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**The Church in China:
Persecuted, Pentecostal, and Powerful**

Luke Wesley

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To the many dedicated faculty members
and students
who serve and study
in underground Bible schools
across China.

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FOREWORD

“LIKE THE BOOK OF ACTS”

This essay on Pentecostalism in China is important for the following reason: At last a knowledgeable Pentecostal confirms that a great part—perhaps even the majority—of China’s Protestants are Pentecostal or Pentecostal-like, and this is done on the basis of thorough field research and by an author who speaks Chinese. However, these Chinese Pentecostals are perhaps not all streamlined according to the western Pentecostal denominations. For instance, a few of them are Pentecostals and members of the Communist Party.¹ Most of the so-called unregistered groups—they are the ones who are mostly, but not exclusively, responsible for the growth of Christianity in China—follow rather an organizational pattern comparable to the organization of early Christians.

It is also very clear that persecution is part of the reason for the unbelievable growth. When the missionaries had to leave China after the Communist take-over, there were about 700,000 Protestants in China. Today there are 60 million, or more. Most of them are young and female, and many have been in prison. Another reason for their growth is the spirit of forgiveness among the Christians towards the registered (state-controlled) churches and towards their persecutors. I have asked myself: Why is this so? Perhaps their willingness to forgive is not only based on their Christian spirit, but also on the fact that China is one of the very few former Third World countries that has mastered the threat of hunger and poverty!

The author has convinced me that Chinese Pentecostalism is perhaps the most numerous and probably also the most important Pentecostalism *of the world*, considering its strategic placing in a country which is crucial for Asia and the future economy of the world. Who knows, in a generation China may replace the US as the number one world power. The author has also convinced me that the seed for this Pentecostal revival was laid mostly by several independent Pentecostal groups like the True Jesus Church, the Jesus Family, etc., which, at the time, nobody took seriously. All of these early Pentecostal groups had connections with the Azusa Street revival. It is a great pity that this Pentecostal beginning and its important growth is generally ignored by most church historians. China is not the only example of this. In particular, evangelical researchers do not like these facts. However, this does not hinder Pentecostals from trying to “please” evangelicals who misrepresent the Pentecostal story in many places.

Also the analysis of the Chinese book by Jing Jiuwei, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (2002), is very important. This is a refutation of Pentecostalism by a representative of the registered churches and it shows—by implication—the importance of Chinese Pentecostalism. It also conveys the message: “If you want to avoid chaos, stick with us,” which means stick with the registered churches, with their paid clergy and cognitive, rather dull services.

That book raised several questions in my mind, as I remember that a Quaker told me in Birmingham (UK): “A Quaker who has never been in prison is probably not a genuine Quaker.” This has stuck with me, as I have never been in prison; however, many Chinese Pentecostals have been in prison. The author tells amazing stories of their testimonies while in prison, similar to the ones in the Acts of the Apostles, and also similar to the early history of Italian Pentecostalism.² Of course one can answer: western countries like Switzerland or Great Britain are democratic and grant full religious freedom. That is true, except that one has to put a question mark against the term “democracy.” In fact, most western countries are dominated by great trusts, banks and commercial holdings, and these are probably more important than the elected politicians. These powerful companies are nominally

accountable to their share-holders, and they are dominated by a few powerful men (very seldom women). They dominate the politicians, rather than the other way round.³ Whoever attacks or exposes this type of democracy might be in trouble. I have met very few western Pentecostals who expose this type of power game. If Pentecostals in the West remain within their prescribed boundaries—not meddling with the powers of trade and commerce—they are not persecuted. In fact, they are quite welcome because they “oil” the machinery of trade, just as the author affirms for China: “If their activities remain within the prescribed boundaries, they can be relatively confident that they will not be fined, arrested, beaten, or imprisoned.” It is obvious that the time is not far away when not only Korean and African Pentecostal missionaries will evangelize in the West, but soon more so, missionaries from China!

All in all, this is a most useful book. The author has researched an extremely difficult field. Thank you, whoever you are (Luke Wesley is a pen name).

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University of Birmingham

¹ Peter Kuzmic, “Pentecostals Respond to Marxism,” in *Called and Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective*, eds. Murray A. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 143-46. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Both authors come from former Yugoslavia and have specialized knowledge on Communism. Volf wrote his dissertation on the “Understanding of Work in Karl Marx” under Jürgen Moltmann at the University of Tübingen.

² W. J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), pp. 251-66 (on the basis of Italian court records).

³ Frank Bartleman wrote: “The capitalists view the war as a commercial enterprise which provides a way to make a profit.... The irony is that politicians who have enough power to ‘commandeer a nation’ into war

do nothing about this 'handful of exploiters'." This side of Bartleman's conviction has mostly been edited out in Pentecostal books. See Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), p. 188.

PREFACE

For many years I have felt a burden to offer a glimpse of the dynamic vitality of the Chinese church to western Christians. This burden flows from my conviction that the Chinese church might serve as a catalyst of renewal for the church in the West. Indeed, as we hear the testimonies of our Chinese brothers and sisters, as we listen to their songs and prayers, as we reflect on their passion and commitment, how can we not be challenged to re-examine our own call, our own theology, and our own commitment? This burden was the motivation for this book.

The Chinese church, like the country of China, is multifaceted and complex. And, from the beginning of my sojourn in China, I knew that I would need to be patient, learn from my friends, and attempt to grow in my understanding of the complex contours of the Chinese church. Over the past ten years, as I have lived and ministered in China, I have attempted to do exactly this. Although all too often I have not been as patient or observant as I should, my search for understanding has been immensely rewarding. This search has been carried out, at least in part, with the hope that I might be able to pass on a bit of my own experience to Christians in the West.

My search has been aided by a number of Chinese friends and missionary colleagues. Unfortunately, due to security concerns, I am unable to name the vast majority of these people, particularly those who live and serve in China. I do, however, wish to acknowledge the significant debt I owe to the many Chinese believers who have encouraged me in countless ways through the years. While most of these dear friends worship in house churches, a goodly number are leaders in TSPM churches as well. To these brothers and sisters who have graciously allowed me to worship together with them, I express my heartfelt thanks. I am especially

indebted to the many students and teachers who have studied and served in our underground Bible school. God has richly blessed my life through them all. My journey would not have been possible without the fellowship and help of many missionary colleagues, particularly those who have served on our team. You know who you are. I thank God for your friendship and the privilege of serving together with you. I also want to express my deep appreciation to the board and supporters of the China Training Network. Your service, prayers, and support have enabled our family to follow the Lord's call for our lives. Thank you all, especially Dave, Ron, William, Tod, Jonathan, Lance, Matt, and Tim.

Finally, I would like to thank those who have made special contributions to this book. First, I want to extend a word of thanks to three editors of the *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* who also serve as the editors of the Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies Series. Without the boundless energy and enthusiasm of Dr. Wonsuk Ma, one of the editors, this book would never have seen the light of day. I also want to thank Judy Gilliland, Grant Hochman, and William Menzies. These three read the manuscript in its entirety and offered many helpful editorial suggestions. I also thank Barbara dela Cruz, Dr. Ma's Administrative Assistant, for her careful labor on the index. Although any weaknesses in this publication are entirely my responsibility, the book has undoubtedly been strengthened by the labors of these gifted people.

One last word on technical matters is needed. I have used the *pinyin* system, which is the standard in China today, to adapt Chinese characters to the Roman alphabet. Chinese names are rendered according to the Chinese custom, by giving the family name first, which is then followed by the given names. The given names, which generally consist of two characters, are linked together to form one extended word in *pinyin*. Thus, for example, Jing Jiuwei indicates that Mr. Jing was given the names Jiu and Wei by his parents at birth. I should also note that, when the names of specific places or organizations are comprised of two or more characters, I link the *pinyin* equivalents of these characters together. Thus, I refer to Honghe County and the Lixin Church.

In the midst of intense persecution and great opposition, God is building his church in China. The unique circumstances of the

Preface

recent revival in China remind us that this wonderful story is God's work. No person or organization can take credit. To God be the glory.

Luke Wesley
From a city in China
October 30, 2004

INTRODUCTION

The old man edged over and, so that the others present could not hear, he whispered his words. I was in China participating in a formal discussion with several church leaders in a government-recognized institution. Obviously the old man did not want his other Chinese colleagues to hear what he was about to say. The elderly Chinese pastor in soft tones indicated that prior to the Cultural Revolution, a ten-year period (1966-1976) of chaos and persecution in China, he had been baptized in the Holy Spirit, a powerful experience which for him was marked by speaking in tongues. The old man's eyes gleamed as he recounted how, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, he was able to endure the severe persecution of the Cultural Revolution period. He concluded, "We have suffered much, but the sacrifice of suffering has produced a church that is vibrant and strong."

This brief conversation summarizes the key themes of this book. The church in China is *persecuted*, *Pentecostal*, and *powerful*. In the pages which follow I hope to illuminate these three facets of the Chinese church and in so doing, stir and inspire the mind and heart of the reader.

In Part One, I seek to explain the complex and paradoxical nature of persecution and church life in China. Christians worship openly in large church buildings, while house church believers are often arrested and imprisoned. How can we make sense of these seemingly contradictory realities? Chapter One, then, offers a broad overview of church life and persecution in China today. It seeks to provide the reader with a broad framework for understanding this important issue. In Chapter Two, I highlight the nature of the on-going, state-sponsored persecution of Christians in China, by offering a detailed account of persecution in a single locale. In broad surveys of persecution in a given country, where a

host of episodes are recounted, often many details and insights into the causes and nature of the persecution are omitted. Accounts such as this are helpful and needed in order to gain perspective. However, I believe that a focused, detailed narrative is also needed to help us understand at a deeper level the forces behind the persecution and how we should respond. I pray that this account will stir your heart and encourage you to pray and to act on behalf of the thousands of Christians in China who experience this sort of persecution on a regular basis.

In Part Two, I examine the charismatic and Pentecostal nature of the Chinese church. I begin Chapter Three by raising the question: Is the church in China predominantly Pentecostal? I then seek to answer this question based on my own personal conversations with various house church leaders, an analysis of the statement of faith issued by a group of house church leaders, and my interaction with other researchers and related literature. Chapter Three focuses primarily on the attitudes and perspectives of the house churches.

In China, there are two kinds of churches: the house churches, which do not submit to government regulations and control, and churches which are recognized by the government and which, to varying degrees, do submit to government regulations. The churches recognized by the government generally belong to what is called, "The Three Self Patriotic Movement" (TSPM). Although I have focused most of my energy in ministering in the house church sector, I have found that there is also tremendous spiritual vitality in many of the TSPM churches. However, the situation of the TSPM churches is complex, and they face a unique mixture of opportunities, challenges, and limitations. It is important to understand the perspective of this significant sector of the Chinese church as well. So, in Chapter Four I focus on attitudes towards Pentecostal values found within the TSPM churches. I begin with an analysis of a recent book on the Holy Spirit penned by a leading TSPM pastor and published by an official church publishing house. I then shift from theory to practice and examine what is actually happening in TSPM churches in terms of Pentecostal experience.

