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**Evangelical
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In the contemporary Chinese Church, encouraging signs point to a maturing community. Easy believism gives way to more thought-out **P. 152** methods of disciple-making and church growth; the deep spiritual emphasis is not dying out; in the deeper recesses of the Chinese Christian consciousness there is the search for power in the charismatic dimension. Leadership patterns are both puzzling and encouraging: the laity is awakened to serve the church; women's role is not only unclear, but it lacks encouragement from the Christian community; and increasingly the Chinese churches are exploring structures for co-operation and unity, bypassing the traditional ecclesiastical (denominational) structure for models which resemble 'networking'. How does one speak the gospel into such a context?

Can one speak of sanctification as the very context of justification? Chinese are intensely interested in how to live the Christian life—what is the 'pay-off' in this life if one becomes a Christian? Perhaps in delineating justification and sanctification too distinctly, we lose the unity of what the Spirit does in the process of applying Christ's benefits. Here insights from spiritual formation will prove helpful. What about leadership? What is leadership? Traditionally Chinese have lived with both a formal pattern of leadership (the imperial government) and an informal, but recognized pattern (the local gentry). While all pay homage to the emperor, the 'eyes of the people are bright as snow'. Power abuse and injustice are concerns which are often unspoken, but nonetheless real. The servant of Jesus Christ needs to pray for the power of the powerless—empowered by the Spirit of God, the servant empowers the people of God unto ministry. Dare the church turn over the tools of servanthood to the laity? Will a leadership pattern emerge which borrows from the best of both the 'formal' and the 'informal' approaches?

The Chinese community is a variety of ethnic Chinese. Chinese culture itself is changing. How does the Church—wonderfully gifted by the Spirit with talents and abilities, but frightfully small in comparison with overall Chinese population—speak the gospel into this context? By re-discovering the vision of the transcendent, covenant-maker God; by ministering with the deepest compassion for man trapped in his predicament of sin and suffering; by empowering the people of God with both the *dunamis* and the tools for ministry. Then will the earth be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. Hard work, yes, but wonderful yields await us.

Dr. Samuel Ling is an organizing pastor of the Chinese Presbyterian Church of America and pastor of the Covenant Church in New York City, U.S.A. **p. 153**

Dialogue on China

Jonathan Chao and Ralph Covell

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A Discussion on the Church in China with Jonathan Chao and Ralph Covell.

QUESTION ONE:

What is the estimated Protestant Christian population of China? What are some of the reasons for this growth?

Chao: Our estimate in the past two years has been a minimum of 35 million and most likely 50 million Christians, or people attending meetings in China. This figure is mainly related to us by itinerant preachers travelling in different parts of China. In a certain province, it is estimated that there are, for example, a minimum of ten million believers out of a population of 75 million.

Another estimate came from an itinerant house church leader whose vocation has given him opportunity to travel among these provinces. He estimates a minimum of 35 million. This kind of estimate has prevailed inside China for at least two years, so our estimate is based on their estimates. As for the three most important reasons for the phenomenal Church growth, the first is the persecution and suffering on the part of believers that has produced a renewal and deeper appreciation of the Christian faith which drives the believer to share his precious faith ... with his fellow Christians. A second reason would be that during and after the cultural revolution the Chinese people, particularly the young, experienced a sense of cultural and spiritual vacuum. They seemed to have no clear theology or faith that would give meaning to their lives. When they were exposed to the Christian Gospel through believers, they received the Gospel as something to give comfort, direction, and meaning to life.

The third reason would be the diligent travelling of itinerant preachers who saw their own responsibilities as (1) preaching the gospel to those who have not heard it; (2) encouraging believers and helping them to organize churches; (3) conducting systematic teaching among the resident house church leaders; (4) the prevalence of miracles that the Lord worked among His people in healing, exorcism, and the demonstration of power against demonic or political opposition; (5) outside assistance of radio broadcasting, literature, Bible delivery and fellowship. p. 154

Covell: It is difficult to give an accurate estimate of the number of Christians in China. One segment of the church gains from overestimating and another may gain by underestimating. Apart from these promotional and political problems, there is the question of 'Who is a Christian?'

