under certain conditions—if both parents are single children themselves or if their first child is a girl, for example. China's National Population and Family Planning Commission has claimed that this policy has prevented 400 million births by 2011 and delayed the date the world's population reached seven billion by five years.

7. Mandarin Chinese, in its several dialects, is the native language of nearly one billion people and the official language of China. Additionally, more people are able to speak Mandarin than any other language in the world; English is a close second, while Spanish and Hindi are a distant third and fourth, respectively.

8. The Han Chinese make up the vast majority of people in China and are sometimes divided into various subgroups, including the Mandarin Han subgroup (803,194,000 people) and the Wu Han subgroup (94,770,000 people), who are, according to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity's (CSGC) 2000 estimate, the first and sixth largest people groups on earth. The Mandarin subgroup alone has nearly seven times as many people as the second largest people group in the world (Japanese). The People's Republic of China (PRC) officially recognizes fifty-six minority peoples too.

in a decade or two. The standard of living in Shanghai has already surpassed some European Union capitals, and the masters of this growth continue to invest heavily in domestic and international infrastructure, export-driven manufacturing sectors, military modernization, and in securing and developing the world's natural resources. Though tens of millions of her citizens still lack basic modern conveniences and live on less than \$1.25 a day (the international poverty line), World Bank figures indicate that China's economic boom accounts for the reduction in global poverty levels over the past three decades.

Trying to predict China's future based on current trends may be tempting, but any predictions may soon appear naive. But predictions disclose present perceptions, which are forceful realities in their own right. Consider, for example, the dynamic language commentators consistently employ: China has "already" or "will soon"; it has "awoken" and is "on the move"; it is "rising fast," and "overtaking." Whatever the future may be, it's coming fast—this, at least, is the perception. This is not just a remote view of the situation, either, but the word on the streets of China's great cities, a refrain among a sober-minded people far from naïve about the profound problems plaguing their society: "Things are changing so fast," they say, "and China is opening up so much."

### *Living with Contradiction*

The post-Mao opening up of China accelerated rapidly under Deng Xiaoping's influence. That Deng is a hero of China's transformation and the tyrant of Tiananmen is just the sort of contradiction that is modern China. As one commentator recently mused:

For those who have never visited China, the country offers much more freedom than you are probably imagining. For those who've visited for quick trips, China is likely far more restrictive than what you've experienced. For most people in China, the lack of freedom only occasionally asserts itself as the veneer of "reform and opening up" gives way, exposing the fact that in many ways, China is still a police state.<sup>9</sup>

The contradiction is not just between rhetoric and reality, but between two kinds of realities or conditions of practical life that collide daily.<sup>10</sup> The

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9. Tom, "China Is Still a Police State(?)," at *Seeing Red in China*, March 26, 2012, <http://seeingredinchina.com/2012/03/26/china-is-still-a-police-state/>.

10. For an insightful exploration of this complicated and conflicted culture and how these contradictions shape vernacular life in China, see Rob Gifford, *China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power* (New York: Random House, 2008).



conflict between them has many faces and is the object of perhaps the central political debate among China's intellectuals: Is today's party line of reform and opening-up substantive, or just a ruse?<sup>11</sup> Or, to ask the same question: Which condition will define China's future?

While surprisingly open today, China remains a single-party police state that continues to fall far short of a rule-of-law society, though foreign visitors are not supposed to notice this—or the air pollution. The primary contribution China's citizens are expected to make to a harmonious and prosperous society is to live quietly under party rule. Many of the new freedoms they enjoy daily are not codified or protected, but exist only as current and frequently unofficial administrative policies. So, although the unmistakable if uneven trend has been toward greater openness, officials retain the legal right to crack down upon whomever they want whenever they choose. The selective, arbitrary enforcement of laws and regulations generally ignored—and the ability of officials to go beyond what the law permits with little to no accountability—leaves a wide opening for the sort of predatory political corruption for which China is notorious. Party leaders have persistently and publicly pointed to this kind of corruption as among the greatest threats to their hold on power, yet they have so far failed to correct a system that creates an environment of uncertainty, fear, and frustration punctuated by real and at times unspeakable human rights violations (see chapter 7).<sup>12</sup>

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11. See, for example, Hu Ping's response to Yu Jie: "Does Wen Jiabao Really Wish to Redress June 4th?," *Seeing Red in China*, March 28, 2012, <http://seeingredinchina.com/2012/03/28/hu-ping-does-wen-jiabao-really-wish-to-redress-june-4th/s>. Yu Jie dismissed a suggestion in the *Financial Times* from March 20, 2012, that (now former) Premier Wen Jiabao might finally be prepared to speak to the brutal suppression of unarmed Tiananmen Square demonstrators on June 4, 1989. Conventional wisdom maintains that in post-Tiananmen China party leaders trade economic freedoms for political stability. But Ezra F. Vogel reminds readers that the reform and opening-up trajectory was well established before the protests in the spring of 1989 in the wake of the reformist Hu Yaobang's death. Although Tiananmen Square protestors may not have started a revolution, they did expose deep divisions extending to the highest levels of a conflicted party, and their actions haunt party discourse and policy to the present.

12. While still in office, former Premier Wen Jiabao, for example, was quoted by the official Xinhua news outlet as saying that "corruption is the most crucial threat to the ruling party," explaining that if this problem is not addressed adequately, it has the potential to undermine the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the people (reported March 27, 2012). This was a theme throughout the recent, once-per-decade transition in power at the 18th Communist Party Congress and of the current President Xi Jinping's administration. An insightful analysis of predatory corruption is offered by Andrew Wedeman in *Double Paradox: Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012), who primarily deals with the political corruption involved in the privatization of state property.