Finally, in Part Three, which is essentially Chapter Five, I offer an analysis of the factors which have influenced the divergent perspectives on Pentecostal teaching and experience found within the house churches on the one hand, and the TSPM churches on the other. In this final section of the book I seek to challenge the reader to reassess preconceived notions and take a fresh look at what we might learn from the church in China. I, for one, firmly believe that it is the context of persecution which accounts for the fact that the church in China is largely Pentecostal. This fact might challenge all of us, whether Pentecostal or non-Pentecostal, to reflect again on the narrative of the book of Acts and to observe how tightly the themes of Pentecostal power and opposition are intertwined. Perhaps as we read the story again, we will hear more clearly the whispered words of the elderly Chinese pastor.

The Chinese church is persecuted, but it is a church strengthened by the Holy Spirit and bold in its witness. God's power is revealed, often in inspiring ways, in the lives of countless numbers of Chinese Christians. I trust that this book will bear witness to this fact.

Part One

Persecuted

CHAPTER 1

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN CHINA: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Lord We Ask You, Set Our Hearts on Fire for China

Lord we ask you, set our hearts on fire for China
Set our hearts on fire for China
Look at the Chinese church
Take a look at your servants
They have truly endured many attacks
They have weathered baptisms of wind and rain
But from the beginning they have never been afraid
They have with steadfastness never wavered
Nor worried on the barren threshing floor
And still from inside and out the pressure comes
Going south, rushing north, they stumble through hardships
Not remaining long in any place
Lord, if this is your will
I will joyfully thank and praise you
Even with fear over head like black clouds
And thorny bushes under our feet
We will preach the gospel around the world.¹

On any given Sunday in any major city of China, a foreign Christian can, if persistent, find a Protestant church and worship there openly with other Chinese believers. Bible schools and training centers can also be found functioning openly in most provinces and in many cities. Bibles and a limited supply of other Christian books (including, for example, William Barclay's commentaries on the New Testament translated into Chinese) can be purchased in Christian bookstores affiliated with TSPM

churches. And yet, at the same time, we hear of intense persecution in China. We read stories of church leaders being beaten and imprisoned. We are told that Bibles are in short supply and thus desperately needed in China. How do we put it all together? How do we reconcile these apparently contradictory messages?

In the following chapter I hope to help answer these questions. China is filled with many paradoxes and the question of religious persecution is one of them. In order to understand this important issue and the present realities that exist in China, we need to understand the broad and complex contours of church life in contemporary China. A bit of historical perspective will also be instructive.

1. The Ebb and Flow of History

Mao Zedong and the communist forces took control of mainland China in 1949. Since then the church has experienced many difficult periods. At times the persecution was extremely intense, at other times less so. Initially, the official policy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) appears to have been one of allowing the church to gradually wither away. This policy was based on the assumption that, in the new society ushered in by the CCP, religion in general, and the Christian church in particular, would become unnecessary and meaningless. In accordance with classical Marxist doctrine, it was felt that both would quickly fade away. When this did not happen, however, CCP policy shifted to a more aggressive stance, actively seeking to “help” the church die away. More recently, at least since the early 1980s, the policy of the CCP has returned to the less aggressive, but still basically hostile position of the early 1950s. In short, it is important to note that, while the attitude of the CCP has been consistently hostile towards Christianity, it has fluctuated between periods of limited acceptance with imposed limitations on the one hand and zero tolerance enforced by active suppression on the other.

The most intense period of persecution was the decade of chaos and ferment called, the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). This was a period of intense conflict and struggle in which Mao and his supporters mobilized the youth of the country in an attempt to attack their opponents, those who had become weary of the politicization of virtually every aspect of life in China, and to reassert their power. The young red guards were whipped into a heated frenzy and encouraged to lash out at counter-revolutionary elements within Chinese society. Religion and particularly Christians and the church were major targets. During the Cultural Revolution every church in the country was closed, many pastors were imprisoned or, in some instances, killed, and the open practice of Christianity was brutally suppressed.

Fortunately today, the situation in China is much improved. While it is true that persecution continues to exist, it is also true that conditions for Christians have improved significantly. Today there are two forms of church life in China: churches which are recognized by the government—these generally belong to what is called the “Three Self Patriotic Movement” (TSPM)—and the house churches, which do not submit to government regulations and control.

We often hear a black and white message: the registered or TSPM church is apostate and evil; the house church is pure and good. This is simplistic; and like so many facets of life in China, the truth is much more complex. The truth is that God is at work in both sectors of the Chinese church. Moreover, the key to understanding the paradox of open churches and focused persecution in China lies in a clear appraisal of these two sectors of the Chinese church.

2. The TSPM Church and Government Interference

It was a TSPM church and the year was 1994. I arrived early, yet found the church already packed with people. The sanctuary was filled to capacity; even its aisles were clogged with people

sitting on small wicker stools. I made my way to the door of the church and found that that was as far as I could go. The entire building was a vast sea of faces. I managed to grab any empty wicker stool and took a spot in the doorway, half in the church and half in the street.

Not long after the service started a little old lady made her way through the human wall. I saw her as she broke through the crowd. She came to me, her hand outstretched. I really had no idea what she wanted, but she grabbed my hand and began to lead me through the press of people into the church. Before I knew what was happening, she virtually pushed me into an open spot in a pew inside the sanctuary. It was her seat. I looked back and saw her shuffle off to my stool in the doorway.

One cannot visit a TSPM church, get to know some of the church members, and then leave feeling that God is not present. Although it is true that many TSPM church services are rather formal and lifeless, there is generally a strong sense of piety and faith. I remember one church service where an usher walked down the aisle brandishing a long stick. He used the stick to prod any sleepy believer out of his slumbering state. Although this church was not particularly vital, a number of strong, young Christians worshipped there. There can be no doubt that many vital Christians worship in TSPM churches across China.

It is true, however, that churches recognized by the government face some serious challenges. Although they are allowed to meet openly (thus you can find an open, functioning church in almost any major city in China), this recognition comes with a price. TSPM churches generally face the following restrictions:

- 1) *They must meet in designated places, at designated times, and with designated leadership.* This means that while there are "open" churches in China, they are very limited in number. For example, in one city of around three million, there are only three open Protestant churches. This is not unusual, but rather typical. Additionally, the development of ministry outside the confines of the

church building—such as lay-led, small group Bible studies, for example—is severely restricted.

- 2) *The teaching of children or youth under the age of 18 in the church is generally prohibited.* Sunday school for children or special services for youth are exceedingly rare. It is evident that there is a conscious attempt on the part of the government to block these sorts of activities. It is touching to see young mothers struggle to keep their children from disrupting the service in TSPM churches. They simply have no other alternative.
- 3) *It is illegal to evangelize outside the walls of the church.*
- 4) *It is illegal to use or possess Christian literature not published in China and approved by the Chinese government.*

In my opinion, the most significant of these restrictions has to do with the selection of church leadership. The Chinese government does have a say in who is selected to serve as pastors and leaders in the TSPM churches. A close friend of mine is a TSPM church leader, and he has shared with me in a very open manner his own frustrations with working in the system. There have been times when he was so discouraged that he considered leaving the registered church and ministering in the house church setting. And yet, through all of the difficulties, he has remained inside and has had a significant impact in our region. On one occasion, he told me that his greatest struggle with life in the TSPM church was the fact that he had been asked to ordain people that he knew should not be ordained. It is evident that Christians in TSPM churches are not free to select their own leaders based on their spiritual character and giftedness. The government can and does intervene in the selection process. Thus pastors and leaders, at least occasionally, are selected and ordained who are not spiritually qualified and who would not be selected by the Christians they serve, if they were given a choice. This problem appears to be more pronounced the higher one goes up the TSPM leadership ladder. Registered churches in the rural areas are often less impacted by government intervention.

It should be noted that the extent of government interference in the TSPM, as well as the amount of energy exerted on suppressing house churches, varies widely. The key factor here is clearly the attitude of local government leaders. China is not a law-based society. For this reason, the way in which guidelines on religious activity are interpreted and applied does indeed vary greatly. Everything depends on the perception and attitude of the person in charge. The law is essentially whatever the leader says it is. This is often difficult for westerners to understand. But it also explains why there is such variation in the level of religious freedom allowed from province to province and even county to county within China.

On one occasion a close friend, who is also a leader in the TSPM, unfolded a map of our province. He began to explain which counties were more open to religious activity and which were not. It was evident that the government leadership at the county level set the tone for religious conditions in their area. So, as my friend indicated, one county might offer considerable freedom for the TSPM church and even ignore significant house church activity, while another county, as we shall see in the next chapter, may not tolerate any public Christian presence whatsoever.

Additionally, it should be noted that within the TSPM, pastors and church leaders vary widely in their willingness to buck the system. After a Sunday morning service in a large TSPM church in one populous city, I shared a meal with one of the pastors. He was an older man and obviously a senior leader in the church. While we ate, I asked him, "What are the pressing issues confronting the Chinese church?" His response was extremely revealing. He indicated that there was a significant gulf developing between the older, more cautious pastors, who had experienced first-hand the reality of persecution, and the younger, more aggressive pastors, who had not yet witnessed the possible consequences of crossing government-established boundaries. This man identified with the older, more cautious pastors. He had seen too much.

I have found that rural TSPM Christians and church leaders are often quite autonomous and very willing to "break the rules" in

order to see the ministry of the church expand. This is less true of TSPM leaders in the larger cities who operate under greater scrutiny. Nevertheless, there are some notable exceptions in this regard as well.

Of course, the attitudes of the TSPM church leaders in a given area and the past experience of their house church counterparts together impact the nature of TSPM and house church relations. In some instances there are very positive relationships between the two groups, with house church believers occasionally attending TSPM services. I have also seen TSPM pastors support in a variety of ways house church groups in their region. Yet, this sort of positive relationship is not the norm. The large house church networks, which have a long history of persecution and suppression, do not hold the TSPM in high regard. Often with good reason, they view the TSPM as a tool of the government and link it together with their persecutors. And yet, their antagonistic approach to the TSPM can often be a self-fulfilling prophecy. When they attack the local TSPM church and encourage believers to leave and join their groups, TSPM pastors understandably become very upset. These issues are complex and rooted in personal histories and entrenched attitudes.

In spite of the restrictions outlined above, the TSPM church is in many areas alive and growing. Several years ago I visited a TSPM Bible school located in the capital city of an eastern province. When I visited the school, it was in its second year of operation. It had four full-time faculty members and 34 students, who ranged in age from 16 to 48 years old. The school's leader, Rev. Z, has Pentecostal roots. The school's key purpose is to prepare ministers for the rapidly growing church in this province. In 1984 there were approximately 50,000 believers in the province and only six churches. Now, there are well over 600,000 believers and over 106 churches. Church leaders estimate that in this province alone 20,000-30,000 new believers are added to the church every year. The need for trained ministers is truly staggering. In 1994 there were 33 ordained pastors in the province, two-thirds of whom were over 80 years old. It was a profound privilege for me to be able to teach a series of special courses in this setting. I was impressed with the students, who were keenly

aware of their need of God's power and eager to do the work of the Lord. Their eagerness to study the Bible, in spite of the long hours and difficult conditions, was especially encouraging. The faculty and students reflect the spiritual vitality of the region. They responded warmly to my teaching on the power of the Holy Spirit and sang an indigenous Chinese song based on Acts 1:8. There was a sense of excitement, commitment, and joy in the school that was truly inspiring.