Of the large group that are always 'hanging on' to a fast-moving 'people movement', how many of whom we hear are professing Christians but do not wish to be identified as such? Given all of these factors, I like a mediating figure of about 15–20 million.

Why growth? To be meaningful these reasons must be unique for China. Many other nice reasons can be given, such as prayer, witness, etc., but these are happening in many places outside of China with *no* growth.

(1) Christianity in China, probably for the first time in its history, is not commonly viewed as foreign by the Chinese people as a whole. To my mind, this is the overriding factor in growth. This has come because of a government and an open Church that wishes outside influence to be curtailed or at least minimized. We have never before seen what Christ could do by His Spirit through the Chinese people on their own. 'Foreign', as I used it here, means 'foreign connection' or 'foreign control' and not so much foreign style, method, theological content, etc.

(2) Suffering in the commitment of Christians to Christ. This has been true of all segments of the church, with no exception before or during the cultural revolution. People have turned to the suffering Christ.

(3) Disillusionment on the part of many younger and older people with the 'zigs and zags' of the government in its implementation of a Marxist policy. They have turned to Christ who offers hope.

(4) Before and during the Cultural Revolution a spiritual vacuum had existed. Now that 'religion' is tolerated there has been a religious resurgence (not just Christian), and every religious group has grown.

(5) The existence of a TSPM has provided an umbrella in its semiofficial relationship with the government, enabling a multitude of house meetings to spring up taking the Christian faith beyond the extension-house meetings related to the TSPM. Without a Church group prepared to be a buffer with the government, to help work out a policy of religious freedom, and to insist on a 'foreign-free' Church, the Church could well have been persecuted out of existence.

(6) The existing churches (and Christians) have contextualized their faith in meeting pressing needs—healing, freedom from demonic [p. 155](#) oppression, forgiveness of sins, hope, community, and (for the more informed) an understanding of how God works in history.

(7) A unified Church in that this is a 'post-denominational' period.

QUESTION TWO:

What are the primary concerns of the Chinese Christians?

Chao: The primary concerns of the Chinese Christians are as follows:

(1) They hope for an improvement in China's religious policy whereby their faith in God and expression of that faith through worship, Christian sacraments, and evangelism can be conducted without persecution.

(2) They hope that those ministers who work within the Three Self Patriotic Movement would be more loyal to Christ and not betray the believers in the name of Christian ministry while actually obeying the commands of the state.

(3) Christians outside China understand their predicament and do not take the words of the Three Self Patriotic Movement at their face value.

(4) Christians from outside continue to pray for them, to supply Christian literature and Bibles, broadcast training and evangelistic programmes to China.

(5) They will be used of God to bring about a nationwide evangelization of the Chinese people.

Covell: The more intellectual believers, as well as many in urban centres, are concerned that Christianity not be 'foreign', that they learn how to better relate in a Christian fashion to the state, and that they identify with the common Chinese people, from whom they often have been estranged in the past, in their concerns. They wish to see China modernized and developed. They wish to see religious liberty implemented evenly over the country. They wish a stable government. Believers in other traditions or in rural areas who espouse a stance of 'Christ against culture', are less optimistic that any on-going satisfactory rapport can be worked out between a Marxist government and the church. They are worried about their children being indoctrinated in school, about inability to evangelize outside the Church, about being discriminated against wherever leftist cadres ignore the constitution, whether what they view as 'legitimate' will be viewed by others as 'counterrevolutionary', etc. My answer is simplistic—Chinese Christians are spread over a continuum and their primary concerns are as varied as those of Christians in even one local American church. [p. 156](#)

QUESTION THREE:

What are the major contributions of the Chinese Church to the worldwide Christian community?

Chao: There are many. I think the first contribution is the realization demonstrated through experience that the Gospel thrives under all political and social circumstances; that the Gospel does not necessarily need a free society to spread; in fact, it spreads even faster and better under conditions of difficulty. The Chinese Church has learned that it is possible to live out the New Testament teachings of Christian community life as the body of Christ without church buildings. The Church is essentially spiritual in nature and so is her ministry. Organization, structure and buildings are only contingent matters which can facilitate church life and church growth, but they can also be hindrances to authentic Christian living.