*Conforming and Nonconforming Churches*

This contradiction creates uncertain conditions for the work of the ministry, too, and divides the mainland Christian community in multiple ways. Most notably, a deep division exists between the congregations of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the vast number and great diversity of house churches (see chapter 8). The TSPM is an umbrella organization for officially recognized—that is, registered—Protestant congregations. It answers to the Communist Party's United Front Work Department and functions as an arm of the government's State Administration for Religious Affairs. Not surprisingly, this is an unacceptable arrangement for most Chinese Christians. Still, there are signs of independence and spiritual vitality among congregations throughout this network as believing pastors and members within the TSPM system take advantage of a less intrusive, or at least less domineering, party to pursue vigorous, biblical ministry and reforms.

A majority of Protestants practice their faith outside the TSPM apparatus and make up China's house churches, also called underground or unregistered churches. To be clear, many of these congregations do not meet in households or operate as clandestine bodies. Although most maintain a low profile out of respect for civil authorities and a desire to live peaceful lives, it would be a mistake to think of these congregations as impoverished and isolated cell groups. Large numbers of house churches are finding some room to transform loose, informal networks into better ordered ecclesiastic connections, and a few congregations have even petitioned the government for the right to register as non-TSPM churches.

So far, party and state officials continue to insist on membership in the TSPM in order to be officially recognized or legally tolerated. By doing so, they continue to assert a right to control Christ's church in China and unnecessarily place millions of her citizens in a difficult situation. This hardline party position is the fundamental issue dividing Protestantism between conforming TSPM congregations and nonconforming house churches. The issue is, at bottom, theological—and a familiar one to those acquainted with church history. Nonconforming congregations and church leaders, while ordinarily highly respectful of civil authorities, refuse to compromise the gospel and their conscience by acknowledging another head of the body who denies the reality of the risen Lord and attempts to usurp His authority over His church.<sup>13</sup>

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13. For this reason, drawing on categories more commonly associated with English church history, Paul Wang, who contributed chapter 13 to this volume, refers to the non-TSPM churches as “nonconforming” churches.

## Christianity in China

From the Christian point of view, the true center of world history is not money or political power, but Jesus Christ, and the totalizing narrative of world history is the glory of God through the salvation of His people. In other words, under Christ, the church has the lead role in this drama, with city, state, and market playing supporting parts. As Scripture insists throughout and Augustine reminds us in *The City of God*, the rise and fall of nations, empires, and economic regimes serve, above all else, this singular redemptive and theological end realized in and through Jesus Christ, for whom the whole creation exists. So, from a biblical point of view, the most important news coming out of China is not the transformation of China's political economy or the shifting balance of global power—it's not even how Christianity is impacting these developments—but rather how Christ is building His church in China in our generation. This is the interest and central object of the contributors to this volume; it is also the truly remarkable change occurring in China today and, given the scale of this change, the world order.

Among the most striking examples of how Christianity is spreading across the global south and east, tens of millions of China's citizens now profess faith in Jesus Christ. The staggering rate of growth of Christianity in China over the last three decades has also stretched Western imaginations.<sup>14</sup> Yet the impression sometimes cast in reports on this growth—that Christianity is new to the Chinese scene—is not true.

### *Early Nestorian and Catholic Missions*

It is possible, as legend holds, that the apostle Thomas brought the gospel to China by AD 64; it is certain, however, that some version of Christian teaching has been present in China at least since the Nestorian missionary Alopen

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14. In addition to numerous articles in the popular press, book-length treatments documenting this development are plentiful, including David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2006); Daniel Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Nanlai Cao, *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010); Liao Yiwu, *God Is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China* (New York: HarperOne, 2011); and Mikka Ruokanen and Paulos Huang, eds., *Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). It is also a major theme in more general works on religion in China such as Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

arrived in Chang'an (modern Xi'an) in AD 635, during the prosperous Tang Dynasty.<sup>15</sup> Nestorianism survived into the thirteenth century and was widespread, although much degraded, throughout the Mongol Empire (especially among the Öngüd) and Yuan Dynasty established by Kublai Khan.

Due largely to the conquests of the Mongols and the grave threat this posed to the West, beginning in 1243 numerous evangelistic/diplomatic envoys were sent to the Khan from Roman Catholic Europe. First, Franciscans came to the imperial court and were mostly rejected; later, Marco Polo received a request from Kublai Khan for Rome to send one hundred wise and learned missionaries to convince the Khan and his people that Christianity was the true religion. Meanwhile, Nestorian monk, scholar, and diplomat Rabban Bar Sauma, born in Beijing, was off to Europe, meeting with Byzantine Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, Kings Philip the Fair of France and Edward I of England, and Pope Nicholas IV. Rome failed to meet Kublai Khan's request, but did dispatch the very capable Franciscan, John of Montecorvino, who arrived in Beijing shortly after Kublai Khan's death. John was received well, experienced notable success (again, especially among the largely Nestorian Öngüd), and translated the New Testament and Psalms. The Catholic faith began to take root in China, and John was eventually joined by other Catholic missionaries and consecrated the first archbishop of Peking in 1308.

The Han revolt against Mongol rule and establishment of the Ming Dynasty, however, brought an apparent end to the budding Catholic faith in China. Although Islam continued to make significant inroads, Christianity languished under systematic restrictions. These Ming restrictions, in one form or another, hindered the mission to China into the late sixteenth century.