The stories the students and faculty told of church growth in this region were amazing. One faculty member described the impact of a young girl, whose home village is located in the northern part of this province, an "unreached" region without any believers or Christian witness. The young lady traveled to Beijing to pursue college-level studies. During her time of study she heard the gospel and committed her life to Christ. After completing her studies in 1984, she returned to her home village. She was the only Christian in the region, but began to testify to her family and friends. As a result, by 1987, just three years later, there were 2,000 believers in this previously unreached area. A little over ten years later, there were over 20,000 believers in this area. One of the faculty members at the school, a tiny but powerful lady, regularly goes to this area to minister since it is without pastors. She once baptized 700 believers in one day!

Many in the surrounding, remote mountainous areas are coming to Christ. One young man came to the capital city to buy Bibles. When local Christians asked him how he had heard about Jesus, he indicated that it was through radio broadcasts. He said that he needed 800-900 Bibles for the believers in his area!

I left in awe of what God is doing in this region and, more particularly, in this school. Although this region and school may be especially dynamic, this is but one example of what God is doing in and through the TSPM church.

Of course there is another side to church life within the TSPM, one that is not so bright. The weakness of the registered church is illustrated in the following episode. Not long ago I was invited by TSPM church leaders from a rural county to speak to a gathering of women. Over 50 women from churches in remote villages in the county had gathered together for a week of fellowship, Bible

study, and prayer. I gladly accepted the invitation, but, knowing that this was a TSPM setting, I wondered what I would find there.

I arrived at the host church around ten in the morning and was greeted by several pastors and the local Religious Affair Bureau (RAB) representative. The RAB representative was not a believer, and his job was to represent the interests of the Chinese government and ensure that nothing “subversive” would take place. It was an unusual mix of people—pastors, missionary (although I certainly did not introduce myself as such), and government official. We sat around a table, ate sunflower seeds, drank tea, and tried to figure each other out as we engaged in stilted, but friendly conversation.

After more than an hour of discussion, we all walked to the large classroom where the training sessions were being held. It was an incredible scene. Over fifty women, obviously key leaders in their respective churches, were seated behind rows of desks. At the front of the room, next to the blackboard, stood a middle-aged man. In monosyllabic tones he read his notes for the day, a government document filled with platitudes about economic development. Fortunately for me and the ladies, the man was bringing his presentation to a close. I looked around and noticed that most of the women were fighting sleep and boredom. The man reading the government message for the day appeared as uninterested in the proceedings as the women. I began to wonder if my decision to come had been a mistake.

Mercifully the meeting came to an end, and we all filed down a flight of stairs and into another room for lunch. After lunch, I was told that I would be given the afternoon teaching slot. The meeting began with songs of praise. The atmosphere in the classroom changed dramatically as the women began to sing of God and their faith. As I moved forward to the front of the classroom I was filled with a sense of kinship, a sense of communion with these dear ladies. What a joy it was to be able to share from the word of God to this remarkable group of Christian women! I spoke from John’s Gospel, a simple message about faith and discipleship. But the contrast with what had preceded was striking. As I spoke, I noticed that the RAB man was sitting in the back, listening to my every word. At one point, I was quite

animated, and in the middle of my point, the RAB man stood and walked out of the room. I must confess that my first thought was, "Oh no, I'm in big trouble now." But later he returned and remained very cordial. A few days later the local pastor called and expressed his appreciation for my willingness to share with the ladies.

Shortly after this experience I traveled to a remote village for a Sunday morning church service. The village was not large and I anticipated a small group that morning, perhaps 40 or 50 at most. When I entered the church building I was startled to see that the building was absolutely packed. From the outside, the building had looked rather small. But once inside, I found that the sanctuary was quite long and that it contained a balcony. Altogether there were well over 200 believers present. I was amazed, because this was clearly more than the population of the village. Later I learned that this church was the center of Christian life in that area and that many believers from nearby villages also worshiped there. I was asked to preach and I spoke from Revelation chapter five about the power and love of Christ.

After the service I shared a meal with a group of elders from the various village churches represented there. They indicated that their greatest need was for biblical teaching. I told them about my experience at the women's conference and asked if they could hold a similar training session in their church. After all, they were also a recognized TSPM church. They indicated that they were unwilling to ask the TSPM leadership for help with training because, they said, "the TSPM teaches things that are contrary to the Bible." I knew they were referring to the kind of thing I had recently witnessed: a government official offering, at best, irrelevant platitudes from Beijing to the saints.

3. The House Church and Persecution

So, largely because of this sort of government intervention and the restrictions noted above, most Christians in China have chosen not to worship in registered churches, but in house churches. There

is a cost: they face intimidation, harassment, and fear of arrest. Nevertheless, the house church is booming. In 1949 there were less than one million Protestant believers. Now, conservative estimates would suggest there are at least 60 million. Most of this growth has occurred in the last fifteen years, especially since the incident in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Almost every believer I know has come to know Christ since then. One friend stated, "When that happened, I knew the government had lied to me," and he began to search for answers.

The simplicity and power of worship in the house church setting is deeply moving. There is something wonderful and powerful about small groups of believers gathering together, in spite of the threat of persecution, to worship Christ. Every one contributes, every one shares.

People usually come to faith in these settings, not in response to a specific appeal, but rather after the meeting concludes. After the meeting there is almost always an informal time of fellowship and regularly someone will approach one of the leaders and, in various forms, say, "I experienced something different, something wonderful here. I want to become a Christian. Tell me how I can become a follower of Jesus."

The house church movement is maturing rapidly. Now there are a number of large house church networks that are national in scope and highly organized. At least five of these networks number three million or more believers each. These networks are transforming China. However, they are also being targeted by the government and severely persecuted.

In our city, there are many house church groups. The majority of these groups are small and have little structure or connection to other Christian groups. These groups are, for the most part, ignored by the local officials. However, the large house church groups, which have extensive networks connecting churches across many provinces, are viewed as a serious threat by the government. They are large and organized; therefore, they must be suppressed. This is the real locus of persecution in China.

On one occasion I had the privilege of meeting with eight leaders of a large house church network. This network numbers well over three million believers and is growing rapidly. For this

reason, it has experienced intense persecution. We had a wonderful time of sharing and prayer. Several things amazed me about this group.

First, they were so young! All but the senior leader were still in their twenties and most had been in ministry for at least ten years.

Secondly, they were all, with one exception, women. The Chinese church is about 80 per cent female. Women are a crucial, indeed the dominant, force in the Chinese church. If you take away the women, you do not have much of a church.

Third, they had all, with one exception, spent time in prison. One lady had memorized large amounts of the New Testament, including the Gospel of John, the book of Acts, Romans, and Revelation, because when she was in prison they took her Bible away. They beat her, shocked her with a cattle prod, and told her not to pray or witness. Nevertheless, she continued to pray and to witness. As a result many prisoners accepted Christ as Lord. We heard wonderful stories of prison cells becoming house churches.

I vividly remember on one occasion when house church leaders from two different networks met together in my home. It was fascinating watching how they interacted with each other. There were three key questions that they asked each other. It was apparent that these three questions touched upon matters they viewed as significant and foundational for church leadership. First, they asked about their conversion experience. Second, they wanted to know about their call to ministry. Finally, they asked about their experience of persecution (i.e., their time in prison). Their conversion, their call, and their suffering—these were the marks of a true minister. I could not help but compare this list with the list of qualifications we look for in most churches in the West. There was something very basic, very compelling, and very biblical about their approach.

About six months ago a pastor and high-level leader of one of the largest house church networks in China visited my apartment. The senior leader in their fellowship had recently been imprisoned. This has signaled the beginning of a new wave of persecution directed at this particular group. This man, about 45 years of age, sat in my living room and shared how the persecution was

impacting his life. He was on the run and his future was very uncertain. He had spent time in prison in the past and he was prepared to return if need be. He told of how his apartment was watched and how he had been harassed. The last time he was arrested, a group of police officers burst into his apartment at one in the morning. His 15 year-old daughter woke up and was terrified as she saw the officers drag her father from their home. The pastor was deeply moved by this memory. The thought of his traumatized daughter and her perceptions as she watched him being dragged away as a criminal were still fresh in his mind.

More recently, a Bible school operated by one of the house church networks in our area was raided by the police. The thirty students and three faculty members were arrested. Most of the students were released after a week, but two students and two faculty members were kept in custody in very difficult conditions for over a month. One faculty person was kept under house arrest for three months. Some of the students and faculty were interrogated for up to 48 hours in one setting and not provided adequate food or clothing. This sort of treatment is not unusual, but rather is the norm. Yet, in spite of these hardships, boldness and joy characterize house church believers.

5. Conclusion

Church life in China today is filled with paradoxes. While Christians meet openly for Sunday morning worship in a TSPM church, house church believers are arrested and imprisoned. One city or region may experience considerable freedom, while another city or region allows little or no public expression of faith. Some house church Christians are ignored, while others, especially those associated with large networks, are closely monitored and targeted for suppression. Clearly, the context in China is complex and it defies simplistic, black and white judgments or descriptions. Nevertheless, our brief summary of the church and persecution in China has illuminated the following points:

- 1) Since the communist takeover in 1949, the church in China has faced many difficult periods of persecution, some more intense than others. Fortunately, the dark days of the Cultural Revolution are past and today the situation is much improved.
- 2) While TSPM churches meet openly, they do so with significant limitations imposed upon them.
- 3) Christians who worship in TSPM churches, and their leaders, are often godly people who openly identify themselves as Christians and seek to impact their country for Christ.
- 4) Nevertheless, the vast majority of Christians in China choose to worship in house churches that do not submit to government regulations and control.
- 5) These house churches, especially the networks that are large and highly organized, are targeted by the government and are the object of deliberate and sustained persecution.

We have noted that the dark days of the Cultural Revolution are a thing of the past. Nevertheless, persecution is an all too real experience for many Christians in China today. It continues to exist and often in very flagrant and extreme forms. The following chapter highlights the nature of this on-going, state-sponsored persecution by focusing on one well-documented episode.

¹ This song and the others that follow in this book are my English translations of songs found in Lu Xiaomin, *Xin Ling Zhi Sheng* [Sounds of the Heart] (underground house church publication, 2003). Lu Xiaomin and her songs are known and loved by house church groups throughout China. I asked one Chinese friend how many believers knew about these songs, and he answered, "All the house churches sing them!" *Sounds of the Heart* is a recently updated and expanded version of *Songs of Canaan*, her previous and hugely popular song book. *Sounds of the Heart* contains 900 songs and is the closest thing to an "official" song book that exists in the house churches today. In view of their popularity and impact, the songs penned by Lu Xiaomin clearly represent an important

insight into the Chinese house church movement. The song offered here is song #592 and found on p. 652. The songs in this book and five additional songs penned by Lu Xiaomin will appear in Luke Wesley's second book, scheduled to be published in 2005 by Authentic Media, Milton Keynes (U.K.), MK1 1QR. A condensed form of this chapter and various excerpts will also appear in this book.

CHAPTER 2

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN CHINA: ONE COMMUNITY'S STRUGGLE

We Are an Invisible Army

We are an invisible army

We are evangelists without names

If God helps us, who can stand against us?

