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Is the Chinese church Chinese enough?

The Search for a more Chinese Theology

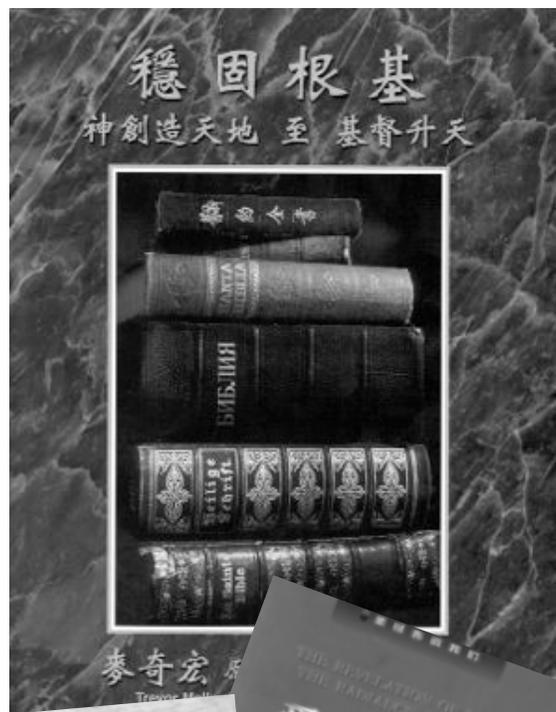
Alex Buchan

A recent visitor to the Mu'en Three Self church of Shanghai confided, "Gosh, I didn't expect it to be so Western—not after hearing them say they were an indigenous church." A choir in red robes, clergy in white, hymns like "Onward Christian Soldiers" and a sermon out of a book of Campbell Morgan, all combined to give the impression to the visitor he had stepped back in time. He said, "It reminded me of London in the 1930's, when I used to go to Westminster Chapel."

The experience is little different among many house churches. Favorite reading fare is *Streams in the Desert* and *My Utmost for His Highest*—two sturdy pillars of evangelical devotion. Much of their theology is drenched in Dispensationalism and garnished with Creationism and Inerrancy—all theological exports from Europe and North America. Their style of preaching is old-hat evangelical, full of task lists about how to earn the blessing of God—holiness teaching with a Chinese accent.

But is that all there is to the Chinese church? Is it really just a Western church underneath, with its theology, hymnology, and ecclesiology borrowed from abroad? Is there a Chinese theology? Has Christianity taken a truly indigenous form in China today? Is the Chinese church Chinese enough?

These concerns have recently coalesced around the issue of theology, which is seen as foundational to everything else. And the language of crisis is beginning to be used. Long time leader of the TSPM, Bishop K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxin) declared at the recent 50th anniversary of the Three Self that "the crucial and most important step for successful church administration is the development of a genuine Chinese



“If we do not develop a better Chinese theology, then the church will be irrelevant to the massive social changes sweeping China today.”

Never Ends, are being foisted upon many of China's 18 seminaries as a model for bringing this new theology about. But Ting is not alone. According to the Rev. Baoping Kan, Vice President of Beijing Theological Seminary, "Our present day theology is too Western, too outdated, and if we do not develop a better Chinese theology, then the church will be irrelevant to the massive social changes sweeping China today."

The house churches are more sanguine, though that may be more due to the fact that very little theological reflection goes on at all. Yet among the younger, better educated house church leaders of the cities there is a growing unease. Said a Xian based Bible teacher who had studied theology abroad, "Older converts were equipped to deal with Communism and resisted heroically; but today the converts must cope with Consumerism, and they do not know how. We must have a better theology or our faith will not connect to this disturbing, bewildering society we find ourselves in."

What is the nature of this theological crisis in China's church today? We assess this first in the official Three Self church, and secondly among the house churches, where the problems take a different form.

A. The search for a Chinese theology in the Three Self

That there is a search is shown by the frequency of writing on the topic in the official Three Self theology magazine, *Tianfeng*, and in the Amity News Service, particularly over the past three years. The arguments for a new theology can be examined in four areas of

crisis: historical, intellectual, social and ecclesiological.

1. Historical crisis. The argument from Ting et al is that the problem began when Western missionaries insisted on planting Christianity in such a way that new converts had to repudiate Confucian culture to become Christians, with the result that to be more Christian, one has to be less Chinese. Baoping Kan, writing in *Word and World* in 1997 complains that the Western missionaries brought the most extreme form of Calvinism (TULIP), with the result that "Chinese Christians cannot remain an integral part of their own society." Thus there is a culture vs Christian divide that needs to be dismantled—the legacy of the colonial missionary.

2. Intellectual crisis. The problem here is that very few have the time to actually do any theology thinking in present day China. Kan in the same article reckons a genuine Chinese theology was getting underway in the fifties with thinkers like T. C. Chao and Y. T. Wu, but their project was derailed during the Cultural Revolution. The eighties and nineties have seen churches re-opening at such a rapid rate that it is all the Three Self can do to train young pastors for all the new congregations. The pastoral crisis has overshadowed the theological crisis. Even in the seminaries—the normal place for theological reflection—the candidates are too young, and too poorly educated, to attempt theological reflection. As the Vice President of Wuhan Seminary confided with a smile, "All we can do is turn out preaching machines, for that's what our graduates have to do."

And if few have the time, still fewer

have the inclination. Writes Mr. Ji Tai, former associate dean of studies at Nanjing Theological Seminary, "...there exists in the church a prevalent thinking that 'to despise rationality is equivalent to richness in one's spiritual life.'" Some Three Self lecturers complain that the fundamentalist nature of the old theology has resulted in an anti-intellectualism among China's Christians.

3. Social crisis. "China is developing. The Chinese church is growing. Under the surface, however, these two significant movements are not integrated." So wrote Baoping Kan in 1997. He explains further in May 2000, "Chinese society is full of new problems, massive corruption, drugs, unemployment, and it needs ethical guidance, but because the church is so fundamentalist in its theology, it takes no interest in the social system, and therefore gives no lead." It is the essential pietism of the old theology that galls these new theologians, since it refuses to engage with the world at large, and Christianity is perceived as something you do privately, but has no relevance to the public sphere. Thus China's social crisis goes unaddressed by the very people that could help the most—the Christians.

4. Ecclesiastical crisis. According to Bishop Ting et al, a new theology is needed to "safeguard Christian unity." Writes Kan, "One of the reasons people are attracted to heretical groups is that so often the theology taught in their own churches is antiquated." Predictably, heresies are said to be mainly the product of outsiders interfering with the church, but the need for a coherent theology is to ensure that the

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higher echelons of the Three Self give clear guidelines on what kind of church each congregation should be. At the moment there is no such guidance, and local groups must decide by themselves. It is this vacuum of leadership that worries Three Self leadership, fearing that it will surely lead to that great Western evil—denominationalism. Thus, they need a new cutting edge theology around which to build the new 21st century church, lest each congregation or province goes its own merry way and there is a loss of unity and uniformity.

One can see the stakes are high. For these thinkers, a new theology is urgently needed for China to have a church capable of combating heresy and staying unified, and reaching out to Chinese society and staying relevant. Galloping growth is not enough. Says Rev. Kan, “People are running to Christianity now because it is so self-confident, full of certainties, but this sureness is not well based, and will wither, and then where will they be?”