#### *The Jesuit Mission and Rites Controversy*

Prevented from entering China legally, Francis Xavier, the famous Jesuit missionary, passed away on the offshore island of Shangchuan in 1552 while waiting to be smuggled on to the mainland. Eventually, the Jesuit mission to China was established at the new Portuguese trading post of Macau, where Matteo Ricci landed in 1582. Ricci was a brilliant man who, along with a few

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15. For an enlarged account of the history of Christianity in China, see Bays, *New History of Christianity*. On whether Thomas made it to China, Bays notes that it "has never been questioned by the Mar Thoma church in India," whose "books and church traditions clearly have Thomas in the 60s C.E. coming to India, then to China, and back to India, where he died" (5). Though other hints exist, the matter remains uncertain, unlike the seventh-century Nestorian mission.

companions, devoted himself to learning the Chinese language and culture. His object was to extend the Jesuit mission into the mainland, communicating Roman Catholicism in terms Chinese intellectuals would readily embrace.

Realizing that Christianity and European culture were distinct, even if thoroughly entangled, Ricci and his fellow Jesuits attempted to engineer an indigenous Chinese Roman Catholicism. Also aware of just how much Chinese intellectuals—Ricci’s primary target—were steeped in Confucianism, Ricci tried to show that Confucianism and Roman Catholicism were compatible. He argued, for example, that basic Catholic doctrines were latent in the principles of Confucianism and other traditional Chinese religious beliefs and practices. Rome, he argued, could accommodate traditional ceremonies like ancestor veneration and offerings to the emperor and Confucius as mere social or civil practices and not actual pagan rites or idolatry. This stance, however, resulted in a syncretistic version of Roman Catholicism that scandalized Dominicans and later Franciscans, who eventually had some of Ricci’s compromises condemned by Pope Clement XI.<sup>16</sup>

Ricci’s influence over Roman Catholicism in China is felt to this day in notable ways. The most striking of these is the crisp distinction Chinese make between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Protestantism is commonly called *Jīdūjiào* (基督教), which means the religion (*jiào*) of Christ (*Jīdū*), or simply Christianity; Roman Catholicism, however, is called *Tiānzhǔ jiào* (天主教), which means the religion of the Lord of Heaven (*Tiānzhǔ*). Ricci argued that the long-established, complex traditional Chinese term *Tiānzhǔ* referred to the Christian God in his catechetical dialogue, *The True Meaning*

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16. The Rites Controversy, as this episode is known, is a notable and instructive moment in Roman Catholic missiology. In response to Dominican complaints about Jesuit practices, Pope Clement XI forbade Roman Catholic participation in traditional Chinese rites in 1705 and followed up with *Ex Illa Die*, a papal bull condemning certain rites as inherently heathen and forbidding the use of traditional Chinese terms for deity. This condemnation, and the incompetent and callous manner in which it was communicated, infuriated the Qing Dynasty emperor, Kangxi, who until then had been supportive of the Jesuit mission. Bays writes that “the emperor grew increasingly irritated, then angry, at the message from the Vatican. In fact, as far as can be determined he was quite outraged by what he saw as gratuitous interference in his state and culture, with foreigners who spoke no Chinese presuming to dictate to him the meaning for his subjects of Chinese rituals and cultural practices.” *New History of Christianity*, 29–30. The fallout resulted in a significant setback for the Roman Catholic mission in China that was ongoing as Protestant missionaries began arriving in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. In 1939 Pius XII largely reversed the stance adopted by Clement XI, and in 1958 Pope John XXIII upheld Ricci as an example for Roman Catholic missionaries to follow.

of the *Lord of Heaven* (1603). Although every available term for deity in the language of any un-Christianized culture will be freighted with unhelpful connotations, Ricci's use of this term, together with his accommodation of Confucian philosophy and devotional practices, was especially controversial and has sharply distinguished post-Jesuit and post-Reformation Roman Catholicism from Protestantism in China till today.

*The Protestant Mission: 1807–1949*

Protestant missionaries began arriving in China with the landing of Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society in 1807. At first, they too were confined to certain coastal districts, but with Hudson Taylor's famous push inland and the altered relations with the West epitomized by the Opium Wars and unequal treaties, Protestant missionaries were working quite openly throughout eastern China and penetrating the country's interior by the end of the century.<sup>17</sup>

Morrison was a studious man. Steeped in Scottish Presbyterianism, he trained diligently, as best he could while still in England, for his life's work as a pioneering missionary. Raised in a working-class family, Morrison was not highly educated and already accomplished as were John of Montecorvino or Matteo Ricci when they set out for China. Nevertheless, ordained in a London congregation of the Church of Scotland just before departing for China, Morrison more than rose to the occasion. In the twenty-seven-year span of his ministry—the rest of his life spent mostly in the vicinity of Guangzhou and Macau—he translated and published the Bible in Chinese, wrote a catechism (see appendix A), produced a Chinese grammar and massive Chinese-English dictionary, started a newspaper, helped found a college, served as the official translator for the British government and the otherwise anti-missionary British East India Company, and along the way “became a major, if not the foremost, Sinologist of his day, and the leading interpreter of China to Western nations.”<sup>18</sup> And yet he knew of only ten Chinese converts to Christianity

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17. A series of “unequal treaties” followed China's defeat in the First Opium War in 1842. For more on that, see note 19. For comparisons between the earlier Roman Catholic and Protestant missions see Bays, who argues that, despite obvious differences, early Protestant missionaries grappled with many of the same problems and had similar experiences as Roman Catholics in earlier generations. He also suggests that Protestants could have learned from the history of the Roman Catholic mission if not for anti-Catholic prejudice. *New History of Christianity*, 50.

