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THE MISSION IN CHINA: HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHURCHES OF CHRIST

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ABSTRACT: *Jesus gave his followers a momentous task: to go and make disciples of all nations. China presents unique challenges to fulfilling the Great Commission. This essay explores three topics: 1) the origins of the Churches of Christ and their mission philosophy; 2) factors affecting Christianity in China; and 3) mission strategies available to the Churches of Christ in contemporary China. The aim is to help accomplish the church's mission in China.*

KEYWORDS: China, church of Christ, great commission, Stone-Campbell

INTRODUCTION

Jesus initiated the church's mission of worldwide evangelism. Before his ascension, Jesus told his followers "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:18-20 NKJV). The Apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, began fulfilling this Great Commission on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Before a large gathering of people from every nation under heaven, Peter delivered a powerful gospel sermon and God added approximately three thousand souls to the church that day (Acts 2). The remaining books of the New Testament explain how the church expanded through missionary journeys and evangelization, under God's providence and guidance.

Missio Dei is a Latin phrase literally translated as mission of God. The phrase describes God's overall purpose in this world. The church's mission, or *missio ecclesiae*, is part of God's mission and includes working to fulfil the Great Commission through proclaiming the good news of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins (1 Cor 15:1-4). Augustine (354-430), the early bishop of Hippo (in northern Africa), was among the first theologians to write about missio Dei, but the term was refined and formalized during a 1952 interdenominational gathering held in Willingen, West Germany.

The Willingen gathering, known as the International Missionary Council, came in the footsteps of a turning point for the Protestant missions in China. In 1949, communist forces under Mao Zedong (1893-1976) defeated China's nationalist army and Mao declared the founding of the People's Republic of China. China became an officially atheist state and quickly expelled all western missionaries. Less than two decades later, Mao attempted to abolish Christianity altogether and the church's mission in China seemed doomed.

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That proved to be unduly pessimistic. Since Mao Zedong's death, Christianity has grown dramatically in China. Although it has the world's largest nonreligious population, China will also soon have the world's largest group of people identifying as Christian.[1] This essay will outline the government's systematic attempts to limit the influence of Christianity in China. The essay will also suggest viable mission strategies that remain for Church of Christ congregations and their members around the globe. The essay's goal is to help the Churches of Christ fulfill the Great Commission in contemporary China.

THE STONE-CAMPBELL TRADITION

The Churches of Christ trace their recent roots to Barton W. Stone (1772-1844), Thomas Campbell (1763-1854), and Thomas' son Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), American ministers who wanted to reestablish the church that began on the Day of Pentecost and replace denominational disunity with Christian unity.

Barton W. Stone began as an ordained Presbyterian minister. In 1801, Stone organized the Cane Ridge Revival, in Cane Ridge, Kentucky (U.S.A.). It was one of the largest camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening, a wave of Protestant spiritual revival that spread across the American frontier and Canada between 1790 and 1840. Although Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists spoke at the revival, the gathering led many attendees to consider disassociating from denominationalism.

During 1803-1804, Stone and a small group of likeminded ministers resolved to restore the biblical "Body of Christ" and they signed a document entitled *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* (1804). *The Last Will and Testament* made several seminal pledges. Church members would "henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven" and disregard "other books that stand in competition with it." Each new local congregation would base their laws on the Bible's example and resume their "native right of internal government." Each local church would "choose her own preacher and support him by a free-will offering." Ministers would "preach the simple Gospel" without mixing in philosophy and the "traditions of men."[2]

Thomas Campbell was also an ordained Presbyterian minister on the American frontier but, like Barton W. Stone, he broke with the Presbyterian Church over doctrinal concerns. Campbell's *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (1809) proposed principles that should guide Christian congregations. Denominationalism should be put aside, Campbell asserted, because "the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." Although the church by necessity exists "in particular and distinct societies … there should be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among them." Nothing should be "inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion, but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them in the word of God," wrote Campbell. Terms of communion and forms of worship should be "as old as the New Testament," the church's "constitution for … worship, discipline, and government."[3]

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Alexander Campbell joined his father's ministry in 1812. He edited two journals: the *Christian Baptist* (1823-1830) and *The Millenial Harbinger* (1830-1866). Campbell intended the journals to espouse the cause of "that ancient sect [simply] called 'Christians first at Antioch,'"[4] and to expose errors in denominational doctrine and practice."[5] The long-lived *Millennial Harbinger* became the mouthpiece of the Stone-Campbell movement, which by 1866 included over 200,000 adherents worshiping in hundreds of local congregations.