Only a brief critique of the above argument can be attempted here. While all agree that more theological reflection is needed (who wouldn't?), many object to the model of theological reflection Ting and his circle insist upon. Obviously any theology seeks a correlation between word and context, but the fear is that Ting's wish is to begin from context, rather than from revelation. Following the context-driven theologians such as Hick, Kaufman and Tillich represents a form of liberal accommodation to the culture that distresses many more conservative thinkers in China, especially when the likes of T. C. Chao and Y. T. Wu are quoted so approvingly. Chao, for example, believed that the Confucian belief in the innate ability of humans to be good refuted the Calvinist view that humans would always fail to attain God's love through their own efforts. And Wu began to recast the faith in the light of Marxist-Maoist teachings in the fifties. When Ting talks of “making theology compatible with socialism,” alarm bells are rung in the minds of evangelicals, including some not quite so conserva-



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tive ones. The concern is that the new theology called for is not new in the least, but is rather a dated and warmed-over Social Gospel theology, which fails to understand that not all evangelical theology is fundamentalist in tone or nature. As a student at Nanjing Theological Seminary said after hearing Ting preach that Christ was not physically resurrected because modern science made such a notion absurd, “His views reflect the narrow theological experience of his own liberal education rather than the theological diversity of Evangelicalism.”

Another objection to the new theology recommended is that it smacks of elitism. If the culture is the new starting point for theology, which culture are you talking about? Is it the culture of intellectuals, of Confucianism and of Socialism? Or is it the ancient culture of the land, spirit worship, ancestor worship and spells? In most cases the new theology envisaged would deal with modernity, science and ethics—issues of the city—but perhaps the really important engagement with folk culture is being neglected—issues of the village!

A third objection has to do with the sheer vagueness of it all. Said a lecturer in a northern Chinese seminary,

“They keep telling us the old theology is bad, but they don't really tell us what the new theology is.” It is true that most of the writing thus far from the new theologians majors on critique rather than construction, though in their defense it might be said that one has to be done before the other. But critics surely have a point. Ji Tai in an article entitled “Is there a Chinese Theology?” spends three pages saying what is wrong with the old theology, then finishes up thus: “We need to probe deeply, using our reasoning and developing our own theories systematically. This is the kind of theology that the Chinese church needs. Together we try to learn God's will for our age and time. The Chinese church needs theology. The construction of Chinese theology needs the participation of everyone of us.”

Beneath these bromides very few specifics are offered, though as we shall shortly see, it may be that Ji Tai's heart was not in it. The clichés hide the fact that although everyone is bidden to do the new theology, very few actually seem to be producing it.

A final objection is to do with trust. The fact is that Ting and those he handpicks to spread his message are al-

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The Roots of Bishop K.H. Ting's Theology

The 1930s up to the Cultural Revolution

Tony Lambert

The last year has seen the promotion by Bishop K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxin), former head of both the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), of a campaign for “theological construction” that is “compatible with socialism.” Pastors and seminary students in many places across China have been encouraged to attend meetings to study Ting’s *Select Works* that was first published in 1998. Ting has strongly attacked evangelicals (whom he admits are the overwhelming majority in the Chinese Protestant church). In the preface to a new book, *Love Never Ends*, published in September 2000, he has also attacked the centrality of justification by faith, the reli-

aroused strong opposition from evangelicals in China and serious concern overseas.

It is helpful, therefore, to understand the background to Bishop Ting’s long career and his developing theology. Although retired from his posts as head of the TSPM and CCC, Bishop Ting clearly retains a significant influence and appears bent on making a permanent mark on Chinese theology.

Bishop Ting was born in Shanghai on September 20, 1915. This was only four years after the overthrow of the Qing dynasty by Sun Yat-sen but already China was sliding into the chaos and misery of the Warlord era. His father was a banker, and both parents were Christians. Ting’s maternal grandfather had been an Anglican minister. The boy was sent to St John’s University

Ting appears to have chosen a theology of political liberation in preference to the evangelical Gospel that stresses personal transformation through faith in Christ.

Wu was influential in the YMCA in Shanghai and between 1938-1943 Ting was active as Student Secretary of the Shanghai “Y.” This was during the difficult years of the Japanese occupation. Ting encouraged young Christians and non-Christians to meet together to discuss social and political questions, and hold Bible studies.

In 1979 Ting related to a visiting Canadian, Dr Gardner, his “conversion experience” from orthodox Christian faith to a political social Gospel: “There was one type of Christian belief which we felt to be irrelevant and we, or many of us gave it up. The type which said that all the trouble in China was due to something wrong in the hearts of human beings and therefore the first thing that Christians wanted to do was to change people’s hearts.... We moved to a Christian faith which has something to say about the transformation of the social system.”³

In 1942 Ting was ordained as a priest in the *Sheng Gong Hui* (Anglican Church of China). In the same year he married Kuo Siu May from Wuhan who had studied at St Mary’s Hall, an Anglican high school in Shanghai and at Beijing (then Yenching) University. For the next three years he served as pastor of the International Church in Shanghai. However, in 1946 he moved to Canada to become the Missions Secretary of the Student Christian Movement. After a year, they moved to New York where Ting completed a Master’s Degree at Union Theological Seminary, then, as now, a bastion of “progressive” theology.

In China the savage civil war between Communists and Nationalists was fast reaching a decisive conclusion. In May 1949, Ting went to Prague to attend the Stalinist-dominated World

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ability and inerrancy of the Bible and the necessity for faith in Christ, downplaying the difference between faith and unbelief.¹ Nanjing Seminary, the most prestigious in the country, has been purged of evangelicals, first, in 1999 when three students were dismissed ostensibly for refusing to sing Communist Party anthems in the seminary chapel: three prominent graduates then resigned in protest. In 2000, various members of the faculty were removed or sidelined. The most prominent was a promising young evangelical theological teacher, Ji Tai, who was dismissed last June.² This politicized campaign for “theological construction” can therefore not be dismissed as a gentlemanly theological debate. It has already seriously impacted people’s lives. Ting’s theology and actions have

in Shanghai, which was run by the American Episcopal Church, to study engineering, but later changed to theology at the urging of his mother who prayed that her son, too, would become an Anglican minister.

During the thirties Ting first came into contact with Wu Yaozong, who later became the first leader of the Three Self movement. By his own account, Ting was greatly impressed by Wu’s radical theology that encouraged him to sideline his Greek textbooks and the evangelical “Thirty-Nine Articles” of the Church of England in favor of the “question of national salvation.” Wu told him that “only after the social system in China underwent a basic change would objective conditions emerge to make personal transformation possible.” Thus, from his youth,

Peace Council where he again met Wu Yaozong. Wu, Ting later said, talked to him at length about the role of the church in the new Communist society and the important place of the Communist Party's "United Front" policy. Wu also told him that there would have to be "extensive and intensive education" about the new religious policy among all religious believers, the general public and Party cadres.⁴

In 1950 the Korean War broke out. Ting and his family returned to Geneva where they had been living previously, for a further year. Despite the warnings of some Western friends, they flew to Hong Kong and arrived back in Shanghai in late August 1951.

In February 1952 Ting published his first theological article in *Tianfeng*, the mouthpiece of the TSPM. In this he drew a political meaning from God's question to Adam in the Garden of Eden after the fall: "Adam, where are you?" (Genesis 3:6-13). According to Ting, this was a call for political participation by Chinese Christians in the Communist Party's mass political campaigns that caused immense suffering in the fifties and sixties. "Today we are surrounded on all sides by the high tide of the (Party's) 'Three Antis Campaign.' If we Christians confess and repent before God and before the People our own heavy burden will be cast aside. Then we can throw ourselves bravely into this movement of the entire People." Ting stated enthusiastically that the church had failed, but the Party had succeeded under the banner of Mao. "In the era when darkness ruled (i.e. pre-1949) not a few Christians shone like 'candles in a dark room.' But today when 'The east is red and the sun rises' (a clear reference to Chairman Mao taken from the popular Communist anthem) we have no cause for self-congratulation. In the radiance of the People's high morality our (Christian) 'bright lamps' are lusterless. Faced with the manifestation of their high morals and their vast movement opposing every kind of crime we are like Adam, having no way of escaping God's searching question: 'Where are you?'"