18. Bays, *New History of Christianity*, 44.

through his labors. Still, he laid the foundation upon which other successful Protestant missionaries would build.

The Protestant mission to China was at times deeply entangled in European mercantile interests, including the opium trade,<sup>19</sup> and suffered from association with the heretical and revolutionary Taiping Kingdom. The Taiping Kingdom was founded by Hong Xiuquan in the midst of the Jintian Uprising—itsself the opening episode in the Taiping Rebellion. Influenced by Protestant missionaries who struggled with how to react to his rise, Hong claimed, on the basis of a revelatory vision, to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ, the Chinese Son of God. Despite these associations, the Protestant mission made slow but steady progress and was joined by more and more denominations and missionary-sending organizations from an increasing number of nations. The accumulated effect amounted to a major push by Protestants, including many Presbyterian and Reformed missionaries, from about 1870 through 1940, to evangelize what was already recognized as perhaps the world's most strategic mission field.<sup>20</sup>

Though not defined by the kind of spectacular growth of more recent decades, this phase of the Protestant mission to China was successful, even when judged by the often narrow and at times misguided desiderata we tend

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19. As David Aikman notes, "A monstrous albatross for Protestant Christianity in China for more than a century, was the association of Western missionaries with Western traders who came...to make money trading opium." *Jesus in Beijing*, 51. Already engaged, the opium trade increased steadily under the Canton System, beginning in 1756 and culminating in the First Opium War (1839–1842) and Treaty of Nanking (1842). The terms of this treaty were reworked to China's even greater disadvantage in the Treaty of Tientsin (1860), and other "unequal treaties" after the Second Opium War (1856–1860). This began the so-called century of humiliation, when China was subjected to the mercantile interests of certain Western powers, including the United Kingdom and the United States. This was the backdrop of the Protestant mission to China prior to 1949 and no doubt haunts the mission to this day.

20. In a lengthy discussion on the years 1860–1950, Bays helpfully subdivides this era into three parts: "Expansion and Institution-Building in a Declining Dynasty, 1860–1902"; "The 'Golden Age' of Missions and the 'Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment,' 1902–1927"; and "The Multiple Crises of Chinese Christianity, 1927–1950." *New History of Christianity*, 66–149. There are numerous studies on the efforts of particular missionaries or mission-sending bodies, or of the Protestant mission in particular locations or among particular groups of people in China, or in relation to certain other factors or historical developments dating from this era—too many to list here. One example worth noting, however, is Selles, *New Way of Belonging*, which documents the involvement of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Though entering the mission to China relatively late, this Reformed denomination first engaged China before any other foreign nation. Selles's narrative of this decision is very insightful and illustrates the kinds of motives often at work in this era across denominational lines.



to use in such matters. The mission to China transformed Protestant cross-cultural missions, too. The story of Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission is well known, but just one example of just one aspect of the transformation hammered out in the world's largest cross-cultural mission experiment. Also, despite at times widespread and fierce opposition, it was during these decades that an indigenous Protestant Chinese church was born.<sup>21</sup> This church, as tenuous as its existence sometimes seemed, would survive the turmoil of the Communist Revolution and collapse of the mission (see chapters 1–3).

The collapse of the Protestant mission to China in the 1940s seemed unthinkable just a few years earlier. Foreign Protestant missionaries at work in China hit their “high-water mark of more than 8000 in the 1920s,” while “Chinese Protestants...[were] reaching about 500,000 before the storms of mass nationalism hit.”<sup>22</sup> After the Xinhai Revolution of 1911–1912, through which four millennia of dynastic rule gave way to the Republic of China, Chinese Christians found themselves enjoying American-style liberties like the freedom of religion, separation of church and state, and the ability to participate fully in public life as citizens. Some even held top-level positions in the government.<sup>23</sup> The future also looked promising. Nearly 250,000 Chinese students enrolled in Protestant mission schools, blazing the trail toward China's much desired modernization. Some American observers of the time openly discussed the prospect of China becoming a Christian nation.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, not all was well. By the turn of the twentieth century, theological liberalism was sweeping mainline Protestant denominations in the West, and the mission to China suffered the effects. Bays notes that “the world-wide ‘Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy’ began in China in the summer of 1920, with acrimonious disputes over biblical authority, higher criticism,

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21. Several notable episodes of violence against Christians, missionaries and converts, erupted in this era. The most famous is the Boxer Rebellion or Uprising (1898–1902). The uprising involved the siege of the Legation Quarter in Beijing and murder of “all foreigners and Chinese Christians in north China within their reach” outside the capital city. Roughly 250 foreigners (nearly all missionaries) and thirty thousand Chinese converts perished before the uprising was put down by the intervention of a foreign military alliance who occupied Beijing into 1902 and the nearby city of Tianjin until 1906. Bays, *New History of Christianity*, 85–86.

22. Bays, *New History of Christianity*, 94.

23. Sun Yat-sen, celebrated father of the Republic of China by both mainlanders and Taiwanese, was baptized by an American Congregational missionary and deeply influenced by the Protestant mission. Bays also reports that several members of the first national assembly were Christian. *New History of Christianity*, 95.

