**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

*By Dr. Riley B. Case*

***THERE ARE MORE CHRISTIANS THAN MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN CHINA***

I was impressed, many years ago, by Kenneth Scott Latourette’s mammoth *History of Christian Missions in China.* It was not a hopeful book. For the most part, the history of Christian Missions in China is the story of failed efforts. The first Christians in China were the Nestorians, followed by the Franciscans, the Jesuits, the Russian Orthodox, more Roman Catholics, and finally the Protestants. By 1928, when Latourette wrote the book, Christianity could claim only 2.5 to 3 million adherents in China, less than 1% of the population. Missionaries had made a lot of mistakes, not the least of which was the effort to “help” China by seeking to impose Western civilization and ways of thinking upon a land which already had its own understanding of “civilization.”

The book was more discouraging because I perused it (I don’t think I totally read it because it is 930 pages long) in the 1960s at a time when it appeared that Christianity, because of the Communist takeover of China, had failed one more time. In 1949 China banned Christianity. I remember a presentation by Eugene Stockwell of the Board of Missions, who had been a missionary in China, who basically pronounced a eulogy over the church in China. The Communists had seized all of the Methodist properties. All the missionaries had been evacuated, and the Board of Missions had no contact with former Methodists in China.

Never mind, at least as far as the progressives were concerned. Progressives, it might be noted, tend to be more interested in matters like equality and inclusivism and brave new worlds than with Christian converts. In the 1960s and 70s liberation theology never knew a revolution it didn’t like. Millions died in the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976 but this was necessary to create a worker’s paradise. In 1978 United Methodism’s Women’s Division offered a book for its mission study entitled *China Search for Community*. Christianity, according to the book, may have died out in China but it had been replaced by Maoist values which had much to commend them. Because of these values “the experience of the People in China today, their way of living and interacting, is in some way “Christian” aside from any considerations about religious adherence or belief.”

The book explains:

*And so one comes to the great paradox that…in China they are implementing the second great commandment far better than has been done by Christendom at any period, while at the same time rejecting altogether the first one….I think China is the only truly Christian country in the world in the present day, in spite of its absolute rejection of all religion*. (p. 55)

For those enamored with social planning and scientific advancement, Maoism should have proved the progressive mantra that as history moves forward learning replaces religious dogma and reason replaces unthinking obedience. The UMW study book explained: “China is…further on the way to the true society of mankind, the Kingdom of God if you like, than our own….We don’t know what back-slidings and failures will occur, but on the whole, I think they are more advanced.”

Progressives have a strange view of the Kingdom of God. Was China under Mao really an example of the coming Kingdom of God? As we all know China would further undergo times of hunger, rerpression, cynicism, despair and the suppression of basic human rights in the 1980s and 1990s. Atheism and secularism offered no hope, no purpose, and, despite government planning, little wealth.

The last twenty-five years, however, have brought major changes in China. China has experimented with some free market principles and, while still with a Communist government, has a rapidly expanding economy. It is presently the chief rival to the United States as a major power on the world scene.

But there is another reality usually overlooked by world observers. China also has a fast-growing Christian Church. Our God, that is, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, acts in unexpected ways. Christianity never did die out completely in China. Despite tremendous suffering and persecution the Church in China has come to life. This is happening without missionaries, without the influx of financial support from western nations, and, for that matter, apart from western civilization. It is doing this without institutional denominationalism, without boards and agencies and bishops and monitoring groups who make sure proper diversity is evident at all levels. It is doing this without Christian colleges and Christian hospitals. It is doing this without Boards of Church and Society telling the political powers how they ought to run the nation.

The *Financial Times Magazine* of Great Britain in its November 8/9 issue carried a major story on Chinese Christianity which opened with these words: “There are now more Christians in China than members of the Communist party.” No one is certain how many Christians there really are in China at the present time but some are estimating about 100 million compared with 86.7 million members of the Communist Party. The article quotes Fenggang Yang, director of the center on religion and Chinese society at Purdue University: “By 2030 China will almost certainly have more Christians than any other country…”

Even more than the United States? According to the article the Communist government is alarmed: Chinese officials often cite the experience of Poland, where they believe the Catholic Church helped destroy communism. Consequently there is presently a new campaign of repression against Christians. This intentional campaign to reign in the rise of Christianity started on April 28 with the demolition of one of the most beautiful Protestant cathedrals in the Zhejiang Province, the Sanjiang Church in the coastal city of Wenzhou. Along with this has been harassment, removal of crosses, and arrests. The official explanation has to do with zoning violations and building codes but few persons buy that argument. Isn’t it the Christians who are causing the trouble in Hong Kong with their demonstrations? (a reality not recognized in the U.S. media reports of the demonstrations). Furthermore, the Christians in China are not the older, mostly female, mostly uneducated peasants of rural areas, the types of persons that characterized Christians before the revolution, but educated and financially secure young people. They may represent only 7% of the population but it is a significant 7%. 11.8% of the people of Hong Kong are Christian. 10% of Wenzhou’s population are Christians. (China”s population is 1.3 billion.)

We would wish to have more contact with our Chinese sisters and brothers in Christ. The pastors have little theological training since there are no opportunities. Roman Catholics are cut off from Rome. Protestants are cut off from denominations in other parts of the world. We know that the Church in China tends to be charismatic and millenarian. There are portions caught up in a prosperity gospel. There are other parts that are synchronizing with Chinese folk religion.

All the same the work of God carries on. It may not be a bad thing that China’s Church has little contact with the west. Moral standards are in flux in America. The traditional understanding of marriage is being undermined n America. Freedom is becoming license in America. In the west the test is whether growing secularization will mean the demise of religion. In China the test is whether the rise of Christian faith will mean the demise of atheism and secularism, and perhaps even Communism.

Stay tuned.