Alexander Campbell's book *The Christian System* (1839) is perhaps the most concise articulation on his theories regarding the restoration of the New Testament church. In *The Christian System,* Campbell outlined the successes and failures of the Protestant Reformation and lamented that the reformers were eventually divided by extreme "philosophies, mysticism, and politics." According to Campbell, this led *restorationists* "to abandon the whole controversy about creeds and reformations … to restore primitive Christianity … to build alone upon the Apostles and Prophets, [with] Jesus Christ himself [as] the chief corner." "The Bible alone … can reform the world and save the church," he wrote.[6]

Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell shared a desire to purify the modern church by restoring primitive Christianity. In 1832, the Stone and Campbell groups merged with a handshake at the High Street Meeting House in Lexington, Kentucky. Stone's ten thousand followers called themselves simply "Christians." Campbell's twelve thousand followers called themselves "Disciples," or the "Disciples of Christ."

John Chester, *Pioneers in the Great Religious Reformation of the Nineteenth Century*, engraving, 1885. The print features portraits of Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott (1796-1861).

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DISAGREEMENTS AND DIVISION

Before long, two contentious issues caused disunity among the local congregations sharing a Stone-Campbell lineage. The congregations could not agree on whether the Bible authorized instrumental music in worship services or a para-congregation missionary society.

Many local churches rejected musical instrumentals because they could not find explicit examples of their use in the New Testament.[7] There were sectional divisions. Urban congregations in the northern states were more likely to use musical instruments; rural congregations in the south were more likely to be non-instrumental, or *a cappella* (an Italian term meaning "in the manner of the chapel"). There were also regional disagreements over lay/clergy distinctions, ordaining female ministers, and the Bible's infallibility, but the loudest debate concerned a new missionary society.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) held a national convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1849. Barton W. Stone died five years earlier and Alexander Campbell did not attend. Convention delegates established the American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS). Elected executive officers and a board of directors would oversee ACMS business. They would appoint missionaries, set salaries, and choose mission locations. The ACMS encouraged local churches to send contributions and put forth missionary candidates.[8]

Many congregations refused to accept the ACMS. They raised four primary objections: 1) missionary societies were human (rather than divine) inventions; 2) individual congregations, rather than missionary societies, were God's intended vehicle for evangelism; 3) the ACMS method of raising funds had no scriptural basis; and 4) the missionary society was dividing the church, and, thus, was heretical and inherently schismatic.[9] Between 1849 and 1900, numerous Church of Christ congregations disengaged from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Because of their opposition to the ACMS, by the end of the nineteenth century the Churches of Christ had a reputation for being "anti-missionary."[10]

In 1906, the United States Census Bureau conducted a nationwide religious census. A special agent noticed signs of disunity among the restoration churches and sent a letter seeking clarification to David Lipscomb (1831-1917), founder of The Nashville Bible School and editor of the *Gospel Advocate* journal. Lipscomb responded, "There is a distinct people taking the word of God as their only and sufficient rule of faith, calling their churches 'churches of Christ' or 'churches of God,' distinct and separate in name, work, and rule of faith from all other bodies of people."[11] The 1906 census recognized the "Churches of Christ" as a distinct religious group."[12]

In fact, by the beginning of the twentieth century at least three distinct groups existed among the Churches of Christ: 1) the *Sommer Tradition* centered in Indianapolis, Indiana; 2) the *Texas Tradition*, centered in Austin, Texas; and 3) the *Nashville Bible School Tradition* (or *Tennessee Tradition*), centered in Nashville, Tennessee.[13] The Tennessee Tradition—embodied by David Lipscomb and James A.

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Harding (1848-1922)—embraced God's divine action in the world, including his interaction with specific groups in global evangelizing missions.

MISSION PHILOSOPHY

In a way, each Christian is a missionary participating in God's great mission of salvation. The Apostle Paul exhorted each Christian to use his or her special gifts to serve the church (1 Cor 12). Some Christians focus on purifying themselves by resisting their culture's prevailing values and ungodly influences, and become countercultural pilgrims (1 John 3:3; Rom 12:2).[14] Others become local missionaries, spreading the borders of the kingdom close to home but never serving abroad.[15] Since the time of the Apostles, however, local churches have sent missionaries to evangelize in new communities and countries.

