

we learned about changes in Christian thought over the last few decades. We saw a progression from traditional Chinese intellectuals paying attention to “ultimate concern” (the purpose of life) to issues concerning how to deal with real-life problems, to the more recent developments concerning ways the church and Christian worldview can impact a broken society. This progression demonstrates how intellectuals have moved away from being “cultural Christians” to those who are able to see the world and analyze it from a Christian viewpoint.

For historical, geographical and theological reasons, house churches include people from all strata of

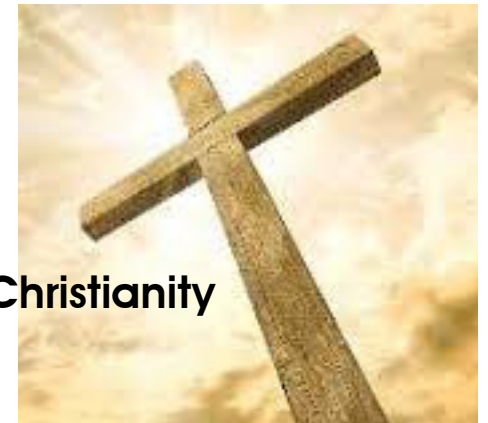
society. Most people in the church have never before experienced a church closing down. If we review Chinese church history over the past more than a hundred years, there is only one other time when the church has been banned. History tells us that the church will never be closed forever. Although government powers may try to destroy the church, they cannot stop people seeking after God and the salvation He offers. It is even more impossible to deprive people of the right to worship God forever. One day, closed churches will be reopened. They will welcome more people to come and learn of God’s mighty works and to worship Him. Can mere man close doors that have been opened by God?



Prayer Letter

July / August 2019

The Development of Christianity in China



On May 18 this year, a well-known house church was banned and ordered to pay a fine of RMB 25,000 (about USD3,700). The next day was Sunday, and dozens of law enforcement officers entered the church to post punishment notices, and also prohibited people from entering to worship.

This church has a long history: the first pastor was installed in 1900. This man’s fourth generation descendent - who was born after the Cultural Revolution - quoted the Bible to the officials: “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple”. (1 Corinthians 3:17, NIV)

For more than a year now, there have been frequent church closures all over China, but this situation has been rare for some years.

Since the reopening of the church in 1979, Christians have been fairly active for almost forty years. However, since last spring, due to the official implementation of the new “Regulations on Religious Affairs,” we have heard a lot of negative news from churches in different provinces. How do we understand the situation in view of these reports? How do we pray intelligently for the church under pressure? Between September 2018 and June 2019, we have written some brief introductions and analysis on the development

of Christianity in China. We have looked from different perspectives, with a view to inspiring readers and letting them see the wonderful work of God during this process.

In our September 2018 edition, we looked at the China Evangelistic Network (CEN) as an example of growth in a rural church network. We remembered that the struggles the church is undergoing today are like those that are a part of its history. Our description of CEN showed how Christianity developed from the rural areas in the Central Plain provinces, dividing into “shepherding districts”. We then saw how they worked with urban churches to plant migrant worker churches. Finally, we talked about their efforts in taking the Good News cross culturally. In 1998, the China Evangelistic Network and other rural networks published the *“Chinese House Church Belief Doctrine Manifesto”* (a landmark Chinese Church document), allowing the world to see the inner strength of the Chinese Church.

In the October 2018 edition, we introduced Centennial Church in Ningbo, and learned about the development of another aspect of Christianity in China during the last forty years – the “three-self church”. Centennial church was not only the first church that reopened in China after the Cultural Revolution, but the building of the church in 1948 was to commemorate the centennial of the Anglican mission in Ningbo -

hence the name. Interestingly, in the spring of 1951 it was the first church to sever relations with the West and embark on the “three-self” road.

The story of “Centennial Church” shows us the real reason why the “three-self” church grew: it was driven by believers who adhered to traditional Christian theology. Whether “three-self” church or not, what really drove the development of Christianity was revival among evangelical believers.

Our November 2018 edition, after introducing the traditional “house” and “three-self” churches, discussed the topic of contextualization in the Chinese church. The rise of social gospel beliefs versus fundamentalism in the twentieth century had far-reaching implications for the development of Chinese Christianity. This was especially true after 1949 when this controversy was co-opted by the “Three-Self Patriotic Movement”, which highlighted it.