24. Bays, *New History of Christianity*, 92–94.



evolution, and the like breaking out” between missionaries in various places.<sup>25</sup> By the 1930s, the situation had so deteriorated that “all but the most firm fundamentalists among American Christians...[had] second thoughts about the legitimacy of foreign missions.”<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, Pentecostals began flooding in, and several deviant indigenous movements emerged from within.<sup>27</sup>

Discouragement from without was plentiful, too. As Rodney Stark notes, smug secular scholars dismissed Chinese converts:

Through much of the twentieth century, it was widely believed among Western intellectuals that the Chinese were immune to religion—an immunity that long preceded the communist rise to power. When, in 1934, Edgar Snow quipped that “in China, opium is the religion of the people,” many academic and media experts smiled in agreement and dismissed the million Chinese claimed as converts by Christian missionaries as nothing but “rice Christians”—cynical souls who had frequented the missions for the benefits they provided. Then, in 1949, Mao Zedong came to power. Religion was outlawed, and it was widely agreed among social scientists that China soon would be a model of the fully secularized, post-religious society.<sup>28</sup>

The Protestant mission to China collapsed with Mao’s ascent. The few institutions that survived were reorganized under the bureaucratic umbrella of the TSPM.<sup>29</sup>

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25. Bays, *New History of Christianity*, 106.

26. Bays, *New History of Christianity*, 122. Bays highlights Pearl Buck’s tirade against foreign missions and William Ernest Hocking’s *Laymen’s Report* as “the two biggest flash-points” in the debate that eroded confidence in cross-cultural missions, especially to China. See also Daniel H. Bays and Grant Wacker, eds., *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003); Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions to China, 1907–1932* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1997); and Kevin Xiyi Yao, *The Fundamentalist Movement among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920–1937* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2003) for treatments on the mission to China in general, and see chapters 1 and 2 for how this story played out among Presbyterians.

27. Among these are the True Jesus Movement, the Jesus Family, and Watchman Nee’s the Little Flock.

28. Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 405. See also Stark, Byron Johnson, and Carson Mencken, “Counting China’s Christians,” *First Things*, May 15, 2011, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/05/counting-chinas-christians>.

29. The TSPM was established in 1954 as the only legally permitted Protestant form of Christianity in China. Congregations had but three choices: join, fold, or go underground. At times functioning as an arm of the party, even the TSPM was suspended from 1966 to 1978

*The Protestant Mission: 1949–Present*

In 1966 a brutal campaign against all perceived challenges to Maoist orthodoxy was unleashed on the nation. Young radical zealots, the Red Guards of Mao's Cultural Revolution, were especially vicious, and Chinese believers were frequent victims of their fanatical rage. Hays writes, "In countless places, Christians were put through such abuse that many did not survive the ordeal."<sup>30</sup>

During this decade-long crusade it seemed that Christianity as well as other religions might be wiped out in China, leading Richard C. Bush to pronounce Communism the victor in 1970.<sup>31</sup> A religion unto itself, he argued, Communism had vanquished Christianity and all other religious competitors, even Confucianism, and ushered in the most thoroughly secular society the world had yet seen. The future of China had been forged in the Cultural Revolution, which Bush viewed not so much as a program orchestrated from above as an organic, fanatical religious outbreak—a kind of popular Maoist jihad.

Although Bush also noted that Christianity continued to persist at some level in the personal devotions of private individuals or tiny gatherings scattered across the countryside—wherever the priests of Maoism were a bit lax—the foreseeable future for China appeared utterly secular. Stark observes, however:

It wasn't to be. Instead, belief in a coming post-religious China turned out to be the opium of Western intellectuals. The Chinese Christians of 1949—those ridiculed in the West as rice Christians—were so "insincere" that they endured decades of bloody repression during which their numbers grew. And as official repression has weakened, Christianity has been growing at an astonishing rate in China.<sup>32</sup>

What appeared to Bush and many others to be flickering flames ready to burn out were, it turns out, glowing embers ready to be fanned into a fire that academics and authorities did not predict and perhaps never could have.

Though admitting that "Christian history in China" during the Cultural Revolution is "still a black hole," Bays estimates "that Protestants increased their numbers by a factor of five or six...from 1966 to 1978." This

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during the Cultural Revolution. In 1980 a sister organization, the China Christian Council, was founded. The "two organizations" (*lianghui*) are largely redundant.

30. Hays, *New History of Christianity*, 185.

31. Richard C. Bush Jr., *Religion in Communist China* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

32. Stark, *Triumph of Christianity*, 405. See also Stark, Johnson, and Mencken, "Counting China's Christians."

“very rapid growth rate” translates into roughly “five to six million Protestants” by the end of a decade when many were actually predicting the end of religion in China.<sup>33</sup>

Mao died on September 9, 1976; less than a month later the notorious Gang of Four was arrested, and the era of the Cultural Revolution was brought to a close. After what turned out to be the brief, transitional premiership of Hua Guofeng from 1976 to 1978, a new era of reform began in earnest with the ascent of Deng Xiaoping. TSPM churches were allowed to reopen around Christmastime 1978, and in 1982 “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question,” or Document 19, was issued, expounding the party’s new official policy on religion and establishing a framework that remains in place till now.<sup>34</sup> Although a significant advance over the pre-Deng era, the framework erected by Document 19 remains unnecessarily restrictive and a great hindrance to healthy church development in China today, a point we will return to.