"Charge forward" is our battle cry

The blood of martyrs spilled over thousands of years,

Cries out to those of us who follow

The throng of saints over thousands of years,

In ragged clothes, drifting, yet not discouraged

On the battlefield these soldiers were tested

In strong winds and waves these helmsmen were tried

In these last days we will face even greater trials

So we constantly ask the Lord for His guidance.¹

In June of 1998, as President Clinton was being wined and dined by top-level Chinese government officials, Christians in the southern part of Yunnan Province were being systematically persecuted by local officials. Persecution is nothing new for the believers living in Honghe (Red River) County of Yunnan Province, yet this new wave of hostility appeared to be particularly severe. Incredibly, a detailed account of this persecution has been provided by the *Honghe County Newspaper*.² Using rhetoric reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, the article, entitled "Our County's Lawful Efforts to Punish Illegal Religious Activity in Luo'en Township Meet with Initial Success," gives a blow by blow

account of the government's meticulously planned efforts to intimidate, fine, and imprison local Christians.

1. Strong Measures

The article begins by announcing that "in order to maintain public order," local officials have adopted "strong measures." These "strong measures" are required, because "a group of illegal religious organizations which violate the spirit of socialism and disrupt the construction of civilization have appeared." While these illegal organizations have infected five townships in the county, "illegal activity is most rampant in Luo'en Township," where eighteen meeting points have been utilized by the 235 families and 425 people engaged in these nefarious activities.

The leaders of these illegal religious groups are characterized as people who "have created and spread fallacious rumors" in order to "realize their wild ambitions and satisfy their selfish desires." The teaching of these "so-called missionaries" (obviously Chinese Christians) is then described in language calculated to generate animosity. These "religious ring-leaders" are said to proclaim that while "believers are noble, non-believers are maggots, devils, and low-lives." The Christians also purportedly slander the Hani minority and repudiate their customs. Furthermore, they disrupt social order by blocking "the implementation of the government's family planning policy" (i.e., the notorious one-child policy).

The article describes in considerable detail the "strong measures" taken by local Communist Party officials and government leaders. The extensive resources—including a force of 98 persons, "all very professional and of high political quality"—and careful planning devoted to this problem, culminated in a pre-dawn raid early on June 13. At two in the morning, the 98 members of the recently formed, "Ban Illegal Religious Activity in Luo'en Township Work Group," separated into three groups and "launched their attack, rushing toward their prearranged objectives," three villages in Luo'en Township. The group attacking

Suoma village met two believers with a knife who attempted "to block the work group from carrying out their official business." These men were quickly arrested. In Yangpu village, the home of a "religious ring-leader" was raided and "over 20 illegal evangelistic books" were seized, including "A Complete Bible: Old and New Testaments," a book entitled *The Three-Self [Church] According to Scripture*, a hymnal, and *A Commentary on First Corinthians*.

Later that same day, government leaders issued a public proclamation entitled "The People's Government of Honghe County Announces a Ban on Illegal Religious Activity." This public notice, another excellent source for documenting the extent of the persecution in this region, states that "a few lawless persons cloaked in religious garb are spreading heretical ideas which are harmful to the masses and our society." The notice included the following directives:

- 1) All religious meetings associated with places which have not been registered with the government and received government approval are illegal and will be strictly banned.
- 2) All people will be prohibited from engaging in illegal religious activity, regardless of the means, methods, or location.
- 3) The leaders of these illegal religious organizations and activities must immediately stop their illegal activities and, by June 14-20, 1998, go to the appropriate government offices of their respective administrative villages and townships and give an accounting of their actions. If their attitudes are good, they will be treated with leniency. Otherwise, they will be severely punished. Those who have participated in these illegal activities must simply refrain from further involvement and the government will not investigate the matter further.
- 4) This announcement is effective as of the date of publication [June 13, 1998].

2. Zero-Tolerance

This public notice and the previously mentioned article frequently speak of “illegal religious activity,” defined as religious activity associated “with places which have not been registered with the government and received government approval.” What both documents fail to mention is that not a single church or place of worship in the entire county has received government approval. Local believers have indicated that this was the case despite frequent attempts by the Christians of Honghe County to obtain this official recognition. It is thus clear that the ban on “illegal religious activity” is in reality, at least in this region, a ban on all Christian activity.

A complete lack of tolerance for any expression of the Christian faith is also evident in the authorities’ seizure of basic Christian literature, the kind utilized by Christians all over the world. Books so fundamental to the Christian faith as the Bible, a worship hymnal, and a commentary on scripture were described by the authorities as “illegal evangelistic books.” Furthermore, the zero-tolerance posture is reflected in the slanderous tone of the newspaper article, which characterizes the Christians as “criminals” who have no respect for their own minority culture and the government. In one instance, the article describes the persecuted band of Christians in Luoan Township as a “a large, evil force which opposes” the efforts of the government to restore order. However, the fact that the Christians of Honghe County have been stripped entirely of their freedom to worship is revealed most clearly in the strong-arm tactics employed by the government to suppress them.

The public notice, cited above, declares that “the leaders of these illegal religious organizations” must go “to the appropriate government offices of their respective administrative villages and townships and give an accounting of their actions.” We are told that “if their attitudes are good, they will be treated with leniency. Otherwise, they will be severely punished.” The matter of punishment was also stressed in a speech given by the

Vice-Secretary of the county's Communist Party and the Chairman of the work group noted above, Dou Yuntao. After the early morning raid, Duo exhorted his comrades to "use administrative, economic, and legal sanctions to punish the ringleaders and to hold criticism sessions for ordinary believers." He also called for the arrest of four leaders who had escaped and urged his subordinates to "quickly bring them to justice." His final exhortation was to "continue to energetically carry out the enforcement work for an extended period, so that the illegal religious activity might be completely eliminated." County Vice-Deputy Li Puzhong, a man who has persecuted Christians in this county for over a decade and who has also, over this period, continued to rise in the ranks of the government, sounded a similar note. On the day after the raid, utilizing chilling Cultural Revolution era rhetoric, he exhorted the "temporary occupation and search work group" (in other words, the mop-up team) to "unify the thinking of the people, deepen understanding, act in close coordination, and fight side by side." He also encouraged them to "mobilize and rely upon the masses in order to eliminate illegal religious organizations and activity." Finally, Vice-Deputy Li declared that their aim is "to clear away decadent and ignorant 'culture' from the minds of the people" and "strongly propagate the policies of the Communist Party." Currently, the article states, six villages in Luo'en Township are being temporarily occupied, while "the work of rooting out and eliminating" illegal religious activity "continues to develop in an aggressive and orderly manner."

Local believers have shed further light on this troubling public account of the persecution in Honghe County. They confirm that there has been a long history of persecution in the county. Over the past ten years, Christians have frequently been harassed, fined, and imprisoned. Yet this wave of persecution appears to have been especially severe. As the public notice cited above indicates, Christians have been summoned to government offices to "give an accounting of their actions." Private accounts help us understand more fully the nature of these meetings. Christians are normally told that if they are unwilling to renounce their faith and refrain from meeting with other believers, they will be fined. The fines

normally range from 300 to 400 RMB (Chinese dollars) per person, the equivalent of three or four months worth of wages. If they are unable to pay this fine in cash, their livestock, crops, or possessions are confiscated. However, if the believers are willing to sign a document (sealed with a finger print) signifying their rejection of Christianity, they are promised that they will not be fined. They are warned that if they do sign the statement and later return to their Christian practices, they will be fined double the original amount. This gives fresh meaning to the government's declaration that "if [the Christians'] attitudes are good, they will be treated with leniency. Otherwise, they will be severely punished."

3. Tragic Results

The reference by government officials to severe punishment was not an idle threat.

At 2:00 a.m., early on the morning of the 13th, the work group [totaling 98 men] separated into three groups and boldly and powerfully launched their attack, rushing toward their prearranged objectives: the villages of Suoma, Yangpu, and Taian. Two believers in Suoma village, Li Hukan and Li Huli, grabbed a knife and attempted to block the work group from carrying out their official business. These men were lawfully arrested.

This is how the *Honghe County Newspaper* described the tragic events which took place in the early hours of June 13, 1998.³ Yet the plight of Li Huli, one of the Christians attacked and arrested in this pre-dawn raid, casts further light on these deeply disturbing events in Honghe County. Local believers provided the following chilling account of the last days in the life of Li Huli, a twenty-three year-old Christian man.

Around 3:00 a.m. on June 13th, Public Security Bureau (PSB) officers burst into the home of Li Huli. Initially, he was startled and, not knowing who his attackers were, he grabbed a knife. After

the officers burst in they quickly knocked him to the floor and, although by this time he had dropped his knife and was not resisting the officers, they continued to beat him, savagely kicking him in the groin.

Later that morning, a badly beaten Mr. Li was placed in prison and, in spite of his injuries, was not offered any medical care. While in prison, Mr. Li was repeatedly beaten by the officers. Shortly before his death, Mr. Li told a visitor to pass on a message to his father. (The pre-dawn raid was actually designed to trap his father, a prominent Christian leader in the area. However, Li's father was staying with friends at the time and was not captured.) Mr. Li told the visitor to warn his father not to return home. If his father returned home, Li warned, the local authorities would surely arrest him and beat him to death.

On the evening of September 30, 1998, shortly after this visit, Mr. Li died. When the Public Security Bureau notified the family of Li's death, family members asked, "How did he die?" The PSB simply responded, "He died of sickness." The family asked for a hospital record indicating the cause of death, but none was available. Although the family stated that they wanted to bury the body, the PSB disposed of the corpse at 10:00 p.m. on the same night of Mr. Li's death and did not allow the family to view the body.

This account of events is substantiated, at least in part, by the terse legal document which describes the investigation of the accusations against Li Huli, an investigation cut short by his death (see Document #36 of the 1998 Honghe County Criminal Record).

The family contacted a lawyer, but to my knowledge they have not seen any results. Mr. Li's father was forced to remain in hiding. Such is life for one Christian family in southwest China.⁴

4. Lessons for the Future

The Honghe episode highlights the reality of on-going, state-sponsored persecution of Christians in China. It is ironic that

this wave of persecution coincided with President Clinton's highly publicized visit to China. Indeed, as decisions were being made in Beijing concerning how best to host the Clintons, officials in Honghe County were plotting how best to crush the Christian movement in their area. The newspaper article detailing the meticulous and systematic nature of the persecution in Honghe County was printed while President Clinton was still in China. It is quite probable that on June 28, while President Clinton was speaking in a church in Beijing, Christians in Honghe County were being interrogated, fined, and imprisoned. I point this out, not to suggest that President Clinton's visit to China was inappropriate; nor would I deny that China has made important progress in the area of religious freedom. But I make the contrast, because I believe it illustrates the complexity and urgency of the situation in China.

While one region may allow Christians a considerable degree of freedom, another area may be intolerant of any expression of the faith. Even in Yunnan Province, home to Honghe County, the situation is very uneven. Many cities and villages have thriving churches, a large number of which are recognized by the government. Bible schools and training centers are also permitted to exist in some areas. Nevertheless, the plight of the Christians in Honghe County is real, and it is certainly not unique. Clearly, much progress is needed if all of China's citizens are to be guaranteed even a modicum of religious freedom.