The Stone-Campbell congregations that had opposed the ACMS began to place greater emphasis on international missions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though they did so slowly. By 1930, local congregations in the U.S. had sent around sixty-five missionaries to foreign lands, primarily to Africa, Japan, and China.[16]

John Moody McCaleb (1861-1953) was one of the first Church of Christ members to serve in an overseas mission. While studying at the College of the Bible, in Lexington, Kentucky, McCaleb was inspired to go on a mission to Asia. In 1888, McCaleb met the itinerant preacher James A. Harding (1848-1922) at a religious debate held in Columbia, Tennessee, and they carried on a correspondence for many years thereafter. Harding and McCaleb shared the belief that missionary societies were unscriptural and each man was developing an alternative model for mission support based on New Testament examples. McCaleb explained his system, which he called the *living link*, in a series of lectures in Nashville, Tennessee.[17] Each congregation would act as its own missionary society and select, send, and support its own missionaries (Acts 13:1-3). If a missionary was unable to survive on the local church's support, he or she could find supplementary work in the mission field (Acts 18:3), relying on God's guidance. McCaleb lived according to this system during his lengthy mission to Japan (1892-1941).

John Moody McCaleb, circa 1891.

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In 1891, James A. Harding became the first president of the Nashville Bible School (now David Lipscomb University). Harding was an enthusiastic exponent of global missions and many early Church of Christ missionaries graduated from the Nashville Bible School. Harding encouraged students to go on *faith missions*.[18] Hudson Taylor's (1832-1905) non-denominational China Inland Mission (CIM) had used the faith mission method in China since 1865.[19] CIM missionaries believed their financial support would only come as an answer to prayer in faith (the *faith principle*). They placed their trust in God's divine providence to provide for their needs (the *trust principle*), rather than trusting in denominational support or missionary societies. The Apostles also relied on God to provide for their needs when they went on evangelizing missions (Matt 10:9-10). Faith missions were effective and Bible-based and allowed local Churches of Christ to maintain their congregational autonomy.

In 1924, Harding College (now Harding University) was founded in Morrilton, Arkansas. Harding College's first president was John N. Armstrong (1870-1944). Armstrong was James A. Harding's son-in-law and he became an equally influential advocate of foreign missions. George S. Benson (1898-1991) was in Harding College's first graduating class. The year he graduated (1925), Benson left for a mission in Canton (Guangzhou), China. Benson had read articles written by the evangelist and educator Don Carlos Janes (1877-1944) in the journal *Word and Work* calling on more Church of Christ members to serve in China.[20]

Shortly after arriving in Canton, an uprising of communist belligerents drove Benson from his new home, and he fled to the Philippines. Chinese nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) quickly suppressed the uprising, and Benson returned to resume his mission. He founded the Canton Bible College, which operated until 1936. The situation in China continued to deteriorate as Chiang Kai-shek's National Revolutionary Army battled Mao Zedong's communist forces on several fronts. Benson decided to return to Arkansas and he became Harding College's second president (1936-1965). Because of his experiences in China and the emergence of the Cold War, Benson focused much more on national and international politics than had his predecessor, John N. Armstrong.

Many contemporary global missionaries are also graduates of universities and colleges affiliated with the Churches of Christ.

REFLECTING ON CHINA'S HISTORICAL PROTESTANT MISSIONS

Missionaries from the Churches of Christ can benefit from studying China's historical Protestant mission era (1807-1951). Robert Morrison (1782-1834), an Anglo-Scottish Presbyterian, was the first Protestant missionary in China. He arrived in the Portuguese port of Macau, along China's southern coast, in 1807. At the time, foreigners could only enter China for trade so Morrison preached surreptitiously, evangelizing privately and taking secular jobs to support himself.

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During the next couple of decades, small numbers of western missionaries followed Morrison to China. The Treaty of Nanking (1842) ended the First Opium War between the United Kingdom and China's Qing dynasty. By terms of the treaty, China permitted foreign Christians to proselytize in five official *treaty ports*: Shanghai, Canton, Ningpo (Ningbo), Foochow (Fuzhou), and Amoy (Xiamen). The treaties ending the Second Opium War (1860) opened up the entire Chinese mainland to missionary activity.