Ting also extolled revolutionary Marxist heroes: "Today in farms, in factories and in armed resistance on the front-line (against the UN forces in Korea) ordinary people are producing extraordinary results every moment. Nourished by patriotism 'they out of weakness were made strong and waxed valiant in fight' (Hebrews 11:34). They were those of whom the world was not worthy (v. 38). Inspired by the great spirit of the new democratic nation they have simply become a new kind of people in the world." Although the rhetoric has been downplayed since, this train of thought in which Communist heroes set an example for the church is one which can be found in many of Ting's essays down to the present.

Ting was one of the youngest of a core of generally theologically-liberal church leaders who rallied to the Party under Wu's leadership.

From the middle fifties to the middle sixties Ting often visited Wu Yaozong who had by then become the leading figure in the nascent TSPM. Ting was one of the youngest of a core of generally theologically-liberal church leaders who rallied to the Party under Wu's leadership.⁵

In April 1952, he published a further article in *Tianfeng* comparing the death of Christ to the deaths of revolutionary martyrs: "Whether in German concentration camps, Turkish prisons, villages in old China or on Golgotha's cross 'those of whom the world was not worthy all having obtained a good report through faith received not the promise....' The distant prospect which they viewed from afar by faith has become a reality which we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands in today's new world. Today those who have a new consciousness and new courage march forward in the mainstream of history, causing all the forces of darkness to reel back in panic."

To facilitate the dismantling of the denominational structures, the TSPM held a meeting in Shanghai in August

1952 at which it was decided to close down eleven theological colleges and amalgamate them into the existing Nanjing Jinling Theological Seminary. The TSPM chose the board of directors and Ting was appointed the new principal. Thus began his long association with Jinling that has lasted (with a break during the Cultural Revolution) for over 45 years until the present day.

In the fifties, the students were expected to spend at least two days per week in political studies. In early 1953, Ting reportedly told them that full academic freedom prevailed but it was not "freedom to pervert the scriptures, spread rumors, oppose those fighting for right, or to uphold imperialism."⁶

In 1955, although still only aged 40, Ting was consecrated as a bishop of the

Anglican Church for the diocese of Zhejiang near Shanghai. It should be noted that by that time the Anglican church, as all other church denominations, was virtually defunct as an independent organization.

In 1955 Ting crossed swords with the redoubtable Wang Mingdao, leader of China's independent evangelicals. In a pamphlet, "We, Because of Faith," published in June of that year, Wang attacked the liberal theology of both Wu Yaozong and Ting, quoting their writings extensively to prove his point that there could be no compromise with a liberal theology which denied the basic tenets of the Gospel. A series of articles was then published in *Tianfeng* as part of an orchestrated national campaign to defame Wang Mingdao. In mid-August, Ting published a long article attacking Wang in *Tianfeng* entitled "A Stern Warning to Wang Mingdao." One week earlier, on the night of August 7, Wang and his wife had already been arrested and disappeared into prison and labor camp for a total of 23 years.

In 1956, a brief relaxation in repres-

sion occurred during the famous “Hundred Flowers” Campaign, when Mao at first encouraged people, especially intellectuals, to criticize the Party. Many Christians responded, complaining of discrimination, that children of believers were sometimes expelled from school, that atheistic propaganda was full of abuse against Christianity and so on. A provincial Chairman of the TSPM even opposed the control of religious affairs by the government and said openly that the RAB was bureaucratic and had “restricted religious affairs.”

Ting delivered a lecture to his students in June 1957 just as the “Hundred Flowers” campaign was being phased out. He challenged the Communist stereotyped classification of all ideology and religion as either materialistic or idealistic and attacked the Marxist view that Christianity is an opiate. Despite these forthright criticisms, Ding surprisingly emerged unscathed when Mao unleashed the “Anti-Rightist” campaign soon after.⁷ Most other Christians were not so fortunate.

From the middle-fifties an ominous twilight had fallen across the church in China. Church membership, with some exceptions, dwindled. Many young people, brought up in Christian families, joined the Party. There seemed little future for the church. In 1966, the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution erupted closing down the last few churches. Pastors and religious leaders were beaten, imprisoned and sent to labor camps or to work in factories or in the countryside.

However, Bishop Ting again escaped surprisingly unscathed from the Cultural Revolution. According to his own account, the Nanjing Seminary was closed down and became the headquarters of the Red Guards in that city. Ting was given exceptional preferential treatment in that he was permitted during the latter period of the Cultural Revolution to receive foreign visitors in Nanjing. He was allowed to speak to them as a quasi-government spokesman justifying Maoist policies that had obliterated the institutional church.

In an interview with E. H. Johnson in March 1973, Ting stated that the Red

Guards in 1966 entered his home and church and took books, the cross, and the candlesticks but in a few months it was agreed that religion was to be respected and the books and religious objects were returned. He further told Johnson that ordained professional ministers and church buildings were considered “non-essential” to Christian ministry, (both, of course, had been ruthlessly banned since 1966 at the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution.)

On October 22, 1976, Ting met with Eugene Stockwell at the Nanjing Seminary soon after the death of Mao and the downfall of the leftist “Gang of Four.” Ting stated bluntly that “missionaries were tools of imperialist aggression.” He also stated that: “with the new position and esteem of labor, many of our ministers wanted to identify themselves with the people around them in mental and manual labor. They feel they do not want to be full-time ministers.” He also stressed how “there is a constant decrease in the number of Christians.... With the imperialist background it is understandable that the number of believers would decline.” Because of this “it is unthinkable to maintain a five-year (theological) course for students to educate them in an ivory tower to be a new elite. Christians will not support them anyway.” When asked by Stockwell whether he would agree that Christianity would die out in China Ting stated: “I would not be surprised if that would be the case.”

In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping was beginning to rise to power and “leftist” influence was well on the wane, Ting met with Howard Hyman in Nanjing. He told Hyman that “Chinese Christians today are not eager to hold meetings in church buildings.... The theological and liturgical concepts of building those churches was entirely Western.” Ting also opposed the idea of evangelism of the vast Chinese population: “As far as I can see very few Chinese Christians today think that he or she has a call to evangelize China.... It would not be fruitful, to say the least, for us to talk too much about evangelism, because we would be promoting a

Western commodity.”⁸

Ting admitted to his visitors during the seventies that small numbers of Christians in Nanjing were meeting in homes, but the above comments show clearly that as late as the late seventies he saw no real future for Christianity. His comments read strangely in view of the subsequent massive growth of the Gospel over the past two decades and of the vast building program of churches and seminaries across China which he himself headed in the eighties and nineties.

(Editor’s note: *The remainder of Bishop Ding’s life and thought will be covered in a later issue of ChinaSource.*)

NOTES

1. “Zhongguo Jidujiao Shengjingguan Xueshu Yantao Hui Lunwenji” (“Essays from the Conference on Views of the Bible of the Chinese Christian Church”), *TSPM/CCC*, Sept 2000, pp.1-4.
2. The statements and letters of the students, graduates and Ji Tai have been widely circulated in Chinese on the Internet. See also *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), 28 June 1999.
3. *China and Ourselves*, May 1980, Interview of Bishop Ting by Dr. Gardner in Canada.
4. *No Longer Strangers: Selected Writing of K.H. Ting*, p.155.
5. *No Longer Strangers*, p.10.
6. *Religion in Communist China*, R. Bush, pp.87-88.
7. *The Church in Communist China*, Francis P. Jones, p.139.
8. *New China* magazine, Summer 1979.