The situation in Honghe County is highly disturbing for several reasons. First, there is the obvious disregard for a basic human right, the right to worship. This is a right which is clearly affirmed in the *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*. Article 36 declares that "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ...may discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities." Furthermore, Article 35 states that citizens of China "enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association." The treatment of Christians in Honghe County is not only inconsistent with international standards of conduct, it also contradicts Chinese law. Therefore, it is especially appropriate for the international community to

encourage the Chinese government to investigate matters such as this and act in accordance with its own commitment to uphold the basic rights of religious believers.

A second disturbing feature of this incident is the obvious attempt on the part of local government officials and the *Honghe County Newspaper* to slander the Christians in this region. To describe Christians as an "evil force" that demeans others and threatens "public harmony" by engaging in "illegal activities" is misleading and slanderous. The twisted statements and outlandish rhetoric contained in the article merely serve to verify the depth of the prejudice against Christians in this region.

Third, and perhaps most disturbing of all, is the fact that two public documents (the newspaper article and the public notice) describe in great detail the methodical manner in which the government has, and continues, to persecute these Christians. This persecution is no secret, furtively hidden from the eyes of China's officials. Rather, the sad narrative, which implicates county and state officials, is chronicled for all to read as if the state is actually proud of its actions. Indeed, the article praises "the correct leadership of the County Communist Party Committee and government" for its work to "eliminate and uproot these illegal religious organizations and activities." The article also gratuitously highlights "the hardships" endured by County Communist Party Secretary, Zhang Jun, on his "long and hurried journey" to Luoen Township. The names of numerous other officials responsible for this brutal suppression of religious liberty are listed as well. This indicates that the problem is not a matter of ignorance. It appears that the Chinese government is simply unwilling to protect the rights of many Christians in numerous locations throughout China. If the local leadership is unyielding, so much the worse for the Christians under their jurisdiction.

Honghe is an example of what life can be like for Christians in today's China. It is also an excellent test for China's leadership. Will they tolerate this sort of brutal suppression of religious liberty? Will they allow systematic, state-sponsored persecution to continue and go unchecked? Will the government officials in Honghe County who are responsible for these activities be punished? I hope

the international community will take an interest in the plight of the Christians of Honghe County and raise these questions until satisfactory answers are provided. I also hope and pray that the Chinese government will deal with this matter and ensure that their own laws concerning religious freedom are enforced, even in Honghe County.

¹ Lu Xiaomin, *Xin Ling Zhi Sheng* [Sounds of the Heart], p. 585 (Song #524).

² June 30, 1998 issue, p. 4. A number of supporting documents, including my English translation of this newspaper article, are contained in the Appendix.

³ See the article entitled, "Our County's Lawful Efforts to Punish Illegal Religious Activity in Luo'en Township Meet with Initial Success," in the June 30, 1998 (p. 4) issue of the *Honghe County Newspaper*.

⁴ The plight of Mr. Li and the nature of the "strong measures" used to suppress Christians in Honghe County are recounted in two short sections of Luke Wesley's second book, scheduled to be published in 2005 by Authentic Media, Milton Keynes (U.K.), MK1 1QR.

Part Two

Pentecostal

CHAPTER 3

IS THE CHINESE CHURCH PREDOMINANTLY PENTECOSTAL?

The Wind of the Holy Spirit Will Blow Everywhere

From the East coast to the West coast

The wind of the Holy Spirit will blow everywhere

From the East to the West

The glory of the Holy Spirit will be released

Good news comes from heaven

Good news rings in the ear

Causing dry bones to become moist

Frail bones to become strong

Full of the Holy Spirit, we will not turn back

Step by step we go to distant places

The lame skipping

The mute singing

The fire of the Holy Spirit

The longer it burns the brighter it gets.¹

It is now apparent that since the early 1980s the church in China has experienced unprecedented growth. Once viewed as an essentially foreign faith, Christianity has taken root in the Chinese soil. And it has blossomed. If the trends of the past two decades remain constant, by 2020 there will be more evangelical Christians in China than in any other country in the world.²

Researchers agree that the form of Christianity that has emerged in China is both evangelical in character and Chinese in expression.³ It is evangelical in that the vast majority of Chinese believers exhibit a firm belief in the authority of the Bible, faith in

Christ as the sole means of obtaining salvation, and the necessity of evangelism.⁴ And yet this evangelical faith has been expressed in ways that are especially appropriate to the Chinese context. Church life is often experienced in small groups that feature close relationships and family ties. There is a strong emphasis on the miraculous, with prayer for healing taking on an important role in the life of faith. The experiential dimension of Christian spirituality, expressed in prayers and worship charged with deep emotion, is significant to many Chinese believers. And the vast majority of Christians in China worship in “house churches” (or, as some prefer, “autonomous Christian communities”) that are independent of state or foreign control.⁵

Observers in the West are still attempting to understand this burgeoning Christian movement and much is still unknown. It is evident that there is much to be learned from the Chinese church, dynamic, multifaceted and polymorphous as it is, and that we in the West would do well to attempt to understand it more clearly. This is the case, not only because increasingly many western missionaries seek to minister in this great country, but, it is also the case because an understanding of the church in China might shed light on ourselves, our own strengths and weaknesses, and stimulate new insights into our understanding and application of God’s word. In short, a greater understanding of the church in China might help us more fully understand and fulfill God’s plans and purposes for our lives.

In the following chapter, I hope to shed light on one dimension of the church in China or, at the very least, to stimulate more thought and study concerning this question: To what extent is the church in China Pentecostal? It would appear that there is considerable disagreement in the West concerning how this question should be answered. On the one hand, *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (NIDPCM) states that there are over 53 million “neo-charismatics” (that is, charismatics with no affiliation to the traditional, mainline denominations) in China today.⁶ This significant number would certainly represent the vast majority of believers in China. On the other hand, Tony Lambert, in his highly readable and well-researched work, *China’s Christian Millions*,

makes this judgment with reference to the Chinese church: "There is a strong wing who are charismatic or Pentecostal, but they are not in the majority."⁷ These varied responses to the question posed above indicate that further probing and analysis is needed. Is the Chinese church predominantly Pentecostal? To this question we now turn.

1. Methodology

In order to answer this question, I shall analyze the five largest house church networks in China. Based on my own personal interviews with leaders from these groups, additional information gleaned from other researchers, and an analysis of relevant written documents, I will seek to characterize these five groups in terms of the following four categories:

- 1) Non-Charismatic: those Christians who believe that the Spirit's work flows out of regeneration and who deny both a baptism in the Spirit distinct from conversion and the validity of at least some of the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10 for the church today.
- 2) Charismatic: those Christians who believe that all of the gifts listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10, including prophecy, tongues, and healing, are available to the church today.
- 3) Pentecostal: those Christians who believe that all of the gifts listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10 are available to the church today and who also believe that the Bible encourages every believer to experience a baptism in the Spirit, an empowering for service distinct from regeneration.⁸
- 4) Classical Pentecostal: those Christians who, in addition to the beliefs ascribed to Pentecostals above, also affirm that speaking in tongues is the accompanying sign of baptism in the Spirit.

I am using the terms listed above as theological rather than ecclesiastical descriptions. The *NIDPCM* tends to define the terms based largely on ecclesiastical considerations. Therefore the

NIDPCM classifies 99 percent of the 54.2 million Pentecostals and charismatics who it claims reside in China as “neo-charismatics.” The term “neo-charismatic” refers to charismatics not affiliated with the historic, classical Pentecostal groupings or to traditional, mainline denominations.⁹ Of course, by definition, virtually all of the charismatic house church Christians in China would fall into this category. This system of classification is less helpful for elucidating the specific nature and theological orientation of the various groups in the Chinese church. We are primarily interested in what they believe.

I would also like to stress that my use of these categories does not imply that groups which hold certain beliefs in common are similar in other respects. The Pentecostal movement in the West, as in other parts of the world, is very diverse. This is no less true of China.¹⁰ The church in China is extremely diverse and, while there is value in seeking to understand the theological orientation of the various groups more accurately, I would in no way want to suggest that groups who hold to Pentecostal beliefs and practices in China are similar in a multitude of other ways to their western counterparts. Since our terms or categories often carry unstated nuances, it is vitally important that we define our terms carefully.

It should also be noted that all of the categories listed above are compatible with the term “evangelical.” With the designation evangelical, I refer to those Christians who affirm: 1) the authority of the Bible; 2) that salvation is found only in Christ; and 3) that evangelism is an important part of the Christian’s mission in the world. As I have already noted, the vast majority of Chinese Christians are evangelical in this sense. And, I might add, all five of the house church networks which we will analyze are also evangelical in nature.

In addition to defining key terms, I would also like to clarify the nature of my sources. I will be working with a variety of oral and written sources. First, I will utilize notes from my personal conversations and interviews with various house church leaders. Second, I will also draw upon responses to questions which I have posed to others who are experienced researchers of Christianity in China. Most of these researchers wish to remain anonymous so that

their continued service in China might not be jeopardized. For this reason I will describe and list these sources as follows:

- “A”: refers to notes sent to me on August 28, 2003 by a researcher who is associated with a large, evangelical, and generally non-charismatic denomination.
- “B”: refers to notes sent to me on September 1, 2003 by an independent researcher who is affiliated with a non-denominational mission.
- “C”: refers to notes sent to me on September 9, 2003 by a missionary in the classical Pentecostal tradition, who works closely with house church groups in China.
- “D”: refers to written notes and oral comments presented to me within the past year from an independent Pentecostal missionary who works closely with several of the house church networks listed above.

A third source of information will come from documents drawn up by the house church networks themselves, especially the Statement of Faith produced and signed by leaders of several of the churches listed above on November 26, 1998.¹¹ Finally, I shall also draw from a number of books and articles which speak to this topic.

The five house church networks which I will examine are: China for Christ, a group with origins in the Fangcheng district of Henan Province; the China Gospel Fellowship, a group which began in the Tanghe District of Henan Province; the Lixin Church, which stems from Lixin region in Anhui Province; the Yinshang Church, which also has its origins in Anhui Province; and finally, the Word of Life Church, sometimes called the “Born Again Movement,” which was founded by Peter Xu. These groups have been chosen for analysis because it is generally agreed that they represent the five largest house church networks in China.

It is extremely difficult to determine with any degree of precision the size of these groups. Estimates for these groups run as high as 12 million for China for Christ (Fangcheng), 10 million for the China Gospel Fellowship, five million for the Word of Life, and five million each for the two Anhui groups.¹² My purpose here is not to argue for specific numbers, but rather to affirm that all of the

researchers contacted agreed that these five house church networks represent a significant majority of house church Christians in China. This is especially significant in that virtually all researchers also agree that house church Christians represent the vast majority of Christians in China today. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that these five groups represent a very significant cross-section or sampling of the Chinese church.

2. The House Church Networks: A Theological Assessment

2.1 China for Christ (Fangcheng)

Let us begin with what appears to be the largest of the house church networks currently operating in China, China For Christ (sometimes called the Fangcheng Church). The China for Christ Church began in the Fangcheng district of Henan Province. It has grown very rapidly since the early 1980s and constitutes a large network of house churches which span the length and breadth of China.

On Nov. 26, 2002 I met with the top leader of the China for Christ Network, Brother Z. We met and discussed various items for about an hour and a half and then shared a meal together. While we were eating, Sister D, the second highest leader in the China for Christ Network, joined us.