The Chinese church cannot be completely represented by the three-self church. In 2018, a group of widely representative pastors issued a joint statement: “The Christian church in China unconditionally believes that the Bible is God’s Word and revelation. It is the highest authority of all teaching about righteousness, truth, salvation and sovereignty. If the will of any political party, government legislation or human orders directly

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Christians are moving away from the values of their original culture towards a more Christian cultural paradigm. Modern Chinese culture is a blend of tradition and secularism, a culture that pursues material benefits. But we thank the Lord, that even in this hostile cultural environment, many Christians are living out a biblical worldview.

In the March 2019 edition, we looked at “shepherding of the house church”. Due to increasing external pressure, the space for house churches to operate has shrunk, so many house churches have split into small groups to continue their ministries, which includes Sunday worship in small groups. Most ministers and Christians have not been too frustrated by this change, and have not lost hope. They continue to look to the Lord for His leading. They firmly believe that God the Father is purifying the church, and will continue to use the church mightily to be a blessing to the Chinese people.

April 2019’s edition discussed “Chinese Religious Sentiments and the Pursuit of Truth”. Traditionally, Chinese society has not been a religious one. It has been built on the thoughts of Confucius, based on right relationships. People build and maintain their social networks through relationship building and family ties. Participation in religious activities is subjective, according to individual needs

and understanding, or consists of seeking “spiritual experience” through ever more powerful idols. Although atheist indoctrination has caused modern Chinese to have poor understanding of religious matters, it cannot remove the inherent religious sentiments within their hearts. The worship of idols does not provide a true foundation for living. As “spiritual beings” they must seek truth, and they search for transcendent religious experiences. These are reasons why Christianity has grown in importance and has gradually become the fastest growing religion in China.

In the May 2019 edition, we saw that a recent survey on age dispersion revealed that at this time the vast majority of Christians were born in the 1960s. Although most only came to faith in the last twenty years or so, they were the generation that lived through the great famine and the Cultural Revolution. They were educated in the 1970s, and experienced the opening of China after the Cultural Revolution, which has led to the problems of materialism today. This group of people have the most thorough understanding of the deep-seated problems of contemporary society, and also the deepest experiences of modern Chinese life. They have become the stable foundation of the Christian community, and will not be easily shaken by external turmoil.

In last month’s edition, we saw three examples of Chinese intellectuals’ search for the truth. From them,

27 Pray for Chinese students who are studying in overseas seminaries. Some graduating students recognize that the road to serving in China is very challenging, despite their clear calling to serve back home. May the Lord open doors for them.

28 Pray for Chinese students studying in US seminaries, some of whom have learned that their home churches are either closed or being closely monitored. May the Lord grant them strength and wisdom.

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conflict with the teachings of the Bible and the gospel, we have the responsibility to obey God and not man, and to teach all members of the church to do the same.”

In the December 2018 – January 2019 edition, we focused on the “urban church”. Most urban Christians were born after the 1970s, and are people who did not go through the brutality and trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Since the reopening of universities in the 1980s, they have been deeply influenced by individualism and materialism. Some listened to gospel radio broadcasts and some were

29 Pray for brothers and sisters serving cross-culturally this summer. May the Lord grant them safe journeys and blessing on their work.

30 Pray for teachers who will visit their students during the summer, to show them care even though they are not allowed to teach them. May the Lord bless their journeys and enable them to be channels of blessing to the students and their families.

31 Pray that Chinese pastors who serve faithfully in various ministries will find times of rest with their families and be renewed in every way.

exposed to Christian teaching on campus. God worked in their lives and drew them to Christ. Although only a small percentage of the population, some were transformed by their experiences during the summer of 1989 and as a result they became believers in Christ. In this way, emerging urban churches have been steadily growing, significantly increasing the number of “house churches”.

The February 2019 edition focused on “Biblical Family Values”. Through in-depth investigation of three cases, we found that Chinese

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Prayer Points

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1 Pray for brothers and sisters whose churches have been closed recently. May they experience His presence during this difficult time.

2 Students at Christian schools are impacted by the closing of many churches. The prospect of not having Christian education and being forced to learn atheism will leave an indelible impression on their hearts. Pray that parents and teachers will be able to help students understand God’s ways and guidance during this period.

3 Some churches are quietly organizing camps and Bible classes during the summer, in spite of an increasingly challenging situation. May the Lord watch over these events.