As we have seen, by 1978 Bays estimates there may have been as many as six million Protestants scattered around China and almost no Western missionaries in the country. But the rapid rate of growth he proposes in the late 1970s continued through the 1980s.<sup>35</sup> Almost all of this growth occurred in China’s thickly settled countryside. Then, during the 1990s, an even more remarkable and unexpected turn occurred: as the rate of growth in rural China moderated, the church began to thrive in urban areas among the well-educated and culturally influential classes. By 2000, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) reported 89,056,000 Christians in China. In 2008, *The Economist* cited “Zhou Xiao, a former Communist Party official and convert to Christianity,” claiming “there are up to 130m Christians in China.”<sup>36</sup> This number, the article reports, was supposedly confirmed to ChinaAid, also in 2008, by the director of the government bureaucracy responsible for overseeing religion. Others have offered somewhat lower numbers, but even CSGC’s

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33. Bays, *New History of Christianity*, 185–86.

34. Bays, *New History of Christianity*, 190; see also chapter 8.

35. Fenggang Yang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006), 105, writes that “a very careful study” by Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan in 1993 “suggested that the total number of Protestants in both TSPM and house churches was likely to be 20 million or more” and that another methodologically careful count by Tony Lambert in 1999 “concluded that there might be a total of 50 million Protestants.”

36. “Christianity in China: Sons of Heaven: Inside China’s Fastest-Growing Non-Governmental Organization,” *The Economist*, October 2, 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/12342509>.

conservative estimate projects there will likely be 135,190,000 professing Christians in China by 2025.<sup>37</sup>

### *China's Millions of Christians*

If these figures are anywhere close to reflecting the reality on the ground, then about 8 percent of the Chinese population now professes faith in Jesus Christ, meaning there are more Christians in China today than there are atheists, the officially endorsed and publicly taught religious position, or Buddhists, the best-known traditional religious alternative. Even the low estimate of 70 million preferred by Stark, Johnson, and Mencken means the Christian population is as large as the Communist Party despite the clear political and economic advantages of belonging to the latter, and disadvantages sometimes attending the former.<sup>38</sup>

Whatever the number comes to, this much is clear: “More people go to church on Sunday in China than in the whole of Europe.”<sup>39</sup> China appears to be home to more evangelical believers than any other nation, and the church continues to grow and make inroads in every level of Chinese society, from peasant farmers and factory workers to the cultured elite. While still laboring under persecution and official harassment, tested by many temptations, and occasionally upset by heresy, the church in China has courageously continued to worship and obey the triune God. Although none of us knows how history might turn as God works out His redemptive purpose, the church in China is already emerging not just as a place of vibrant Christian faith but as a significant missionary force in the world. And yet, as Chinese ministry leaders (and informed visitors) clearly and consistently report, the need for church development is both profound and urgent—both for the health of the church in China and the future of Christianity in the world.

### **Church Development, Presbyterianism, and China**

This deep and multifaceted need for church development, so acute in China, exists wherever the gospel is bearing fruit. Indeed, the proper goal of the

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37. See CSGC's report: “Global Top Ten Lists on 145 Major Missiometric Categories,” <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/documents/listings.pdf>. Rodney Stark, Byron Johnson, and Carson Mencken have published results of a survey conducted by Horizons, Ltd. in China, which they have corrected in cooperation with Peking University, and conclude that it “seems entirely credible to estimate that there are about 70 million Chinese Christians in 2011.”

38. Stark, Johnson, and Mencken, “Counting China's Christians.”

39. Gardam, “Christians in China.”

church's mission has never been just to announce the good news to those who have not heard or to call unbelievers to faith and repentance; the church's mission also includes establishing a well-ordered church in every land for the welfare of God's people and perpetuation of the ministry.

A well-ordered church is a church ordered by Scripture. Such a church is not an isolated, autonomous gathering of individual believers but a disciplined body before God, under the watchful care and ministerial oversight of a plurality of ordained elders, connected to other like bodies throughout the region and beyond, worshiping God in spirit and truth and carrying out the work of the ministry centered around the core devotions of word, sacraments, and prayer in fellowship together. In other words, the church of Scripture—the visible church Christ is building on earth until He returns—has a particular nature and shape to it: it is an organism with an institutional structure set by God.

Jesus Christ, in whom all authority in heaven and on earth resides, is the head of this institution, which has been entrusted with the ministry of word and sacrament in order to make disciples of all nations, gathering in and building up God's elect wherever they are found throughout the world. So the visible church not only has a particular institutional shape, but a unique role to play in God's redemptive program as well. This role is so vital to that program that outside the visible church, as the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) asserts, "there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (25.2). In other words, by God's own design, the life and health of the body of Christ and household of God are provided for and sustained through the well-ordered institution of the church.<sup>40</sup>

### *Presbyterianism, with Chinese Characteristics*

The point is this: the institutional form of the church outlined in Scripture and tersely described above is what we mean by *presbyterianism* (with a lower-case *p*) in this volume. Particular Presbyterian and Reformed churches and traditions (indicated by use of a capital *P*) have developed highly refined polities applying the basic principles of presbyterianism to the circumstances of

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40. To insist that the church has a particular institutional form is not yet to specify what that form is. Though unique, it appears throughout Scripture that the church is most like a family. While sometimes compared to a school (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.4), hospital (Augustine, *Homilies on John*, 41.13), or some other institution, healthy families function as schools and hospitals, too, and the family seems the closest analogy to the church in Scripture. This family-like dimension of the institutional church is beautifully expressed in biblical presbyterianism.

their respective bodies and cultural contexts. No doubt, in time, Chinese Presbyterian or Reformed churches will do likewise—they already are. The non-Chinese contributors to this volume do not presume to know just how presbyterianism will come to expression under the quickly evolving circumstances of mainland China—that is for our Chinese brothers to determine “by the light of nature, and Christian prudence” (WCF 1.6). By *presbyterianism* we refer only to “the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed” as they relate to the proper order of Christ’s church, and thus church development in China (WCF 1.6). (We do not mean anything more specific, such as a particular denomination of Reformed or Presbyterian churches.)