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Into the Future

Ding's Theology and China's Church

Danny Yu with Joshua Snyder

Bishop Ding Guangxun's *Love Never Ends*, which has become required reading in China's Three Self seminaries and Bible schools, has created quite a stir both in China and among Christians outside of China. Western evangelical comments on Ding that I have read or heard, especially as regards his theology and promotion of "theological construction" in China's seminaries, are mainly negative. While Western evangelicals have had difficulty with some of the liberal theological posi-

the West understands the evangelical church. Because fundamentalist thought was the dominant theological thought before 1949, Chinese Christians are more fundamentalist in their theological outlook. Conversely, when China's church leaders think and speak about Western evangelicals, they equate evangelicals with fundamentalists. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that nearly all of China's understanding of Western evangelicals comes from the negative reports Western evangelicals put out concerning China and the official church.

China's church leaders see this theo-

Unhealthy Teaching

The Chinese Church also has a very unhealthy teaching about stewardship. Consequently, the church is strapped financially and lags behind in many of its ministry undertakings and opportunities. In the Chinese Church, it is considered unspiritual to teach about tithing.

There are further and unfortunate applications of this theology in the present Chinese Church. For one, a good Christian should not be a good businessman. A successful businessman is not a practicing Christian. Moreover, a good pastor should be poor while an adequately paid pastor is thought of as not suffering for the Lord.

Another component of this turn-of-the-century theology is the church's monastic stance towards social action. In the West, at the turn of the century and before 1949, there was a popular

TO UNDERSTAND THE CHINESE VIEW OF EVANGELICALS

we must recognize that in 1949 China's church lapsed into a sort of theological time warp.

tions Ding has espoused over the years, I, as an evangelical, believe his recent book brings out some significant themes that deserve serious consideration by those who are concerned about the state of Christianity in China.

A Theological Time Warp

In his book, Ding speaks to a basic issue concerning the future of the Chinese Church: China's church is theologically weak. It is stuck in a turn-of-the-century fundamentalist theology that is confused with evangelicalism. To understand the Chinese view of evangelicals we must recognize that in 1949 China's church lapsed into a sort of theological time warp. Because China's door closed to new theological ideas in 1949, the church's theology remained as it was since the beginning of the century. Meanwhile, the church in other parts of the globe advanced in its thinking and theological method, and modern evangelicalism, as we in the West now understand it, came into being.

Christians in China, therefore, are not evangelical in the same sense that

logical time warp as a major challenge that threatens the future of the Chinese church. The church's theological backwardness creates a number of serious problems, especially hermeneutical. Theological beliefs and church practices are created from a passage of Scripture without sound exegesis. Some leaders extract theocratic ideas from the Scripture concerning leadership, which leads to autocratic styles. Related to this is the severe lack of accountability and abuses of spiritual authority in the local church structures. In other instances, church leaders complain that sermons are made by "breaking down" a Chinese word in a Bible passage and attaching significance to insignificant words simply to impress the listeners. For example, a popular evangelistic message in China comes from the Chinese characters for the name of Jesus. Since there are two components, one meaning "two ears" and the other meaning "fish and rice," the message proclaims that if you listen to Jesus with your ears, your stomach will be filled with fish and rice.

distaste for what was called the "social gospel." At times, it struck a raw nerve in the church, which often resulted in the rejection of good works, even good works done in biblical Christian love.

While much of the Western church and missions community has embraced social action as a viable outreach over the last several decades, the church in China is stuck trying to separate the spirit from the mind and body. Their mindset has remained the same as it was prior to 1949, so much so that the Amity Foundation needed to look outside the church when it began its social work. As China evolves rapidly towards a 21st century economy, the Chinese Church finds itself in an embarrassing position of embracing an "anti-intellectual and separate-from-society" culture.

Ding's Response

It is to this fundamentalist state of the church that Bishop Ding speaks. I believe he has three immediate concerns in mind.

First, cults threaten the existence of the church. That the TSPM is an orga-

nized, structured, unified, marching-in-unison body is a myth. There is much autonomy on the local level. For this reason, it is susceptible to cultic influences. The ominous presence of cults demand much greater theological rigor on the part of the Chinese Church.

Second, as China opens up even more, intellectuals flock to the church in increasing numbers. But the church is not ready for them. The background of the rural church and the training of the pastors, along with the spiritualistic and anti-intellectual bias, create an obstacle to embracing Christianity for many intellectuals.

Third, Ding sees the church's continued resistance to social action as "bad timing." For the last several decades, he has worked towards legitimizing the church in society. Indeed, he believes that the church can have a strategic role in the transformation of Chinese society if only it will embrace its social responsibility. If the church does not involve itself in society, it will remain at the lower end of the social and political totem pole. Thus, he wants a Christian label on good works done in China.

Consider, for example, the church's potential to speak to this society educated in an atheistic environment. To it the doctrines of original sin, justification by faith, redemption and predestination are foreign. However, Chinese culture has historically valued high morals and good deeds. And the church can easily relate to that. Therefore, Ding says, "Given the state of the Church in our country, the starting point for contextualization seems to be the restoration of the ethical and moral content of Christianity."¹

Church and Society in Communist China

I believe Bishop Ding's goal in writing his book is to shape the Chinese Church so it can speak and minister to the Chinese society under a communist regime. For over 50 years Ding's emphasis has been on making the church Chinese. While Western evangelicals may not appreciate the anti-Western mission rhetoric and condone the process by which this transformation was

achieved, the TSPM can, however, claim at least some success in this area and has become a viable and significant entity in China. Ding's new book moves on a new plane: make the church thrive in a communist society.

As one who has been thinking about the relationship of Christianity and communism for over 20 years and who has tried to work through the issues on a daily basis with our own ministry in China, I am very excited about Bishop Ding's perspective. Despite the difference in theological orientation, I subscribe to his presupposition: we must find ways to relate the Gospel to the present situation. I grew up in the 50s and 60s believing that the political regime in China would one day be changed; then China would be evangelized. Obviously I no longer hold that view. Twenty years ago I was called to ministry in China and resolved to find ways to work with the existing reality. After two decades of involvement and observation, I am glad to be able to say that it is possible to do so.

It is easy for Western evangelicals to get agitated about Ding's different theological and political persuasions. Without downplaying these significant differences, I would nonetheless like to suggest it is possible to view Ding as a missiological pioneer, for he is indeed helping us chart new territory in the construction of the Christian church in communist China. His book has raised a valid issue regarding Christianity's future in China. For 50 years, Ding's idea of "selfhood" for the Chinese Church has not seated well with Western evangelicals, who have found themselves at odds with the TSPM. But will we again miss a divine opportunity as the Chinese Church enters a new era and a new missiological frontier?

Danny Yu is president of Christian Leadership Exchange and Educational Services Exchange with China. Joshua Snyder is a research assistant with ChinaSource.

End Note

1. Bishop Ding Guangxum, *Love Never Ends*, Yilin Press, April 2000, p. 334.

Is the Chinese church Chinese enough Continued from page 3

ways suspect in the eyes of most of China's Christians, and that includes Three Self lecturers, many of whom resent recent injunctions to study Ting's thought. It is a mistrust that goes all the way back to the 1950's, and constantly resurfaces in ways that baffle Western observers. When Ting visited Fuller Seminary in November 1994 he was challenged by Chinese students to explain why he had written vituperative articles in the fifties against Wang Ming Dao, the independent churchman who refused to join the Three Self. He merely smiled and said, "Well, it wasn't that bad, and anyway, those were the times"—a defense that incensed the students, and some of the more knowing faculty. Said Dr. Tan Che Bin, "He called Wang Mingdao a lackey of Japanese imperialism, which was a charge that meant the death penalty then, so its very inadequate to brush it all off as a little bit of youthful exuberance." Most of China's Christians wait for Ting to repent more fully of past actions before any of his statements will be studied seriously.