During our meal Sister D, who was sitting next to me, raised a question about a book on Pentecostal doctrine that I had made available to them.¹³ She suggested that baptism in the Spirit, although possibly an experience subsequent to conversion, could also take place at the moment of conversion. She felt the book implied that Spirit-baptism must take place after conversion. I assured her that we were all in agreement on this point and that when most Pentecostals speak of baptism in the Spirit as subsequent to conversion, we actually mean that it is logically subsequent to conversion, a distinct work of the Spirit. Temporally, both could occur at essentially the same moment (as with Cornelius and his

household in Acts 10). We continued our discussion and Sister D indicated that their church was classical Pentecostal in nature.

Sister D then stated emphatically that their church came to these classical Pentecostal conclusions, not on the basis of receiving this tradition from others; but rather, as a result of their own experience and study of the book of Acts. She indicated that in the 1970s and 1980s they were quite isolated and experienced considerable persecution. In this context of persecution they developed their classical Pentecostal orientation. At this time their church began to grow. Today, as I have indicated, the China for Christ Network is widely recognized as the largest house church group in China.

I then asked the group if they felt the majority of Christians in China were Pentecostal. Brother Z answered and said that apart from the TSPM churches and various smaller house church groups, the vast majority were indeed Pentecostal. He considered, in addition to their own church, the China Gospel Fellowship, the Lixin Church, and the Yinshang Church to be Pentecostal.

On another occasion late in 2002 I had the joy of teaching in an underground Bible school associated with the China for Christ Network. During one of the breaks, the leader of the school showed me around and introduced to me some of the other faculty members. In the midst of our conversation, I noted that their theological tradition was similar (*lei si*) to mine (he knew of my classical Pentecostal orientation). He stopped, looked at me, and said emphatically: "No, our theological traditions are the same (*yi yang*).” Later, with great excitement, he spoke of the hunger for the things of the Spirit in the churches in the countryside.

This evidence, admittedly anecdotal in character, is substantiated by the responses I have received from the other researchers mentioned above. Virtually all of them would agree that the China for Christ group should be classified as classical Pentecostal, although certainly there may be some in this large network that might be best described as Pentecostal.¹⁴

2.2 China Gospel Fellowship

The origins of the China Gospel Fellowship can also be traced to Henan Province. This network of house churches has grown rapidly since the early 1980s and now has evangelists working in virtually every province in China. I have developed close relationships with a young couple sent out as evangelists by this group. This couple has been very effective in planting churches among village people in our region. They are very open to all of the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Cor 12:8-10. Their testimonies are laced with references to healing, visions, prophetic insight, and persecution. They also speak of being “filled with the Spirit,” an experience which enables them to face hardships and adversity. While they do not appear to view tongues as integrally connected to this experience, they do view tongues-speech as a valid and edifying experience. If this couple is reflective of the group as a whole, I would say that the group is Pentecostal. This conclusion is consistent with the judgments of the other three researchers I contacted with knowledge of this group, two of whom categorized the group as, at least, charismatic (A and B). One other (D) indicated that the group is Pentecostal in its orientation.

I have participated in a number of house group meetings associated with this group. The following example, an excerpt from my personal notes, reveals a bit of the excitement and sense of community that characterize these meetings.

On December 23, 2002 I participated in a house church Christmas service. I walked through the door of the small apartment, roughly 600 square feet in all, and entered into the main room. It was very simple, with concrete floors and bare walls. The walls were now adorned with Christmas decorations. One banner proclaimed, “*Pu Tian Tong Qing*” (The whole world celebrates [His birth] together). The crowd grew to the point that the small adjoining rooms had to be pressed into service. All told, around 70 people packed into the little sanctuary.

The people were simple, country people. This house church is situated at the edge of a large city. The people living in this area represent village people who have migrated to the city. Urbanization is taking place at a breath-taking pace in China. In

cities across the country there are large populations of village people attempting to “make it” in the cities. It was apparent that these folks were marked more by the village than the city.

The service [led by the capable young Chinese couple noted above] began and a sense of joy quickly permeated the small make-shift sanctuary. Songs and Scripture readings celebrating Christ’s birth followed. It was then my turn to preach. I greeted the crowd, which now seemed like a large family, and began to share about Christmas.

After the short, simple message, a call to accept Christ as Savior and Lord was given. Nine people responded joyfully. There was a lot of clapping and celebration as they moved to the front of the room. I led the small group in a prayer of repentance, commitment, and thanksgiving and followed with a prayer of blessing.

The next stage of the service was filled with a number of truly amazing and very culturally authentic forms of worship. Small groups of believers, usually two or four, sang songs based on Scripture as they performed Christian folk dances. It was incredible—a wonderful form of worship which instructed and edified the entire group. Everyone entered in and the joy was almost tangible.

When the service finally came to an end, the nine new believers gathered together for instruction. I was especially touched by one family. The husband had just committed his life to Christ. He along with his wife and their small one year-old baby stood together. Their faces beamed with new-found joy.

2.3 The Yinshang Church

This house church network began in Anhui Province in the late 1970s. It claims to have over 20,000 distinct congregations and approximately five million followers.¹⁵

On Nov. 25, 2002, I met with Brother C, the leader of the Yinshang Network. Persecution was a major topic of our discussion. One of Brother C’s colleagues had been arrested a few weeks before our meeting and he was still in prison. After we prayed for this man, Brother C noted that just two days prior to our

meeting the Chinese government had conducted high level meetings with various departments within their bureaucracy. In these meetings they discussed their policy toward the house churches. The government officials concluded that they would strictly enforce new measures which demanded that all house churches register with the government. The government attempted to present this new policy as an opportunity for house church groups to register and receive government recognition. During our meeting, Brother C received many calls from his colleagues asking how they should respond to the new policies. Brother C said they would not register, but wait and see how things developed. He felt that this new policy actually represented a new wave of persecution, not a new opening. In the past, the government had often issued fines for not registering. Now, Brother C stated that, they are intent on arresting people who do not comply. Brother C indicated that they would only register if there were no conditions placed upon them. He stated that currently the government was asking for the names of leaders, the number and names of believers, and the location of their meetings. This was not acceptable to him. Approximately one month after our meeting, Brother C was arrested and imprisoned. He is currently still being held in prison.¹⁶

During the course of this meeting, Brother C stated very clearly that the Yinshang Church did believe in the baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. He stressed that they seek to maintain a balance between the word and Spirit. Although I would not say that this group links tongues with Spirit-baptism in the classical Pentecostal sense, they are indeed Pentecostal. This was explicitly stated by Brother C.¹⁷ It is likely that, in a manner similar to the members of the China for Christ Church (and, I would add, the early Christians in the book of Acts), their experience of persecution has shaped their theology at this point.

2.4 The Lixin Church

This church takes its name from the Lixin region in east central Anhui Province where it was first established. The church was founded around 1980 and was especially strong in Shandong, Anhui, and Henan. It then rapidly spread from this base to other

parts of China. One of the strongest leaders of this movement is a woman.

I have not had much personal contact with this group or its leaders. One research colleague, D, who has had considerable contact with the Lixin leaders insists that this group is Pentecostal, but that they are not classical Pentecostal in that they do not insist on tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism. Another research colleague, A, characterized this group as charismatic with some Pentecostal leanings. B characterized this group as charismatic and C was not able to make a judgment due to lack of knowledge. It would appear that the group is predominantly Pentecostal with some segments perhaps best described as charismatic.

2.5 The Word of Life Church

The origins of the Word of Life Church, sometimes called the “Born Again Movement” by outsiders, can be traced to 1968.¹⁸ At this time, Peter Xu began to preach in his hometown in southern Henan. By 1979 he was leading a group of evangelists whose ministry was now reaching into other areas of Henan. Beginning in the early 1980s they experienced tremendous revival. Many accepted their message and hundreds of churches were established. In 1982 they began to send teams of evangelists to other provinces. The first teams were sent to Sichuan Province. Initially, a number of these teams were arrested and sent back to Henan. However, in spite of these setbacks, the church persevered and finally a strong work was established in Sichuan. This also became a major center of ministry.

In 1982 Peter Xu was arrested and imprisoned. However, he was able to escape from the labor camp and resume his ministry. In 1983 a wave of persecution came and many Word of Life evangelists scattered to other provinces. During this time they developed a “seven point missions strategy” (see below) and sent out other full-time evangelists to plant churches.

By 1988 more than 3,000 churches had been planted. Peter Xu was re-arrested in 1988 for attempting to meet with Billy Graham when he visited China. Xu spent three years in prison and was

released in 1991. Xu was arrested again in March of 1997 and again spent three years in prison. He was released in May of 2000 and now resides outside of China. Since his departure from China, the Word of Life Church has experienced significant fragmentation. In 1998 an article in *Christianity Today* estimated that the church numbered around three million believers. This article also rejected some claims that this group was heretical and concluded that it was evangelical in character.¹⁹

The Word of Life bases its theology on John 3:3-5 and emphasizes that the only way to eternal life is to repent and have a new birth in Jesus. In some respects they are quite charismatic. They love the “Fire Bible,” the Chinese translation of the *Life in the Spirit Study Bible*, pray regularly for the sick, and are very much attuned to the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁰

They have been criticized for supposedly emphasizing that believers must cry for prolonged periods of time in order to be truly saved. Thus, they have been called the “criers” and “the born again movement.” It is true that they are very emotional and frequently cry when they pray, but Peter Xu and other leaders insist that crying is not a requirement for salvation. It is quite possible that in a movement of this size some extremes might be propagated at the grass-roots level which do not in fact reflect the more orthodox views of the leaders.

Their theology, described as a “theology of the cross,” led to the following seven point missions strategy:

- Preach the salvation of the cross in order to make sure one repents and experiences the new birth.
- Take the way of the cross to persevere in faith during suffering.
- Recognize that the TSPM embraces a worldly authority.
- Plant churches (this is the goal of evangelism).
- Build up spiritual life (through spiritual life training).
- Build up fellowship (fellowship in church and with co-workers).
- Grow through planting churches (send out evangelists, plant churches, and establish Bible schools).

My first encounter with this group came in Beijing in October of 1998. I had the joy of meeting with a group of eight Word of Life leaders. The eight leaders, who came from their ministry posts in various parts of China, were, with one exception, all young, in their mid- to late-twenties. Most, however, had already been preaching for close to ten years. Seven of the eight were women. Their testimonies were incredibly inspiring. All but one had been in prison. One young lady who had been arrested along with Peter Xu the previous year had only recently been released from prison.

A colleague of mine asked one young lady, D, if she had been mistreated in prison. In a very matter-of-factly way, she said, "Yes, they beat me." She recounted how the prison officials tried to prevent her from preaching or praying: they beat her and shocked her with an electric baton in the chest. In spite of these difficulties, she was able to minister to many in prison. One prostitute was healed and accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. On one occasion a guard attempted to rape her, but as she prayed the guard fell unconscious and had to be taken to the hospital. Their testimonies of God's faithfulness and protection were filled with many stories of miraculous intervention.