One of the greatest challenges the early western missionaries faced was developing the linguistic skills necessary to convey biblical messages to Chinese audiences. Protestant missionaries often spent months in language classes before leaving their home countries and devoted their first few weeks in China to studying with local tutors. Although, in recent years, the number of *English learners* (those studying English as a second language) in China has increased dramatically, the general level of English proficiency remains low. Western missionaries still strive for fluency in Mandarin and/or a regional dialect.

The earliest Catholic and Protestant missionaries translated the Bible into classical written Chinese. The first translations were unpublished Catholic manuscripts of the sixteenth century. British Baptist missionary Joshua Marshman (1768-1837) produced the first Protestant translation in 1822. Robert Morrison and William Milne (1785-1822) produced the second, *Morrison's Bible*, in 1823. Over time, missionaries realized vernacular, spoken Mandarin was becoming a *lingua franca* among China's Han Chinese majority. The first Mandarin Bible translation, *The Peking Version*, was published in 1878. *The Chinese Union Version* of 1919 (revised in 2010) is the most commonly used Mandarin translation in contemporary China. Missionaries also translated the Bible into several regional dialects. Today, China's government permits only one domestic organization to print Bibles: The Amity Printing Company (AMC). Since 1988, AMC has produced over one hundred million Bibles, though most have been exported.

Engraving of George Chinnery's lost painting *Morrison at Work* [translating the Bible into Chinese], 1828.

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Protestant missionaries also distributed religious tracts. The London Missionary Society began printing tracts in 1799 for Protestant missions worldwide; their first Chinese language tracts date to 1824. The American Tract Society was formed in New York in 1825 and supplied Chinese tracts to American missionaries beginning with Elijah C. Bridgman (1801-1861). Bridgman, an Episcopalian minister, was the first American missionary in China. Today, organizations in many countries print Chinese language tracts and, although the government forbids public dissemination,[21] they still find their way to China's congregations.

Protestant missionaries also translated traditional western hymns and compiled Chinese hymnbooks. Robert Morrison's *Sacred Odes to Nourish the Mind* was the first hymnal printed in the Chinese language (1818). *The New Hymnal* is the most popular hymnbook in China's official Protestant churches today.[22] China's authorities, however, discourage public singing of Christian hymns. In 2017, authorities in Zhengzhou, the capital city of the Henan province, detained a Taiwanese minister and a group of Christian worshippers for illegally singing a Christian song in public. The police compelled the local Christians to write letters of confession and gave the minister a stern warning.[23]

CHINESE CHRISTIANITY POST-1949

The Protestant mission era that began in 1807 ended in 1949 with the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War and the expulsion of foreign missionaries. By 1949 there were more than half a million Chinese Protestants (out of a population of more than half a billion), but fleeing missionaries feared the indigenous Christians left behind would not be able to endure the censure of the new communist government.[24]

In 1954, the People's Republic of China (PRC) established the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) to organize all domestic Protestant churches under a strategy of self-propagation, self-governance, and self-support. Protestant congregations were required to register and remain free from unwanted foreign influences.[25] Church activities were to be limited to church premises. The TSPM became a liaison between the government and indigenous church leaders, acting as a conduit for regulation and doctrinal control. A significant percentage of Christians refused to accept the restrictions though, and unregistered *house churches* emerged in rural and remote areas.

The PRC's first constitution stipulated the right to religious belief, but did not stipulate the right to put beliefs into practice, through free assembly or open evangelization. Mao Zedong and his followers, many of whom revered the leader as a pseudo-religious figure, exploited this distinction. In 1966, Mao launched a Cultural Revolution to entrench a communist social order and rid China of traditional elements. Mao targeted the *exploiting classes' four olds*: old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. He gave his blessing to a youthful army called the Red Guards, who publically and brutally persecuted individuals expressing views that ran counter to Mao's Marxist-Leninist philosophy. In 1967, the government outlawed all religions and closed China's houses of worship. During this time, the movement toward secret house churches accelerated.

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Red Guards loot a church during the Cultural Revolution

Thankfully, the Cultural Revolution died when Mao Zedong died. After Mao, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) became the PRC's most powerful leader and lifted many Mao-era bans on religion and religious practice. In 1980, the government established the China Christian Council (CCC), which joined with the TSPM to oversee China's sanctioned churches. The CCC operates theological seminaries, Bible schools, and lay training centers. Since Christianity was de-criminalized, there has been a wide scale religious revival, in both government-sanctioned churches and non-sanctioned house churches.