Recent controversies seem to indicate there is a political agenda behind the theological wrangling. Three students were forced to leave Nanjing Theological Seminary in May 1999 for refusing to sing Communist Party songs at a chapel ceremony. Three more graduate students resigned in protest a month later, and last year, Ji Tai, handpicked by Ting in 1995 to head up a theological research institute, was unceremoniously sacked from Nanjing Seminary. In an open letter dated July 2000, Ji Tai claimed it was because he did not share Ting's ultramodernist perspective. After seeing a speech of Ting's he wrote, "He attacked the very heart of the Christian faith—justification by faith. He suggested we should promote morality and not preach about faith and unbelief." One has to wonder whether this campaign is really about theology at all, or whether the theological controversy is the smokescreen for a more sophisticated reassertion of government

control over the Three Self.

All in all, there are probably two theological battles being fought within the Three Self. Some, like Ji Tai, do want to rescue evangelical theology from the dead hand of Fundamentalism. But that is an entirely different project to Ting's, which seeks a more radical replacement of Fundamentalism with an ultra-modernist theology. The headlines are being dominated by the latter project, especially because of the strong-arm tactics. But the more important project may be the former—that of rehabilitating the evangelical faith to give the church a greater cutting edge in a chaotic society.

B. The search for a Chinese theology in the house churches

Theological concerns of a different nature are exercising some younger leaders of the house churches, especially that handful who have managed to study abroad. Their concerns center not around what model of theology is required—they operate quite contentedly within an evangelical framework—but around how to make the faith more relevant in the face of three major challenges, which are extremely recent.

1. Generational Challenges. Many of the new urban generation of Christians in the house churches are largely ignorant of the testimonies of the older generation. Heroes of the faith such as Wang Mingdao, Watchman Nee, and John Sung are sometimes better known outside China than inside it. According to a Bible teacher in Xian, "...this is the huge question now... it's to teach young Christians the spiritual story and tradition of the older generation, but we have to make this story relevant." This story has to be applied to the different circumstances of the younger generation. He elaborated, "We can't just give the testimonies of the old men. The young don't know what to make of them. The older teachers harp on themes about suffering, but the young don't face so much suffering... they face different challenges, like money issues, consumerism, marriage questions and dealing with stress, so we have to translate the spiritual lessons of the older



If the culture is the new starting point for theology, which culture are you talking about?

generation and make them relevant to the present day—that requires theology.”

Matters are not helped by the fact that many of these older heroes of the faith have produced little by way of writing, so the danger is they die off without their stories being preserved and becoming the basis of theological reflection.

2. Social challenges. The house churches are not as isolated from the needs of Chinese society as their detractors maintain, but as a pastor in Lanzhou discovered, “Its one thing helping a single drug addict, befriending them and supporting them; its quite another to try to stop the causes of drug abuse in the city.” To do the latter requires organization, planning, and a whole new level of negotiating with authorities and outside foundations. This led the church into huge fights over whether it was right theologically to engage with government, and over whether they should form a medical company to help AIDS sufferers that the government ignored. Thus some house churches—who see that the social problems of China cannot be solved by mere individual acts of kindness—need a whole new theological basis for engagement at this more political level.

Again, this is something the Western evangelical movement has had to undergo also. I well remember the sharp

intake of breath among British evangelicals in 1984 when the well-known Anglican churchman John Stott, wrote *Issues Facing Christians Today*. He revealed that it was only since the early seventies that the case for social engagement had begun on the part of evangelicals who, until then, tended to see direct evangelism as the main means of combating society's ills. Stott did manage to change that mindset, but someone has to do it for the Chinese house church. Needless to say, that someone will have to be Chinese.

3. Sociological challenges. “Lord, save us from going the way of Taiwan,” prayed the young house church leader in Wenzhou, Zhejiang. He was not making a political statement, but expressing a fear that the revival might dissipate in China today as it did in Taiwan in the 1930's. He explains, “There was a great revival there among the hill people, but it disappeared when the younger generation left the hills and went into the cities. They didn't take it with them. The city killed it off.”

His fears are well founded, though some dismiss them as “lack of faith.” China's huge revival—from a standing start of around one to two million in the seventies to over 60 million now—has taken place primarily in rural areas; however, this rural population is now migrating to the towns in what must constitute the largest social dislocation in industrial history. China was 15%

urbanized in 1980. Now it is 35% urbanized and that is likely to rise another 5% in the next decade. There is no telling how many of the 150 million current migrants from village to towns are Christians, but there must be many. How will their faith fare in the new cauldron of the urban morass? Will they find fellowship? Will they spread the revival to the towns (as many are praying) or will the towns—like in Taiwan—act like a sea that cools down the erupting lava of revival?

This too is a theological question. Many village Christians have to be prepared for all the new challenges to their faith, and deepened as disciples before they move away from a culture that has nourished them spiritually. As an evangelist from Henan said, “When you leave Henan for Shanghai, it’s like leaving the community of Israel for the Canaanite wilderness.”

Curiously it is the house churches that might be better equipped to meet their theological goals rather than the official church. This is by virtue of the house churches being a lot more Chinese. Professor Daniel Overmyer once listed five key characteristics of Chinese folk religion to an audience in Hong Kong: (1) marked by an emphasis on spirit beings; (2) lay-led; (3) full of spontaneous noise; (4) lively; and (5) usually focused around a meal. House churches—especially in the countryside—exhibit all these characteristics. Of course, a case can be made with some truth that Christianity is merely the veneer over the existing folk religion, but it is still a fact that house church Christianity appears much more indigenous in form than its official counterpart.

One thing is clear. The Chinese church has a lot more thinking to do...about being more Chinese!

Alex Buchan is the Asia bureau chief of Compass Direct and a graduate of Fuller Seminary. At present he is working towards a Ph.D. in practical theology and is writing a book called A Short Introduction to the Contemporary Persecution of Christians.

“Cultural Christians”

Edwin Hui

The growth of “Cultural Christians” (CCs) in China is largely a cultural development and an encouraging sign.¹ We believe that, whether in terms of culture or theology, CCs are highly significant and will exert a long-term impact.

In terms of theology, we must admit that the Chinese church (including the church in Mainland China and among overseas Chinese) is rather narrow-minded. The narrowness of the overseas Chinese church consists of its limitation to the ecclesiastical and theological traditions in-

other hand, since the “Three Self” churches seek to “express the harmony with the authorities of the state,”² they express the Christian faith in terms of an extreme version of the historic, rationalist, liberal school of theology. Over against this, the house churches have strenuously denied the meaning of history and culture for the Christian faith. They espouse an extreme form of fundamentalism that is highly intolerant, and they have sacrificed the openness of the Christian faith.

“Cultural Christians” are situated between these two polarities. If they can hold onto a biblical faith and can en-

Graham Cousins

The church in China and the overseas Chinese church, have taken a very conservative, or even skeptical, posture toward the relationship between the gospel and culture.



herited from the West. The church in Mainland China, on the other hand, is limited by the contradistinction between the registered church and the house church communities. The registered churches follow the “Three Self” platform under the leadership of the state; the house churches take on characteristics of folk religion. The tensions between the two and resulting limitations are obvious.