With this qualification in view, the need for church development in China, then, is a need in large part for the development of a healthy and robust presbyterianism in the sense just described.<sup>41</sup> As such, this need must be addressed through a deepening understanding of the biblical theology of the church as articulated within the Reformed tradition. Encouragingly, an increasing number of Chinese ministry leaders are turning to the resources of Reformed theology as they face the need for better order and further church development. A church ordered by Scripture is a church capable, by the grace and power of God, of guarding the faith, maintaining the peace and purity of the body while realizing its unity and catholicity, and building up its members to carry on the work of the ministry. Somewhat surprising, then, is what little attention church development has received in the mission to China.

### *Presbyterianism and the Mission to China*

Historically, Presbyterians have almost always attempted to establish a biblically ordered, Presbyterian-type church wherever they have labored, and China was no exception in the pre-Mao era (see chapters 1–3). Yet since its reopening in the 1980s, the mission to China has, until recently, been a notable exception. There are several reasons for this.

First, and most obvious, China is officially a closed country, and, as such, foreign missionaries have labored under severe restrictions. Although an opening exists for personal evangelism, which is legal under certain conditions, foreign religious workers are rarely granted visas. Consequently, much of the mission to China has focused on placing Christians in the country to do the sort of things they would do anywhere, encouraging them to witness

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41. For a recent and highly readable case for and description of presbyterianism as the biblical form of the visible church, see Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2011).

as opportunities arise. That some foreign English teachers in China, for example, are Christians eager to evangelize their Chinese neighbors on the side is no secret. Chinese authorities are ordinarily anxious to promote knowledge of English for economic purposes, and many Christians are more than willing to do the job. The practice is well known and generally tolerated within certain parameters.

A consequence of this practice for the mission to China is a foreign Christian presence dominated by young, adventurous, short-term workers with little to no training in church development or pastoral experience and no access to the Chinese church. (Foreign passport holders are restricted to worshiping in TSPM congregations or churches exclusively for foreigners.) There are relatively few ordained ministers or teaching elders on the ground, and most mission agencies strongly discourage or even forbid their workers from seeking contact with unregistered congregations or developing close working relationships with local Christians. This is done for at least two reasons: first, to protect their access to China by not running afoul of government strictures, and, second, out of concern for the security of Chinese believers, contact with foreigners being just the sort of thing that still attracts unwanted attention from civil authorities.

Intimately related, a second reason for the general neglect of church development in the current mission to China is that Chinese believers have not enjoyed a wide liberty to assemble and organize along biblical lines. TSPM congregations are permitted to exercise their rights of assembly and association and have been given some room to set their own polity under the auspices of the China Christian Council. But unregistered churches do not enjoy these advantages. This has not, however, prevented them from multiplying rapidly and forming large networks with meaningful connections and appearing and functioning more and more like full-blown, Western-style denominations. Still, church development among the unregistered congregations has been limited and remains a delicate matter throughout China. Even where unregistered churches are openly tolerated, forming connections between churches, assembling councils of church leaders, operating schools for training ministers, and other similar activities are not as widely tolerated and are frequently harried by the state when attempted. Yet the work of the ministry must go on as well as the institutional development of the church along biblical lines, and such development is occurring and will continue to do so despite the challenges.



This brings us to a third reason church development has been much neglected in the post-Mao mission to China: the significant influence of post-war American evangelicalism. While the remarkable accomplishments of evangelical missionaries ought not to be overlooked, on the one point in view here—the lack of attention to church development in the mission to China—some friendly criticism is in order. Highly individualistic and pragmatic, American evangelicals and Pentecostals tend to have a low view of the church and lack the biblical, theological, and historical perspective needed to appreciate her crucial role in God's redemptive program. It is not surprising, then, that American evangelicalism also frequently suffers from a low esteem for and lack of confidence in the ordinary means of grace God has appointed for the work of the ministry.

The consequences are numerous. Defining the mission of the church without reference to the church's role in God's redemptive program, evangelicals have at times operated with a missiology focused almost exclusively on evangelistic activism—a kind of “counting coup” approach to missions. Though many evangelical groups have come to see the need for what they typically term *follow-up* or *discipleship*, they have not always focused on developing the church to this end. Or sometimes, when they do pay attention to the need for church development, it is often only to serve these narrowly defined pragmatic ends, leading to relatively light, flimsy, storm-tossed congregations ill-prepared to defend the faith, maintain the ministry, or sustain the ongoing mission into the next generation. Meanwhile, evangelism, and sometimes other aspects of the church's mission, is carried on in the a-ecclesiological context of various parachurch organizations. Finally, even among those evangelical groups that do acknowledge the desirability of engaging in some measure of church development, this work sometimes has such a low priority that when it proves costly and difficult, as it inevitably does, it is readily laid aside as a kind of luxury we can get along without rather than being indispensable to Christ's redemptive work on earth and the mission He has given His people.