HOUSE CHURCHES

Historically, the majority of house churches were located in the countryside of relatively remote provinces. Local officials knew of their existence, however, and they were subject to irregular, often severe attempts to control their doctrine. Today, there are house churches throughout China. Underground house church associations in the Henan and Zhejiang provinces send out missionaries within China and even internationally.[26] It is impossible for these larger, urban churches and associations to evade government scrutiny. The Shouwang Church in Beijing, for example, had over a thousand members and was continuously harassed before it was finally shut down in March 2019 for failing to register as a "social organization."[27]

The beliefs and practices of house churches vary considerably. Many have Pentecostal, Charismatic, or neo-Charismatic characteristics.[28] Pentecostal missionaries first arrived in China in the early twentieth century, as members of the Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Missionary Union, and Apostolic Faith Mission in China. They inspired similar local groups, including The True Jesus Church (founded in 1917) and the Jesus Family (1927-1952). Both TSPM and house church services frequently feature Pentecostal and Charismatic practices, such as faith healing and other spiritual gifts.[29] Chinese writers have discussed parallels between Pentecostal spiritual gifts and supernatural aspects of traditional Chinese folk religions.[30]

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House Church in Beijing, 2015

Still, house churches are also places where people practice Bible-based "primitive Christianity." During recent years, authorities have allowed very small groups of family and friends to worship together as they wish in private residences, without registering with the government (though there have also been reports of authorities harassing such groups).[31] There have been cases where a Chinese citizen learned about Christianity from a member of the Church of Christ, such as his or her English teacher, and then passed on the gospel message at home fellowships. Though momentum for the house church movement in China "is not dependent on outside influence, hundreds of [foreign] English teachers, community development workers, and businesspeople add spiritual fuel to the fire."[32]

SINICIZATION AND *CONTEXTUALIZATION*

John L. Nevius (1829-1893) was an American Presbyterian missionary in China for nearly four decades and a pioneering missiologist. Nevius advocated *indigenization*: the notion that Chinese Christians should oversee the church in China through self-propagation, self-governance, and self-support. British clergyman Henry Venn (1796-1873) and American minister Rufus Anderson (1796-1880) had earlier espoused similar ideas. Nevius explained his theories in the *Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* in 1885 and in his book *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (1886). As mentioned, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement follows a strategy of domestic self-propagation, self-governance, and self-support. Unfortunately, the TSPM has taken the three-selves principles in a direction Nevius never intended, striving to eliminate outside influences altogether in service to a political agenda.

The TSPM and CCC encourage the sinicization of the church in China. Sinicize (from the Late Latin term *sinae*, or Chinese) simply means to make Chinese. The TSPM and CCC want to make Christianity more Chinese by fusing biblical theology with China's traditional culture and by explaining Christianity within China's modern contexts.[33] This process occurs in state-sanctioned seminaries and Bible schools, and through state involvement in leadership appointments, clergy selection, and doctrinal interpretation.

The TSPM and CCC recently co-sponsored national conferences entitled "The Sinicization of Christianity," which focused on steps to nationalize the church. At one of the conferences, the director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, Wang Zuoan argued that Christian theology must adapt

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to China's national condition.[34] The authorities called on Christians to properly acknowledge China's cultural traditions and adapt their doctrine to contemporary Chinese nationalism. They also declared their opposition to evangelism by churches historically linked to colonialism or imperialism.[35]

The Christian mission community has long struggled with what Gailyn Van Rheenen described as "the interactive dynamic and tensions between effective contextualization and essence-changing *syncretism*."[36]

> Definitions of contextualization differ depending on the emphasis placed upon scripture and the cultural setting. Models emphasizing scripture usually define contextualization as the translation of biblical meanings into contemporary cultural contexts. … When the cultural setting is prioritized … God's meaning is sought experientially within the culture using the Bible as a guide. … [S]yncretism is the blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture so that Christianity loses it distinctiveness and speaks with a voice reflective of its culture.[37]

Members of the Church of Christ should always emphasis the scriptures and be vigilant that the gospel message does not get lost in the fleeting voices of culture.