Since this meeting in 1998 I have had considerable contact with various members of this group. On June 4, 2003 I interviewed one of their leaders whom I know quite well. I asked her about her group's attitude toward spiritual gifts and baptism in the Holy Spirit. She confirmed that they were conservative evangelicals. She also stated that:

- They do not encourage speaking in tongues. Although this may rarely happen, it is not really encouraged and a small element in the group would see it as demonic.
- They emphasize healing, but they do not practice prophecy or speaking in tongues.
- They do emphasize the importance of the Spirit's power in their lives, especially in evangelism and ministry. And, although they might connect this with baptism in the Spirit, this appears to be an area where their theology is not clearly

developed. They appear to be open to the Spirit's empowering after conversion, but whether they would describe this as a definite experience available to everyone or connect this with Acts 2 is not clear. My friend did say that they do not emphasize the term, "baptism in the Holy Spirit."

In short, the Word of Life Church represents an interesting mixture of conservative theology and experiential piety. They expect to see miracles, pray for healing, and look to the Holy Spirit for supernatural guidance and deliverance. At the same time, they are generally quite closed to some manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit, such as prophecy and tongues. One researcher, B, after classifying the group as "charismatic," put it this way: "Overall, [the Word of Life Church is] similar to the Southern Baptists in theology (eternal security, etc.). Yet the first time I met Xu he was on his way to try to raise from the dead one of his workers who had suddenly died." According to the definitions I have listed above, I would classify this group as non-charismatic. As I have indicated, they do not appear to see all of the gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 as valid for the church today.

2.6 The House Church Statement of Faith

On November 26, 1998 a group of four house leaders, including the leaders of the China for Christ Network and the China Gospel Fellowship, signed a statement of faith that they had forged together during meetings convened throughout the previous days. This statement represents the most significant theological statement issued by house church leaders to date. It is thoroughly evangelical and organized around seven key headings: On the Bible; On the Trinity; On Christ; On Salvation; On the Holy Spirit; On the Church; and On the Last Things. The statement on the Holy Spirit is especially significant for this study. It reads:

On the Holy Spirit: We believe that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. He is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of holiness. The Holy Spirit

illuminates a person causing him to know sin and repent, to know the truth and to believe in Christ and so experience being born again unto salvation. He leads the believers into the truth, helps them to understand the truth and obey Christ, thereby bearing abundant fruit of life. The Holy Spirit gives all kinds of power and manifests the mighty acts of God through signs and miracles. The Holy Spirit searches all things. In Christ God grants a diversity of gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church so as to manifest the glory of Christ. Through faith and thirsting, Christians can experience the outpouring and filling of the Holy Spirit. We do not believe in the cessation of signs and miracles or the termination of the gifts of the Holy Spirit after the apostolic period. We do not forbid speaking in tongues and we do not impose on people to speak in tongues; nor do we insist that speaking in tongues is the evidence of being saved.

We refute the view that the Holy Spirit is not a person of the Trinity but only a kind of influence.²¹

This statement contains several significant declarations that highlight the Pentecostal leanings of its framers. First, the notion that charismatic gifts were given only for the apostolic period (cessationism) is explicitly denied: "We do not believe in the cessation of signs and miracles or the termination of the gifts of the Holy Spirit after the apostolic period." Thus, it is not surprising that the statement also declares that the Holy Spirit "gives all kinds of power and manifests the mighty acts of God through signs and miracles." This statement, at the very least then, identifies the framers and the house church groups they represent as charismatic.

But there is more. This statement contains another significant declaration: "Through faith and thirsting, Christians can experience the outpouring and filling of the Holy Spirit." Since this "outpouring and filling" may be received by Christians, this phrase must refer to a work of the Spirit subsequent to (at least logically, if not temporally) the regenerating work of the Spirit experienced at conversion. Although the purpose or impact of this gift is not explicitly stated, it is interesting to note that the language used to describe the experience (i.e., "outpouring and filling") is drawn from the book of Acts.²² It seems obvious that a strengthening or empowering of the believer by the Spirit in accordance with the

experience of the early church as recorded in the book of Acts is in view here. The only prerequisites for receiving this gift which are listed in the statement are “faith” and “thirsting.” Surely this is another way of saying that this gift is available to all earnest believers who desire it. This statement then speaks of an empowering by the Spirit that is distinct from conversion and available to every believer. It thus identifies the framers as not only charismatic, but Pentecostal as well.

Finally, let us examine the reference to tongues: “We do not forbid speaking in tongues and we do not impose on people to speak in tongues; nor do we insist that speaking in tongues is the evidence of being saved.” Tony Lambert, noting this passage, states: “the careful neutrality concerning speaking in tongues is very far from the extreme teachings current in some charismatic or Pentecostal circles.”²³ It is not entirely clear what Lambert has in mind when he alludes to “extreme teachings current in some charismatic or Pentecostal circles.” Is he talking about the belief held by classical Pentecostals around the world that speaking in tongues is the sign or initial evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit? If so, Lambert not only states that this doctrine is “extreme,” he also implies that this house church statement rejects this doctrine. I would suggest, however, that this “reading” of the statement tells us more about the interpreter’s presuppositions than it does about the intent of the original framers. The phrase, “we do not impose on people to speak in tongues” probably should be taken in light of what follows to mean that they do not force believers to speak in tongues by means of emotional or psychological coercion (e.g., by declaring tongues to be a sign that they are truly believers).²⁴ It is highly unlikely that the framers, with this phrase, were consciously renouncing the initial evidence doctrine of classical Pentecostalism. This seems to be an obvious conclusion in view of the fact that one of the four cardinal framers is the head of a classical Pentecostal group, the China for Christ Network.

The only doctrine that the statement specifically rejects and which is relatively common in evangelical circles in the West is the doctrine that denies the current validity of speaking in tongues. The statement is very clear: “We do not forbid speaking in tongues.” The statement, of course, also rejects the strange and rare notion

that tongue-speech is a sign of salvation. It is possible that this indeed is what Lambert has in mind when he speaks of “extreme teachings,” but it is such a rare and unusual doctrine, certainly not representative of mainstream charismatic or Pentecostal Christianity, that one can only wonder.²⁵

In short, the statement on tongues does not appear to be a rejection of the classical Pentecostal position. However, it does not affirm this position either. It reads like a very diplomatic attempt to steer a middle path between two extremes. It rejects the position of those who would seek to forbid tongues and it refutes those who would seek to use manipulative means to force believers to speak in tongues. In fact, the careful way in which this statement is framed suggests that it is a wise compromise which accommodates both classical Pentecostals on the one hand and charismatics and (non-classical) Pentecostals on the other.

We are now in a position to highlight the implications which the house church statement of faith has for the question at hand. Our analysis has revealed that this statement is indeed significant. With its carefully worded phraseology concerning the work of the Holy Spirit, the statement of faith suggests that its framers and the churches they represent are, at the very least, Pentecostal and perhaps even classical Pentecostal in their theological orientation.

2.7 Summary

I have surveyed what are generally recognized to be the five largest house church groups in China. Collectively these groups almost certainly represent a significant majority of the house churches in China,²⁶ and possibly a majority of the Christian population in China as a whole. In any event, these groups represent a significant cross-section of the church in China. More specifically, I have analyzed the theological orientation of these groups, particularly as it relates to Pentecostal and charismatic issues. My evaluation has been based on my own personal conversations, the findings of fellow researchers, and selected written documents. Although my conclusions must be viewed as somewhat tentative, since hard sociological data in the form of grass-roots surveys are lacking, these conclusions are based on

what would appear to be the most extensive research on this issue available to date.

My research suggests that the five groups should be categorized as follows:

- China for Christ: largely classical Pentecostal, partly Pentecostal
- China Gospel Fellowship: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Yinshang Church: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Lixin Church: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Word of Life Church: largely non-charismatic, partly charismatic

Based on this analysis, I would conclude that the overwhelming majority of the Christians in China today are at least charismatic. This study suggests that 90 percent of house church Christians and perhaps 80 percent of the total Christian population in China would affirm that the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 are available to the church today.²⁷

Furthermore, in the light of the significant strength of the Pentecostal groups listed above, it is reasonable to conclude that a significant majority of the Christians in China today are not only charismatic, but also Pentecostal in their theological orientation. I would estimate that 75 percent of house church Christians and 60 percent of the total Christian population in China are accurately described by this designation.

It is also clear that classical Pentecostals represent a minority of the believers in China, but it is a significant minority nonetheless. This is evident from the fact that what appears to be the largest house church network in China today is best described as classical Pentecostal. I would suggest that approximately 25 percent of house church Christians and 20 percent of the total Christian population in China are classical Pentecostal.²⁸

In addition to these conclusions concerning doctrine or beliefs, some general observations may also be made concerning behavior.

The praxis of the house church movement in China may be described as exhibiting the following characteristics:²⁹

- 1) A strong emphasis on personal experience, often reflected in emotionally-charged prayers and worship. God is understood to be present, personal, and vitally interested in communicating with and relating to individual believers. Exuberant, participatory worship and emotional responses to preaching are quite common and might be described as typical.
- 2) A strong expectation that God will intervene in miraculous ways in the daily lives of believers. House church Christians exhibit a firm belief in God's ability and willingness to work miracles in their midst. Their testimonies often refer to God healing the sick, raising the dead, granting special wisdom or direction, communicating through dreams, visions, or prophetic messages, providing boldness for witness, or granting miraculous strength and protection. This expectation is often expressed in an openness to the gifts of the Spirit and is certainly encouraged in part by such biblical passages as 1 Corinthians 12:8-10.
- 3) A strong sense of their own weakness and dependence upon God. Perhaps due in part to their experiences of marginalization and persecution, house church believers often reflect a keen awareness of their own weakness and a strong sense of dependence upon God's supernatural power and leading. This is reflected in an emphasis on receiving strength and encouragement from the Holy Spirit, often in specific moments of prayer. This perspective is undoubtedly patterned after the experience of the early church recorded in the book of Acts. It is often associated with the expectation that one can receive needed strength or encouragement through a definable experience, regularly described as being "baptized in" or "filled with" the Holy Spirit.

3. Gaining Perspective: A Contextual Assessment

The strong Pentecostal orientation of the church in China is striking, but it should not surprise us. In fact, when the recent revival of Christianity in China is viewed against the backdrop of its historical, global, and sociological contexts, this is precisely what we would expect. Let us examine each of these contexts.

3.1 The Historical Context

One of the striking aspects of Christianity in pre-1949 China was the emergence of strong, vital indigenous churches. These churches were founded and led by Chinese Christians. They were established and operated entirely independent of foreign finances, control and leadership. Although these groups were largely overlooked by missionaries and have been neglected by historians, it is evident that these groups were extremely significant. More recently, Daniel Bays, a noted historian of Chinese Christianity, has highlighted the significance of these groups. Speaking of these independent Chinese Christian groups, Bays writes, "I believe that this sector [of the Christian church] was far more interesting and significant than it might have been thought."³⁰ Bays estimates that by the 1940s these indigenous groups accounted for between 20-25 percent (or 200,000 believers) of all Protestants in China.³¹ Furthermore, Bays notes that these groups have exerted a tremendous influence on the Christianity that has flourished in China since the 1980s:

Moreover, judging from what we know of the churches in China today, it is clear that a great many of the older Christians whose experience dates to before 1949 came out of these indigenous churches.³²

The largest of these groups, the True Jesus Church, was and remains Pentecostal in character. Bays has established important

links between the Azusa Street revival and the key founders of the True Jesus Church.