Again, it is not surprising that some Chinese ministry leaders are turning to the rich resources of Reformed theology and presbyterian polity in their vital work of founding sustainable institutions to serve the needs of tens of millions of Chinese believers. Here they find a much stouter evangelical tradition with an ecclesiology grounded in Scripture and built to last, and they are encouraged to find that God speaks to the kinds of challenges and problems they are facing in their pastoral ministries. God is not indifferent about these



matters and has not left His people fumbling around in the dark about how the church should be ordered and should go about the work of the ministry.

The fourth reason for the underdevelopment of the contemporary church in China is perhaps the most important—and certainly the most encouraging: the rate of numerical growth has effectively outstripped the development of the church at almost every level except the often hasty formation of congregations. These congregations come in many shapes and sizes. Often they are thrown together as loose associations of believers and function more like a campus ministry or men’s or women’s fellowship group might in America. A common claim is that in China the two-year-old Christian teaches the one-year-old Christian. That is becoming less common over time, but many of today’s house church leaders more or less stumbled into this circumstance in just such a way.

Conversely, some veteran church leaders have spent time in prison or been tortured for their faith. Not long ago, such experiences were nearly viewed as qualifications for leadership positions. More to the point, more and more congregations have trained ministers, spiritually mature lay officers, and regular administration of the sacraments. A few even maintain active membership rolls and practice church discipline, though this remains relatively rare. And, as already noted, extensive networks of house churches are widespread. Yet the majority of believers are first-generation Christians, and the situation is vastly different from places where the church has been long established and is well served by numerous institutions and resources firmly in place.

### *Cultural Christianity, Chinese Style*

Not all the current interest in Reformed theology is driven by the practical demands of pastoral ministry and church development, however. There is another distinct and perhaps complicating driver. Some of China’s cultural elite believe they have found in the Reformed tradition a resource not just to support healthy church development but for reconstructing China’s culture.

Maoism is dead. Most Chinese know this, but no official dare admit it in so many words, and some citizens still do not want to accept it. The problem runs much deeper than the awkwardness of the ruling party admitting it long ago traded its namesake ideology for pragmatism. Chinese society, from top to bottom, is founded on materialistic principles that have proved culturally bankrupt. Capitalism is quite compatible with materialism. So, for all the outward changes the shift in economic policy has generated, the deeper and more threatening issues to China’s society remain unaddressed. Wealth has

perhaps delayed a cultural crisis a few decades, but many believe one is nonetheless on its way as the latest form of materialism exhausts itself.

What can replace materialism and stave off the coming cultural collapse? Different answers are proposed from different quarters, but one proposal that attracts a surprising amount of support is Christianity, and among those advocating this answer most vigorously are a number of university professors, lawyers, writers, journalists, and the like, who advocate a distinctively Reformed brand of Christianity. Even as elite society in the West has largely turned against Christianity, especially in its Reformed strands, at least some in elite society in China is embracing it. "In China now," as one commenter put it, "this kind of Christianity is seen as forward-looking, rational, [and] intellectually serious."<sup>42</sup>

What will become of this phenomenon is unclear. It is not even clear that all those advocating the Christian option are themselves believers. Brent Whitefield writes, "Even some non-Christians are raising the question: 'What can Christianity do for China?' Reflection on this question has given rise to the 'Cultural Christian,' who may not participate in the life of the church but is otherwise sympathetic to the teachings of the faith and optimistic about their transformative power."<sup>43</sup> For many, that transformative power is most clearly and forcefully expressed in certain strands of the Reformed tradition. The potential politicization of the Reformed brand could harm the vital, ongoing work of church reform, and the subjection of the church and her mission to a culture-changing agenda could undermine it.

## Conclusion

At this moment a notable reformation is underway: Reformed theology is being disseminated and embraced throughout China; Reformed confessions of faith are being translated or written and adopted; new attention is being paid to worship, preaching, and leadership; local congregations and in a few cases entire networks are being organized or reorganized along presbyterian lines; Reformed seminaries are being established throughout the country; a Chinese presbyterian polity has been drawn up; presbyteries are being formed in various places and are in communication with one another; ministers are

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42. Andrew Brown, "Chinese Calvinism Flourishes," *Andrew Brown's Blog, The Guardian*, May 27, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2009/may/27/china-calvin-christianity>.

43. Brent Whitefield, "Chinese Protestants and the West since 1949," *God Reports.com*, <http://www.godreports.com/ministry-updateview/1140>.

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being trained, examined, and ordained; and the great works of the Reformed tradition are being brought into open circulation. All of this is just the beginning of an attempt by Chinese pastors and church leaders to meet the needs of God's people and lay a firm foundation for the future. Despite their vigorous efforts, every one of them "would agree that the church is struggling to keep up with the demand for trained leaders and other resources" as the gospel continues to spread and grow in the world's largest mission field.<sup>44</sup>

These are China's reforming churches. Seizing this moment of profound need and remarkable opportunities amid China's fast-changing culture, they are transforming not only the nature and scope of the Presbyterian and Reformed mission to China but the future of Christianity and the Reformed tradition globally. Complex challenges demanding thoughtful and decisive action abound, but the vital work of developing ecclesiastical structures capable of supporting the present and future ministry needs of the Chinese church is moving forward. Surely this is one of the great kingdom projects of our generation.

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44. Brent Fulton, "The Facts about the Church in China," *ChinaSource*, September 27, 2012, <http://www.chsource.org/en/articles/church-in-china/item/82-the-facts-about-the-church-in-china>.