Van Rheenen gave an example of experiential contextualization in his book *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhist ethics place emphasis on respecting one's parents and ancestors, or *filial piety*. The continuity of practices associated with filial piety and commemorating deceased ancestors "is perhaps the subject of the greatest theological debate in Asia."[38] Chinese Christians feel social pressure to participate in Buddhist and Taoist burial rites venerating the dead and those who refuse are accused of hypocrisy for violating God's commandment to "honor your father and your mother"[39] (Exod 20:12). There are various ways for Chinese Christians to respond. Henry N. Smith suggested pursuing "the transformational goal of contextualization," by "accommodating traditional forms and values," but reinterpreting them in the light of the Christian theology of the afterlife, consistently with the biblical faith.[40]

During China's Protestant mission era, contextualization was an elusive goal. Philip Wickeri, a prominent Anglican scholar and editor of *Christian Encounters with Chinese Culture*, wrote that missionaries "have always faced challenges establishing a Chinese church. Even as they attempted to accommodate to Chinese culture and engage in dialogue, they continued to be seen as propagating a foreign religion—sometimes strange, sometimes exotic, sometimes imposing, and at times simply ignored."[41]

God "stands above culture,[42] and Christians should not compromise their faith to accommodate incompatible cultural traditions. It is a good idea, however, to employ cultural sensitivity and appreciate that people living in evolving mission fields have diverse backgrounds and diverse plans for fulfilling

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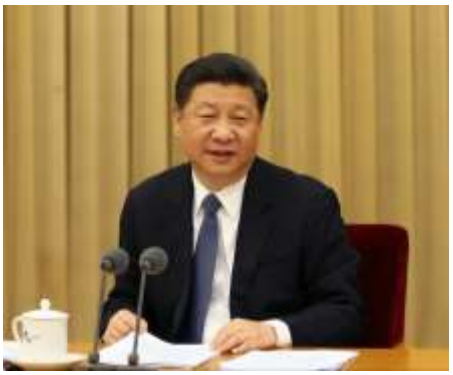
the Great Commission. Christianity's global shift from the North and West to the South and East has challenged Americans, in particular, to rethink their role in international missions.[43] Local Christian leaders in Asia have complained that American missionaries seem indifferent to their visions and strategies for their countries.[44] Jean Johnson, a longtime missionary to Cambodia, cautions missionaries to avoid being *ethnocentric*. Expecting Far Eastern Christians to act as "carbon copies" of their American counterparts, for example, makes it nearly impossible for them to effectively worship and evangelize "by mobilizing their own local resources and cultural expressions."[45]

CHINA TODAY

The current President of China, Xi Jinping is an atheist and the leader of the country's officially atheist communist party. Following his predecessor Mao Zedong's example, President Xi has launched an ever-escalating campaign to limit religion's impact on Chinese society. Local government officials, rather than the central authorities in Beijing, typically enforce China's religious policies. Recently, authorities have stepped up the pressure on house churches that they knew had existed for years. The Zion church in north Beijing, for instance, was "legally banned" for refusing government demands to install closed-circuit cameras in its building.[46]

For the past several years, China's leaders have systematically increased their control over religious activities and personal freedoms when the leaders perceived these as threats to state or communist party interests.[47] This can include imprisonment, physical abuse, and even torture.[48] Officials have demolished hundreds of church buildings in the Shanxi and Henan provinces and have removed crosses from rooftops in the Zhejiang province and elsewhere.[49] Last year, authorities burned piles of Bibles in the Henan province and gave church members forms to renounce their Christian faith.[50] If they refused, they faced imprisonment.

In a recent speech in Beijing, President Xi said he would not slow down his systematic persecution of unsanctioned religious practice. Xi said, "We must resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means and prevent ideological infringement by extremists."[51]



President Xi Jinping says Christianity must adapt to China's socialist society at a religious conference in Beijing on April 23, 2016.

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New regulations came into effect in February 2018. They forbid religious groups from "accepting domination by external forces."[52] Domestic non-government organizations (NGOs), including religious organizations, may receive donations in foreign currency but now must obtain government approval for donations exceeding RMB 100,000 (US$ 15,400).[53] Foreign NGOs may not engage in or sponsor "illegal" religious activities, such as house church assemblies.[54]

China's State Council clarified foreign visitors' rights and restrictions in a "White Paper" dated April 3, 2018.[55] Visitors may 1) attend religious activities at registered churches; 2) preach at places of worship when invited to do so by Chinese religious bodies at or above the provincial level; 3) hold religious activities attended by foreigners at sites approved by government religious affairs departments at the county level; 4) invite Chinese clerical personnel to perform baptisms, weddings, funerals, prayers, or other religious services; and 5) possess religious printed text, audio-video products, and other religious articles that "conform to relevant regulations" when entering China's territory. Visitors may not 1) establish religious organizations; 2) set up religious offices or sites for religious activities; 3) run religious institutions; 4) recruit foreign students studying in China without authorization; 5) recruit followers; 6) appoint clerical personnel from among Chinese citizens; or 7) engage in other missionary activities.