4 Some wealthy Christian families may go abroad to attend Christian family camps during the summer. May the Lord grant them safe journeys and encouraging times together.

5 Some migrant workers in the south have been forced to return home due to lack of employment. Some find it difficult to adapt to life back in rural areas; may the Lord help those workers who are

Christians to start a new life in their hometown, and to support other workers doing the same.

6 Pray that God will look after the pastors who are staying behind in urban churches. There have been challenges in their ministry and daily life, due to the departure of a large number of people from their church congregations.

7 Many foreign NGO workers have been forced to leave, so local workers are burdened with extra workload. They are also having to cope with government officials assigned to be leaders in their organizations. This means they are unable to develop their work based on biblical principles. They do not want to leave the work and people they have served for many years behind, so pray that local workers in Christian NGOs can trust and depend on God during this difficult period.

8 Pray for NGO workers who are serving minorities in the southwest. Although they are suffering from increased interference, they are still determined to not use bribes to achieve their purpose, but insist on doing what God has called them to do in the right way.

9 Pray for an education team who have been serving children in the Northwest region. Their work site was burned down in strange circumstances and they were forced to stop their ministry as a result. They are now seeking ways to visit the students and their families individually in order to show their care for them.

10 Pray for a Christian drug rehabilitation center in the south. Due to increased pressure, they had to close down this center. May the Lord protect and guide drug rehabilitation work in China.

11 Pray for a Christian family who have been fostering a number of street children. The local authorities have taken the children to government orphanages, despite their refusal to leave. May the Lord guide these families to have the most appropriate response under these circumstances.

12 Pray for Christian teachers in China, as a new reward system has been set up for students to report any “inappropriate action” of their teachers. Christian teachers are being punished for discussing religion in class.

13 Pray for two Christian university teachers who have been suspended because of their faith. May the Lord prepare suitable employment for them after the summer.

14 Many university research projects related to Christianity have been stopped due to changes in circumstances, and they have not been funded. This is very discouraging to those who are studying for their degrees. Pray that those who now have to change their research subject will continue to trust in God to help and guide them.

15 Pray for Chinese pastors who have been arrested for spreading the gospel. May the Lord strengthen them and grant their family members grace to endure government surveillance at home.

16 Remember the pastors of churches that have closed; many of them have been blacklisted as ‘untrustworthy’. This means they cannot purchase plane or train tickets, their mobile phones are monitored, and their social media accounts are cancelled. Pray that they experience the Lord’s presence and become stronger in Him in spite of this social isolation.

17 Many world class pieces of literature have been re-translated recently with words such as “God”, “heaven” and “Bible” either edited out or deleted, in order to exercise tighter control on people’s thoughts (especially faith related ideas). The expunging of Christianity has reached the sphere of culture. May God have mercy on China and its people.

18 Pray for brothers and sisters who have committed themselves to literature ministries - they are facing increasing pressure. There is a very small likelihood of Christian literature being published and many of their social media accounts are stopped. Pray that they will grow spiritually and experience God in a deeper way during this time of struggle and isolation.

19 Give thanks for the faith of pastors who have been forced to close their churches. Although they do not know when the dark times will end, they are convinced that more and more Chinese will soon hear the story of God’s love for China.

20 Pray for Christians who are committed to pursue a career in education; may God give them strength. The principal of a large Christian school opened his own home for classes after his school was closed and rented some apartments as student dormitories at his own expense.

21 Pray for graduates of Christian high schools who are going abroad for further education. Pray that the Lord will watch over them and help them grow spiritually as they experience an open and free environment for their faith - for the very first time.

22 Praise the Lord that committed Christians are staying in rural minority areas to serve in medical and educational services, despite immense pressure. May the Lord strengthen their work.

23 We thank the Lord for calling younger generation Christians to serve Him in education. Pray for a Christian high school student who is considering a career in education.

24 The US intends to restrict Chinese who have a military background from getting a visa to study or do research in the US. As a result, the Chinese Ministry of Education has issued a warning to those who plan to study in the US. This will impact students and researchers, as well as ministries to overseas students. Pray for those serving in Diaspora ministry to be flexible during times of change.

25 Remember our diaspora workers who are serving Chinese worldwide. May the Lord raise up more workers for this ministry.

26 Pray for churches who are serving Chinese diaspora, particularly in Europe and North America. Pray that, in spite of tensions between the Chinese government and western countries, the students and new immigrants from China will experience love and acceptance.