Secondly, Chinese Christians have learned that suffering is a training ground for Christian maturity, a necessary and integral part of our Christian path of life; that is, suffering is concomitant with discipleship, with following Jesus. So, believers should not fear suffering but accept suffering as training for growth in faith and a deepening understanding of the believer's relationship with Christ, particularly in understanding the profound truths of our union with suffering, death, and the resurrection of Jesus. The profound teaching of Paul about the Christian life cannot be understood without some measure of actual suffering and experience.

Thirdly, suffering has taught the Church of China to learn obedience through suffering as Jesus did. Fourthly, the work of the Holy Spirit is profound and diversified. Wherever and whenever the Christian Church is faced with resistance to the Gospel, the Holy Spirit comes to demonstrate His power in working out miracles and signs so that an unbelieving community will have to accept the reality of God's existence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians in China have also experienced how the Spirit of God validates and vindicates their authentic faith and the reality of their ministry.

Covell: I think that the Church in China, while hardly perfect, has a definite contribution to make to the worldwide Christian community:

(1) Helps us to see that vitality is not related to strength, availability of materials and all those other 'things' on which we depend, but on finding God's strength in the midst of weakness.

(2) Power of prayer.

(3) A sacrificial spirit in serving Christ. [p. 157](#)

(4) A spirit of perseverance no matter what the odds.

(5) A new implementation of *unity* that has profound missiological implications. In most areas, for example, they have different forms of the Lord's table on different Sundays of the month, different approaches to baptism. If they can do this because of their environment and really see it work, what does this say for God's work in general around the world? Everywhere I went they said 'We know little about the future, but it must never again include the old mission society and denominational divisions'.

(6) Depending on God's strength 'to bind the strong man' and thus to be vehicles of God's Spirit to accomplish 'signs and wonders'.

(7) Obedience to Christ. They know very little, but what they do they seem to obey.

Dr. Jonathan Chao is Director of the Chinese Research Center in Hong Kong.

Statement on Peace

Churches in the German Democratic Republic

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This Statement of Peace was made by the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the German Democratic Republic and the Evangelical Church in Germany on the 40th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

(Editor)

(1) On 8th May 1945 the Second World War came to an end in Europe. The full extent of the destruction it had caused became apparent to many people only at this stage. Over 40 million people were dead, and towns and villages had been laid waste throughout the countries directly affected by hostilities, in particular the Soviet Union, Poland, France and Germany. The horrifying reports of what had been perpetrated in the name of the German people in concentration camps and occupied countries now made inescapably clear to everyone the criminal nature of the German regime which had started this war and continued it without compassion to its bitter end. The world was appalled when it learned of the Jewish holocaust.

(2) Under the influence of the Word of God, many Christians saw what happened after this as divine judgement. Germany was divided into zones of occupation. Large numbers of soldiers had to go into captivity. Many refugees were not able to return to their homes, while many others still had to leave theirs at this stage. Those who survived had years of hunger ahead of them. Some had to suffer bitter humiliation. There were different reactions to what was happening among those affected; some experienced it as the collapse of their world, others as liberation. For most people it was both at once.

(3) People at that time were troubled by many questions: How can we cope with the guilt of our past? What can we do to help heal the wounds of the war? How can we help to build bridges of reconciliation between the peoples of Europe after all the atrocities committed and the hatred arising out of them? Where can we find guidance?

(4) Consternation at their profound guilt, combined with contemplation of the promises of God, gave rise to thanksgiving for their own survival in the hell of destruction and the assurance that life had been given anew as a gift of God.

(5) A few months after the end of the war, representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany met with representatives of the ecumenical movement in Stuttgart and declared:

'We are all the more grateful for this visit as we know ourselves to be with p. 159 our people in a great company of suffering, but also in a great solidarity of guilt. With great pain do we say: through us has endless suffering been brought to many people and countries.'

(6) Today, 40 years after the end of the war, we are deeply grateful for what God has done. He has made new fellowship grow between Christians and Christian churches as a