Although these regulations pose serious obstacles, viable pathways remain for congregations and individuals to further the church's mission in China.

MISSION STRATEGIES

The Christian world has changed dramatically in recent decades.[56] Secularization has reduced the number of Christians in western and northern nations. Membership in mainline Protestant denominations has dwindled. The majority of the world's Christians now live in Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, and Asia. China's growing Christian population is an integral part of this global transformation. China is the largest nation in the *10/40 Window*, a geographical area located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator and running from Morocco to Japan. In many regions of this vast area, people have little access to Christian resources or the gospel message. This is an excellent part of the world to focus evangelism efforts. The conclusion of this essay will review a few available mission strategies that Church of Christ congregations and members can pursue to benefit the church in China.

Many church members go to China on short-term visits lasting from a few days to a few weeks. They often travel in groups because it is less expensive, more efficient, and offers a greater sense of safety and camaraderie than traveling alone. A regular single-entry tourist visa to China is usually valid for thirty days. Various non-denominational Christian student groups go on tours that feature prearranged outreach activities for the benefit of young, local residents, such as interactive English culture and language programs. These tours include structured events, such as game playing or scavenger hunts, and informal

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excursions to tourist attractions and restaurants. Trusting friendships develop and there are frequent opportunities to discuss the gospel with people who may have never heard of Jesus.

Specialized groups frequently volunteer to work in government run social welfare institutions, such as foster homes and orphanages. The Bible describes visiting and helping orphans as an aspect of "pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father" (Jas 1:27). Volunteers naturally bond with the children, foster parents, and support staff, as they "reach out to others with God's love."[57] The non-profit organization Bring Me Hope pairs up single volunteers with single Chinese orphans for a week of caretaking, communication, and connecting.[58] Christians in such groups can sow seeds of faith that will continue to grow long after they leave.

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN CHINA

The Apostle Paul was the early church's most ambitious missionary. Paul spent his Christian life traveling in foreign lands, evangelizing, establishing new congregations, and writing edifying letters. He also spent time making tents (Acts 18:1-4). Paul went on faith missions and placed his trust in God to provide for his needs, which God did, in part, by giving him a wage-earning trade. Contemporary Christians can follow Paul's example by going to work in China, joining new communities, and building God-centered relationships.

Many Christians work as English language teachers in China's secondary schools and universities. Although teachers are constrained from evangelizing openly, there are other ways to convey biblical truths. During traditional holiday seasons, such as Christmas and Easter, teachers may speak about Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection and the reasons people commemorate these events. Teachers and students often set up informal tutoring sessions outside the classroom. These present chances to converse about religious issues and study the Bible. Chinese students' deep interest in spiritual matters frequently comes as a surprise to western teachers.

In 2017, there were nearly 500,000 international students studying in China. The number increases approximately ten percent every year. U.S. students may obtain study visas that are valid for up to five years. The classroom and campus are natural places to make friends, share life experiences, and discuss personal beliefs. Christian teachers and international students can be witnesses for Christ, by their lives and words, and assist Chinese students along their spiritual paths.

PLANTING THE GOSPEL

China's communist government fears the growing influence of Christianity, so people worship discreetly in small house churches. First-century Christians also worshipped discreetly. After Jesus' resurrection, his disciples assembled in a house where "the doors were shut … for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19). After Jesus' ascension, his disciples held a prayer meeting in a (seemingly) private "upper room" (Acts 1:12-14). Similarly, persecuted Christians in Rome used underground catacombs as out-of-the-way

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meeting places. These first and second-century fellowships, outside the purview of disapproving authorities, were similar to the clandestine house church fellowships of contemporary China.