These limitations result in the failure of Chinese theology to truly reflect China’s own traditions, culture, and contemporary context. The issues that the Chinese church reflects on are largely Western issues. Chinese theology has been highly irrelevant to Chinese traditional culture or the contemporary context. On the

gauge in theological reflection in the Chinese cultural context, they have the potential to reconcile between these two extremes and to forestall any crisis they may bring upon the church. This is our expectation concerning “Cultural Christians.”

On a more concrete practical level, “Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity” (SMSCs) and CCs have brought the newest currents of theological thought into the Chinese church. They will create a definite impact on the rather bland theological scene in the Chinese church. In a new competitive situation, they will prompt theological educators (or even the whole church) to re-prioritize their work, to produce more writing with depth. The Chinese theological scene

and Chinese Theology

will become more vibrant and will renew itself through discussion and interaction. This should be a blessing to the Chinese church. These new elements should stimulate the Chinese church to re-evaluate the scope of her vision (for example, her mission among intellectuals and to the world of culture), and help re-define the place of theology (including the re-evaluation of denominational mentality and theology). The church would be encouraged to make a more positive response to Mainland China and to make herself attractive to the Chinese people in other parts of the world.

We do not take the position that the “Cultural Christian” phenomenon constitutes a crisis for the Chinese church. We believe that this challenging phenomenon should be understood as a unique opportunity for the Chinese church at the dawn of a new millennium. At the same time, “Cultural Christians” should earn their right to play a significant role in the life of the church in China.

From the point of view of culture, CCs have the potential to help change the place of Christian thought in China’s cultural-academic circles, via the introduction of Christian thought to the Chinese masses through research and translation. We must concede at this point that the church in China and the overseas Chinese church, have taken a very conservative, or even skeptical, posture toward the relationship between the gospel and culture. This is an imbalance. As the Willowbank Report of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization pointed out, all theological exposition is affected and limited by its cultural context.³ Therefore, if we can take hold of the present opportunity and understand that the emergence of the “Cultural Christian” phenomenon is a sign that China’s intellectuals are seeking direction for Chinese culture, and

if we can offer proposals which have a solid theoretical foundation and which can truly shape the future, we will be able to:

1. Contribute to the transformation of Christianity from its present marginal place in Chinese culture, society and academic circles.

2. Contribute to changing the traditional confrontational relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture.

3. Make a real difference in China’s social structure and thought, and help bring about renewal in Chinese culture, which is undergoing rapid change at the present.

At the same time, we will contribute toward the development of Christianity in China. We must understand the background, life-context, academic and theological training of the “Cultural Christians” the limitations these impose on them, their keen pursuit of the indigenization and contextualization of Christianity in China, and the integration of culture into theology. We must also understand that they are not like some Christian scholars who can still “breathe the air” of Christianity while functioning outside church circles. Therefore, at this embryonic stage, there will be a greater likelihood of imbalance and confusion in the doctrinal and theological understanding of China’s CCs and their efforts to integrate culture into theology.

Christians outside the church should be keenly interested in the thought and writing of “Cultural Christians” and, in a spirit of learning together and from each other, offer timely reviews and revisions to some of their views. Or, Christians can point to the views on a particular issue, taken by the historic church, so that China’s masses, Christians inside the church and these intellectuals can all gain a true and comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the Christian faith.

More importantly, Chinese Chris-

tians ought to be encouraged by the fact of the incarnation of God the Son Jesus Christ, which shows that the Word of God has not lost its character because of a particular cultural context. If we can hold fast to the teaching of the Bible as a whole and take the Bible as our highest norm, we can effect an encounter between the gospel and Chinese culture without losing the entire essence of the gospel.

All theologizing should take the teachings of the Bible as the highest norm (even though we do not deny that the Bible itself was written against a particular cultural background). But the value of theology lies in its usefulness in and to a particular culture. The influence of the Christian tradition in Western culture is a well-known fact. In the realm of Chinese culture, theology must dialogue with culture; this is also inescapable. The “Cultural Christian” phenomenon has a very positive significance from the more profound perspective of Christianity’s dialogue with Chinese culture.

END NOTES

1. The term “Cultural Christians” has come to identify Chinese intellectuals “with faith in Jesus Christ and active participation as Christians, yet without being baptized or joining a particular church or denomination. They are above churches and denominations” (pg. 110). For further discussion of “Cultural Christians,” see Hui’s entire article (reference below).

2. Liu Xiaofeng, “The Fear and Love of this Our Generation,” 115.

3. The Willowbank Report: Gospel and Culture, *Lausanne Occasional Papers*, No. 2 (Wheaton, IL, 1978).

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Converging agendas

Religion, Socialism, and Theological Construction

At first glance the theological debate occurring within China's official church may appear to be primarily a matter of disagreement over doctrine. However, as with most everything in China, there is also a political side to be considered. It is important to understand this political angle in order to keep the theological debate—and its effect upon the church—in proper perspective.

Events during the last decade of the 20th century—including the demise of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, Western pressure on China to increase religious freedom, and the dramatic emergence of Falungong as a significant social movement—have deepened China's leaders' mistrust of religion. As Chinese society continues to become more fragmented and complex, China's leaders fear that religious groups could organize to destabilize the already delicate balance between political and social forces, as has happened repeatedly throughout China's history.

The proliferation of groups such as the Falungong sect have only served to reinforce the conviction of China's leaders that religion, while it cannot be eliminated, must at least be brought firmly under Party control. President Jiang Zemin's dictum that religion must serve socialism is the means of achieving this end. The desire of Jiang and other top leaders is that religious activities in China contribute toward national unity and economic development rather than fostering social division or the development of autonomous social organizations that could be viewed as competitors to the Party-State.

To carry out this mandate, the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) has in recent years stepped up measures to close unregistered religious sites—seen most vividly in the demolishing of at least several dozen unauthorized churches in the heavily Christian city of Wenzhou just before Christmas of last year. The RAB has also launched an offensive aimed at cult activity in China, taking it upon itself to define what is or is not a cult.

By taking on this question of what constitutes orthodox religion (as opposed to cult activity), the RAB is venturing into uncharted territory, for up until now it has not concerned itself with the actual beliefs of the religious groups it is charged with supervising. This step into the theoretical realm may be seen as a move by the RAB to raise its stature in the eyes of the Party by attempting to answer the question of how religion can truly serve socialism. Although the RAB

has not enjoyed much prestige in past years, its current leadership appears rather ambitious in their efforts to enhance the status of the organization and thereby enhance their own opportunities for advancement within the Party system. However, as a political organization staffed by unbelievers, how could the RAB expect to make a legitimate contribution to the development of religious doctrine? Any attempts to do so would likely be met with much resentment and be rejected by Chinese Christians.

This gap between the goals of the RAB's atheistic leaders and the Christian church in China is conveniently bridged by Bishop Ding Guangxun, the long-time leader of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and China Christian Council. Although technically retired, Ding still has considerable influence within China's official church. In these final years of his career, Ding would like to shed his political image, preferring instead to be remembered as one who

made a significant theological contribution to the Chinese church.

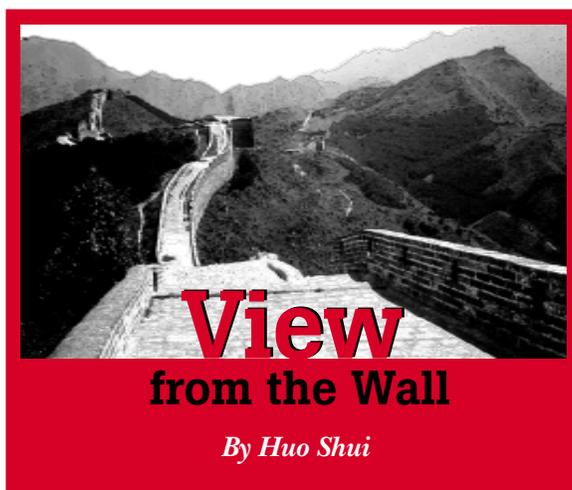
Herein lies the convergence of agendas between Ding and the RAB: Ding's desire to construct a "Chinese" theology fits perfectly with the RAB's need for a theoretical basis for shaping religion to suit the demands of socialism. The result of this symbiotic relationship between Ding and the RAB is the campaign of "theological construction" currently taking place on China's seminary campuses.

Yet how much real "theology" is there in Ding's prescriptions for the Chinese church? Prior to 1949

Ding and other early leaders of the TSPM were heavily influenced by the YMCA, which promoted an agenda that was much more political than spiritual. Meanwhile, independent church leaders such as Watchman Nee and Wang Mingdao were in fact making strides toward the development of a theology that could truly be called indigenous. But their voices were silenced after 1949 as the church was increasingly politicized. Ding's concern then, as now, was not with the church's faithfulness to the requirements of Scripture but rather its conformity to the social conditions of China and the demands of its communist leaders.

China needs a real Chinese theology. We don't know when this will come about, but we do know that it will not happen until the church situation in China is normalized, that is, until Christians are no longer discriminated against and the voice of real believers in China is able to rise up from the grassroots and be heard. If Bishop Ding were to foster this type of communication, this would aid him in attaining his goal of being remembered for his theological contribution to the Chinese church.

Huo Shui is a former government political analyst who writes from outside China.



View from the Wall

By *Huo Shui*

Peoples of China

Theology OR theologies?

Jim Nickel

Chinese theology can be a minefield, as is clearly evident from the other articles in this issue of *ChinaSource*. But sometimes minefields must be crossed if we want to win the battle. One of the minefields we must cross in the battle to make disciples of the peoples of China is the theological complexity that will inevitably develop as diverse people groups come to Christ.

What makes theology complicated is that it is not purely God's revelation (as we confess that Holy Scripture is), but man's interpretation of that revelation. Some would argue that Scripture itself is the latter, but the Bible specifically declares that not to be the case (II Peter 1:20-21). However, we have no such statements with regard to theology.

Obviously, if we hold a high view of Scripture, our theology will reflect that, and we will judge others' theologies by how well they conform to Scripture, as we understand it. This latter phrase, however, ("as we understand it") surfaces the problem. Our understanding of Scripture, and thus our theology, is inevitably conditioned by our culture. That, of course, is also true for Christians in China, and therein lies the complication.

China is made up of a bewildering variety of people groups. These groups may be distinguished from one another by language, culture, religion, social status, and many other factors. God desires to be known by every one of them. He has instructed us to disciple them, which, among other things, implies theological development. What will their theology—or theologies

—look like?

The theology of new believers will usually reflect, to a high degree, the theology of those who bring the gospel to them, especially if these evangelists are faithful to instruct those they introduce to Jesus Christ. However, there are many variables. Other teachers of different theological persuasions may come, molding the theology of these young believers in a different direction. Different worldviews may cause young disciples to interpret the Scripture quite



One of the great blessings of cross-cultural ministry is that it has a way of breaking us out of our provincial approaches to theology.

differently than their teachers.

We can respond to these realities in several ways. One approach is to insist that there is only one true set of theological truths (the ones we hold to, of course!); another is to go to the other extreme, adopting the attitude that one theology is as good as another. Both of these approaches have obvious flaws. Dogmatic theological assertions may well bring people into captivity to the teacher's own culture. On the other hand, if we take too tolerant an approach, we may fail to fulfill our responsibility to pass on "the faith once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

A wiser approach would seem to be to seek some middle ground between these two extremes. If we accept the normative character of biblical revelation, we must insist that theologies that do not conform to the clear teaching of the Scriptures are something other than truly Christian. On the other hand, in all humility we must also acknowledge the inability of any one individual or

group to fully grasp all the truths of the Word of God.

God's revelation of Himself has been compared to a multi-faceted diamond, of which each of us sees only a few facets. Thus, we ought to acknowledge that members of the body of Christ from the various peoples of China might well see things in Scripture that we have never seen, because our culture has blinded us to them. (The reverse may also be true, of course, but how arrogant it is to assume that it is always other people's cultures that blind them to truth, and never our own.)

One of the great blessings of cross-cultural ministry is that it has a way of breaking us out of our provincial approaches to theology. As I reflect on my own pilgrimage, I recall how the group-orientation of my Asian friends

challenged my individualistic approach to Christianity. The first time I heard of a whole Asian village deciding to follow Christ, I was quite put off by the concept. Yet as I've studied Scripture with this in mind, I've seen many affirmations of God's willingness to deal with people as groups, something my "rugged American individualism" previously kept me from seeing.

The necessity of contextualization in the proclamation of the gospel is a well-established missiological principle. If we would lay a solid foundation for the discipling of the peoples of China, we must do our due diligence to understand their cultures and develop evangelistic and discipling strategies appropriate to them. For example, ancestor worship is a key issue in many Asian cultures. How do our evangelistic approaches and discipling strategies address this? Perhaps that is a question best answered by Asian Christians, but anyone who wants to make disciples in

Continued on page 15

Book Review

Christ on trial

The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1998, 297 pages. ISBN 0-310-20930-7 (paperback). Cost: US\$12.99 or package of 6 for \$24.95.

Chinese edition: Chong Shen Ye Su by Lee Strobel, translated by Li BoMing. The Rock House Publishers Ltd., Hong Kong, 240 pages. ISBN 962-399-096-0.

A review by John Peace

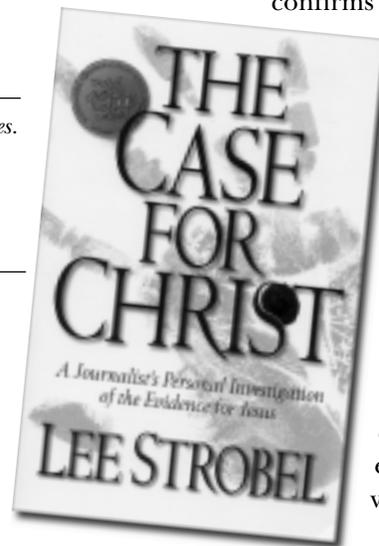
Veteran criminal reporter Lee Strobel provides the church with a powerful case for the claims of Christ in this fascinating and hard-hitting book. Strobel, previously an atheist, committed himself to Jesus after an exhaustive examination of evidence that persuaded him of the truth of the New Testament. He takes the reader on a similar tour in this book.

With a Master of Studies in Law degree from Yale law School, the author covered criminal trials with a trained legal mind for the *Chicago Tribune*. He learned how to assess evidence to de-

termine the truth in hard cases. He applies these skills to a rigorous investigation of the claims of Jesus to be the long-awaited Savior of the world.

be Trusted?" He ruthlessly assesses the reliability of the gospel accounts, the letters of Paul and the testimony of the other apostles in the New Testament. He concludes with a resounding "Yes"—we can believe the reports of the eyewitnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Next, he asks a more fundamental question: "Were Jesus' Biographies Reliably Preserved for Us?" Modern textual criticism demonstrates that we have an overwhelming number of trustworthy manuscript evidence for



calls the work of archaeologists to the witness stand. The result: We discover that external evidence from stones and documents not only does not call into question what we read in the Bible, but confirms the biblical accounts.