Missionaries do not plant large churches in China today, as they did in the past. There are still ways, however, to plant the gospel in the hearts of people who will go on to plant the gospel in the hearts of other people. *Micro churches* (or micro congregations) can thrive in China's restrictive environment, and conform to biblical precedent. These small fellowships may have five or ten members, who meet in private homes, businesses, or any convenient, safe location. China's authorities usually allow foreign residents to conduct small services among themselves,[59] and, in such gatherings, one or two local residents can easily attend without attracting attention or interference. Small-scale worship services include singing, praying, communion, reading scriptures, and preaching. Visitors benefit from the attention received in the smaller group setting.

BIBLES AND BROADCASTS

Ensuring people have Bibles in understandable translations is perhaps the best way to plant the gospel. As previously mentioned, Amity Printing Company (APC) is China's sole producer of Bibles. APC is a joint endeavor of the United Bible Societies and the Amity Foundation, an arm of the TSPM. Officials distribute APC Bibles to sanctioned churches, bookshops, and seminaries. Amity exports most of its Bibles though, and production does not keep pace with domestic demand.[60] The shortage is most acute among poorer people living in rural areas of southern and western China, far from the nearest sanctioned church or bookshop. APC and the United Bible Society formed the China Partnership to provide free Bibles to the poorest Chinese Christians.[61] In addition, the nonprofit organization Bibles for China buys APC Bibles and works with the CCC to see they are distributed in remote areas.[62]

Bibles distributed in rural China

There is still a shortfall though among members of unregistered congregations. Asia Harvest, a non-denominational Christian ministry reaching out to "unreached people groups" throughout Asia,[63] claims

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to have worked within official distribution channels to obtain millions of Bibles specifically for China's house churches.[64]

Since 1983, World Christian Broadcasting (WBC) has transmitted shortwave broadcasts of the good news in Mandarin across mainland China from Anchor Point, Alaska. Anchor Point is at the western end of the U.S. highway system. WBC's eight-hour daily broadcasts—of contextualized gospel messages—have benefitted countless people and bypassed China's government restrictions.[65] Supporting these types of efforts will help many people in China "know the truth, and the truth shall make [them] free (John 8:32).

BENEVOLENCE

The New Testament scriptures are clear that each Christian should act benevolently toward both other Christians and the unconverted (Gal 6:10). There are also examples in the scriptures of local congregations collectively performing benevolent works. A significant percentage of Church of Christ congregations, however, believe the congregation's collected funds should only be used to benefit "the saints," either individually or as a group (*e.g.*, Acts 11:27-30; Rom 15:25-26; 2 Cor 8-9). Individual members of these congregations often support homeless shelters, nursing homes, orphanages, or similar charitable groups, but the congregation, as a whole, does not. Other congregations interpret the scriptures differently and choose to support benevolent organizations with collected funds.

Whichever the case, there are many benevolent groups to support that are doing very good work in China. The Agape Asia Foundation, for example, operates five orphan care centers in China and sends poor children to international medical institutions, such as the Mayo Clinic, for open-heart surgery, cleft palate repair, burn treatment, and other vital procedures.[66] International host families make sure the children make it to their appointments and receive proper care. The Greco-Christian term *agape* refers to the love of God that men and women should emulate. The Agape Asia Foundation, its supporters, and similar medical missions effectuate God's mission in China and embody the biblical directive to care for the sick and orphans (Matt 25:36; Jas 1:27).

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

There are large bodies of literature concerning the historical Stone-Campbell Tradition and China's social and political development during the twentieth century and early twenty-first century. In addition, there are contemporary publication outlets for scholars focused on the missiology and practical, applied theology of Churches of Christ.[67] Very little, however, has been written concerning the Churches of Christ's current mission in China—the world's most populace country—and the ways Churches of Christ can navigate government restrictions while adhering to biblical principles. This essay attempts to address that glaring gap in the literature and, hopefully, it will lead to an increase in related research.

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The Churches of Christ have traditionally looked to the scriptures as their guide and to the New Testament church as their model. In the scriptures, Jesus told his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. Each nation presents its own unique challenges. The Chinese government's historical efforts to control Christianity are troubling and the current movement to sinicize the faith raises concerns. Nevertheless, the increasing numbers of Chinese people drawn to Christianity is very encouraging and their willingness to risk censure by worshipping in unsanctioned house churches is evidence of great faith. The Chinese people are hungry for Christianity and the Churches of Christ must make it their mission to feed that hunger.

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