Strobel then proceeds to analyze Jesus himself. Was he really convinced that he was the Son of God, or did the early Christians come up with this theory later? From his actions—such as forgiving sins and accepting worship—and from his explicit statements, we can see that Jesus considered himself to be the divine savior.

Finally, "Did Jesus — and Jesus Alone—Match the Identity of the Messiah?" A careful look at Old Testament prophecies considered messianic in Jesus' day proves he fulfilled so many that no one could say it was coincidental.

All Christians acknowledge the resurrection of Jesus as the foundation of their faith in him. Strobel concludes with four chapters showing "beyond a reasonable doubt" that Jesus actually died; that the body was missing from his tomb; that he appeared to many people at many times over a period of more than a month; and that an impressive array of "circumstantial evidence" makes his resurrection credible.

All along the way, Strobel grills his "witnesses" with hard questions. He had done his homework before each interview and was armed with quotations from those who reject the claims of the New Testament. The most difficult challenges to the apostolic records were met with courteous but convincing rebuttals from his experts as well as from his own reading.

One major value of this book, then, is the hard-nosed, rigorous treatment it gives to Christian assertions about Jesus. Strobel knows the mind of the unbeliever and he feels the weight of the objections thoughtful people have brought against the idea that Jesus is

I highly recommend *The Case for Christ* to anyone seeking a firmer basis for faith as well as for any serious seekers of the truth.

His method is at once simple and comprehensive. Interviews with thirteen prominent scholars focus on thirteen different types of evidence used by trial lawyers in the courtroom to prove innocence or guilt. As he applies this methodology, he divides his books into three parts: "Examining the Record;" "Analyzing Jesus;" "Researching the Resurrection."

Strobel begins with "The Eyewitness Evidence: Can the Biographies of Jesus

the New Testament from very early times. We can be 99.9 % sure that we are reading what the authors wrote. But they were biased? Is there no "corroborating" evidence from non-Christian sources outside the New Testament? Yes, there is ample testimony from Jewish and Roman sources to support the New Testament accounts of Christ.

Can we be sure that what the New Testament says happened really did? Are there any objective signs that the authors wrote careful history, or were they just sharing their personal faith? The chapter on "scientific" evidence

the divine savior. In the end, he concludes that the evidence for the claims of Christ is simply overpowering—enough, in fact, to convince anyone with an open mind.

I highly recommend *The Case for Christ* to anyone seeking a firmer basis for faith as well as for any serious seeker of the truth. It addresses many of the questions I have heard from intellectuals from the PRC and Taiwan, and I believe that educated Chinese will find it useful in answering common questions about the reliability of the New Testament accounts of Christ.

With the assistance of a non-Christian, high school student from Beijing, I checked portions of the Chinese edition. The translation seems to be accurate, faithful to the original but sufficiently idiomatic to be accessible to Chinese readers.

Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* is much longer and covers more territory. Strobel has taken aim at one target—the claim that Jesus is the Son of God—and has hit a bull's eye. His reportorial style makes for much easier reading than does McDowell's encyclopedic treatment.

I'm Glad You Asked by Ken Boa and Larry Moody (*Wende Hao* in Chinese) seeks to lead Christians step-by-step to effective responses to questions from non-believers. It deals with more basic questions, such as the problem of evil.

Finally, there is Carl Henry's massive *God, Revelation, & Authority*, Volumes 1-4. For those with the time and background to appreciate his argument, Henry first addresses the fundamental presuppositions of unbelievers, then marshals the evidence for the truth of the Bible. He answers all the questions which I have heard Chinese intellectuals raise.

Both for Christians needing more information and argumentation points, and for non-believers eager to know the truth but bothered by tough questions, *The Case for Christ* would be a good book with which to begin.

John Peace, Ph.D., is a pen name for a scholar who has worked among Chinese in Asia and America for 25 years.

Resource corner

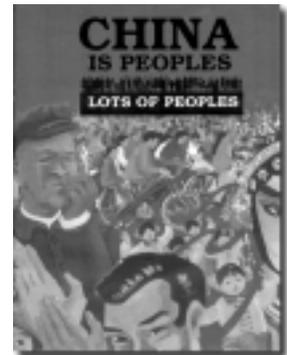
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Theology or theologies Continued from page 13

Asia needs to consider this issue.

We must encourage the development of indigenous theologies by the church as it takes root among the peoples of China. It is not the job of outsiders to do theology for them, though some wise and sensitive *waiyuoren* may earn the right to do theology with them. Certainly, exposure to the great works of theology that have gone before can be useful in the process, but we must ever guard against the tendency to present our particular brand of theology as the only right way to view the Scriptures.

The manner in which theology is articulated is also an area in which we should recognize the value of diversity. In some of the minority groups in China, oral traditions are passed on through songs that go on for days. Might such songs, infused with the stories of the biblical narrative, be much more effective expressions of theology for these groups than a set of propositional statements in a theology textbook?

To this author, the questions seem to be many and the answers few in this

area. The bottom line, however, is: can we—will we—trust the Holy Spirit to guide the church among the various peoples of China to develop theologies that express God's revelation in meaningful and helpful ways within their own cultures? This not to say that there is not a role for Westerners who minister in China in this process. God places upon all of us the responsibility to carefully instruct people in the Scriptures (see, for example, II Tim. 4:2). But teaching the Scriptures and making dogmatic theological assertions are two different things.

A wise teacher will spend more time helping his students find biblical answers to their questions than expounding on the answers he has found to his own questions. Different cultures give birth to different questions. As the peoples of China discover for themselves the answers to their questions in the Word of God, truly biblical yet effectively relevant theologies will be the result. Helping guide them through this process is surely what making disciples is all about.

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Toward a “Chinese” theology

As the articles in this issue of *ChinaSource* demonstrate, theology in China can be a contentious topic. Probably none of our readers will agree fully with everything our various contributors have to say. While some may be offended by one or more of the positions taken, our intention in tackling this difficult subject was not to offend, but to stimulate constructive dialogue on the theological developments taking place within the Chinese church.

Theology by its very nature tends to divide, for it deals with how we in our finite human condition should understand and relate to the infinite God of the universe. When our understandings of who God is and what He requires of us differ, we tend to draw lines around what we deem correct and exclude those whose ideas do not fit within our preconceived framework. Ultimately theology addresses the question of who is in the family of God and who is not

—who is our ally in the spiritual battle in which we are engaged and who is actually fighting for the other side. How easy it is, then, to become militant in our criticism of those with whom we do not agree.

While we may like to think that our theological positions are based firmly and soundly upon scripture, theology is never done in a vacuum. It is influenced by the cultural, social, political, and economic conditions in which the theologizing takes place. The church in China is thus the product of a miraculous work of God performed in the midst of complex human developments that have helped shaped the church.

With increased interaction between the church inside and the church—both Chinese and non-Chinese—outside China we have become participants, not just observers, in this process. Our passion for doctrinal purity and our zeal to serve may prompt us to want to jump in and “correct” what we perceive as the theological missteps of our Chinese brothers and sisters. Yet we must first consider the

unique factors that have shaped the multi-faceted Chinese church of today: the prominent role of suffering in the lives of believers, an authoritarian political tradition that places religion in a subservient position to the state, a culture that emphasizes “ortho-praxy” over orthodoxy, China’s decades-long struggle to free itself from foreign manipulation, and the enduring role of the family as China’s primary social institution—just to name a few.

As we interact with these cultural dynamics—and listen to one another—we will truly become partners in building up the church. Most importantly, we must together seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance as we attempt to apply the unchanging truths of Scripture within a context characterized by relentless change. Perhaps then the things that once divided will bring us together in a more perfect understanding of God and of His plan for China.

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