Alfred Garr, one of the first pastors at the Azusa Street revival to receive the baptism of the Spirit and speak in tongues, felt called to go as a missionary. He and his wife arrived in Hong Kong in October of 1907. The Garrs were joined by a small group of Pentecostals and they began to minister in Hong Kong. Garr's interpreter, Mok Laichi, received the baptism and the gift of tongues. Mok became the founding editor of a Chinese monthly paper, *Pentecostal Truths* (*Wuxunjie zhenlibao*), which was first issued in January of 1908. This paper "directly influenced the North China founders of the first major Chinese Pentecostal church, the True Jesus Church."³³

Another link between the Azusa Street revival and the True Jesus Church can be traced through a Mr. Bernstein, a missionary serving in China who was profoundly impacted by his experience at the altar of the Azusa Mission. After his experience at the Azusa Mission, Bernstein returned to China and, along with a small group of Pentecostals, opened an independent mission station in Zhending (just north of Shijiazhuang) of Hebei Province. In 1912 this group began to publish a newspaper, *Tongchuan fuyin zhenlibao* [Popular Gospel Truth]. This paper, along with the Hong Kong paper noted above, provided inspiration for the early founders of the True Jesus Church. Additionally, two of the key Chinese founders of the True Jesus Church, Zhang Lingshen and Wei Enbo were impacted in Beijing by members of the church Bernstein's group had founded, *Xinxinhui* [the Faith Union].³⁴

These two men (Zhang Lingshen and Wei Enbo), along with Barnabas Zhang, all of whom had Pentecostal experiences that included speaking in tongues, determined that they would form a Pentecostal church in China. They founded their first church in Tianjin in 1917. The church grew quickly and spread to Shandong, Hebei, Henan, Zhejiang, and other provinces. Its key areas of strength were in Hunan, Fujian, and Henan. Hunter and Chan note that the church's "estimated membership was at least 120,000 by 1949" with 700 churches throughout China.³⁵

Another large indigenous Chinese church which was also Pentecostal in nature was the Jesus Family. The Jesus Family was

founded in the 1920s by Jing Dianyin in the village of Mazhuang (Taian County) in Shandong Province. The Jesus Family's worship was marked by prayer for healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy, and other spiritual gifts. The Jesus Family also featured a communal way of life in which everything was shared. The Jesus Family was especially strong in the poorest parts of China. Hunter and Chan provide a wonderful description of the church from a present-day believer's perspective: The church was "a love fellowship, a meeting place for the weary and a place of comfort for the broken-hearted...where you are, there is our home, and our home is everywhere."³⁶ In its heyday in China, the Jesus Family totaled over a hundred communities and around six thousand members.³⁷ The church still continues today in Taiwan.

The Spiritual Gifts Church (*Ling'en hui*) was a loosely knit independent church movement that emerged in the early 1930s. The movement centered in Shandong Province and was linked to the famous "Shandong Revival," which impacted and divided a number of mainline churches and mission organizations. Bays notes that the Spiritual Gifts Church was composed of Chinese churches and pastors "who broke away from denominations or missions that refused to approve their controversial Pentecostal doctrines and practices."³⁸ The church did not develop organizationally and it is difficult to ascertain its strength or influence.

There were, of course, other indigenous churches that were non-Pentecostal in character, such as The Little Flock (*Xiao qun*) established by Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng) in the mid-1920s. And there were certainly a number of non-Pentecostal Chinese church leaders of stature. Wang Mingdao, for example, apparently had a Pentecostal experience in 1920, but later "backed away from full Pentecostalism."³⁹ Nevertheless, the fact remains that of the three largest independent Chinese churches that sprang up in the early part of the twentieth century (the True Jesus Church, the Little Flock, and the Jesus Family), two were Pentecostal. And one of these Pentecostal groups, the True Jesus Church, was by far the largest single indigenous Chinese church group of that era. This fact, coupled with the significant impact of the Pentecostal form of revivalism that swept through China in the 1930s, indicates that the

majority of Chinese Christians prior to 1949, when able to develop their own Christian identity, gravitated to Pentecostal forms of worship and doctrine. It is worth noting, then, that indigenous Chinese Christianity was predominantly Pentecostal.⁴⁰

Tony Lambert points out that today the church in China is generally strong in those areas where historically the missionaries were most active; that is, in the eastern coastal provinces of Fujian, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu. However, Lambert goes on to note that the Chinese church is also very strong in some provinces where the missionaries were not as active, in provinces like Henan and Anhui. He offers no rationale for the growth of the church in these regions, but does note that “the witness of independent, indigenous churches, such as the Little Flock and the Jesus Family, are also vital factors to be taken into account.”⁴¹ What Lambert does not state, but what is especially striking, is this: Strong, indigenous Pentecostal churches were active in these regions prior to 1949 and today, strong, indigenous Pentecostal churches have blossomed in these same regions. It is difficult to deny that the legacy of these early indigenous churches lives on in the Christians and churches birthed in the revivals of the 1980s.⁴² This legacy is conspicuously Pentecostal.

In the light of these historical facts, I would raise this question: If the majority of indigenous Chinese Christians prior to 1949 gravitated to Pentecostal forms of worship and doctrine, why would we expect it to be any different today? The lessons of history suggest that the predominantly Pentecostal character of the contemporary Chinese church should not surprise us.

3.2 The Global Context

If we step back and look at the current revival of Christianity in China from the vantage point of contemporary trends in the global Christian community, again we see that our description of the Chinese church as predominantly Pentecostal is precisely what we should expect. Historians and researchers of Christianity all agree that one of the most significant religious phenomena of the past century (and many would say the most significant) is the astounding growth of the modern Pentecostal movement.⁴³ At the beginning of

the twentieth century, the Pentecostal movement did not exist. Today, there are over 200 million denominational Pentecostals and over 500 million charismatics and Pentecostals around the world.⁴⁴

This movement, which ranks as the second largest family of Christians in the world (after the Roman Catholic Church), has experienced staggering growth, especially in the developing countries of the world.⁴⁵ Over 70 percent of charismatics and Pentecostals worldwide are non-white and 66 percent are located in the Third World.⁴⁶ Today, in continents like Latin America and Africa, a large majority of evangelical Christians are charismatic or Pentecostal. David Barrett estimates that there are now over 126 million charismatics and Pentecostals in Africa, and over 140 million in Latin America.⁴⁷ Charismatic and Pentecostal groups have also grown rapidly in Asia, where they now number over 134 million.⁴⁸ Barrett suggests that over 54 million charismatics, neo-charismatics, and Pentecostals (which he defines largely in ecclesiastical terms) now reside in China.⁴⁹ And, speaking of the Han Chinese worldwide, Barrett claims that by 1985 over 25 percent were tongues-speakers. Furthermore, he states that the proportion of all Han Chinese Christians who are "phenomenologically" Pentecostal or charismatic may be as high as 85 percent.⁵⁰

Even if one remains skeptical regarding the precision of some of these statistics, the magnitude of the movement and the general nature of recent trends cannot be questioned. In view of these trends worldwide, particularly in the developing countries of continents like Africa and Latin America, we would expect that in China too charismatics and Pentecostals would represent a significant and even dominant force within the larger Christian community. This is certainly the case if Barrett's numbers are anywhere near correct. Although this study has attempted to provide more specific, theologically-defined categories for analysis, our conclusions are very much in line with these global trends in general and Barrett's assessment of China in particular.

3.3 The Sociological Context

The reasons for the growth of Pentecostal Christianity worldwide are complex and one should resist the temptation to view these developments totally in terms of naturalistic explanations. Nevertheless, sociologists may provide insight into some of the factors which have encouraged this amazing growth. One of the most striking features of contemporary China is the startling pace of its modernization and economic development. Strange as it may sound, this process of modernization and development may represent a major factor in creating a context conducive for the growth of Pentecostal Christianity.

Ryan Dunch, in a very perceptive article, notes that modernization does impact the religious makeup of a nation. However, he suggests that rather than “producing a straightforward decline in religion,” modernization tends to change its nature. More specifically, Dunch suggests that religion, as it meets modernization, tends to become more voluntary (rather than acquired at birth), individualized, and experiential. These shifts in turn force religious institutions to change accordingly. Dunch views the Pentecostal movement as especially well-suited to minister to the needs of people in societies, like that of China, which are shaped by industrial market economies:

Pentecostal movements, once routinely presented as reactions against modernity, are now being reevaluated as especially reflective of these forces, in their emphasis on the self, and in equipping their adherents, especially in the developing capitalist societies of Latin American and South Korea, with the “values of ascetic Protestantism...so essential for social mobility in a capitalist economy.”⁵¹

We have already noted that Pentecostal doctrine and praxis were particularly appealing to indigenous Chinese Christians in the 1920s and 30s. Certainly many Chinese were attracted to this new form of religion, “which preached good conduct, promised fellowship with divinity, afforded healing and exorcism and offered forms of worship that could be corporate or individual according to

the circumstances.”⁵² And, as Hunter and Chan recognize, “the religious revival of the 1980s suggests that these are still deep needs.”⁵³ It is not unreasonable to suggest, then, that the forces of modernization have, in part, enhanced this sense of need. All of this suggests that China, like other societies being shaped by modernization, represents fertile ground for the seeds of Pentecostal revival.

4. Conclusion

We are now in a position to summarize our findings. I have analyzed the theological orientation of the five largest house church groups in China. My analysis was based on my own personal conversations, the findings of fellow researchers, and selected written documents. I have concluded that these five groups should be categorized as follows:

- China for Christ: largely classical Pentecostal, partly Pentecostal
- China Gospel Fellowship: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Yinshang Church: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Lixin Church: largely Pentecostal, partly charismatic
- Word of Life Church: largely non-charismatic, partly charismatic

These conclusions suggest that the overwhelming majority of the Christians in China today are at least charismatic, and this would include 90 percent of house church Christians and perhaps 80 percent of the total Christian population in China. Furthermore, it is also apparent that a significant majority of the Christians in China today are not only charismatic, but also Pentecostal in their theological orientation. Approximately 75 percent of house church Christians and 60 percent of the total Christians population in China would fall into this category. Finally, while it is evident that classical Pentecostals represent a minority of the believers in China,

it is a significant minority, encompassing approximately 25 percent of house church Christians and 20 percent of the total Christian population in China.

I have also suggested that these findings should not surprise us. Given the strong history of Pentecostalism within the Chinese indigenous churches prior to 1949 and the dramatic growth of Pentecostal churches around the world in recent years, particularly in developing countries, this is precisely what we would expect. I have also noted that Chinese society, which is to a significant degree shaped by the forces of modernization, appears to be particularly fertile soil for the growth of Pentecostal Christianity. Thus, historical patterns, global trends, and sociological factors all serve to strengthen our findings.

By way of conclusion, I might add that this description of the Chinese church is generally not acknowledged in evangelical publications. A case in point are the two excellent and well-researched volumes produced by Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (1994) and *China's Christian Millions* (1999). In these volumes Lambert consistently describes the Chinese church as evangelical, exhibiting a conservative theology, a warm experiential piety, and an openness to the miraculous (especially healing).⁵⁴ However, the strong charismatic and Pentecostal orientation of the Chinese church, expressed in its doctrine and praxis, is consistently neglected. This neglect is evidenced in a variety of ways.

First, there is Lambert's curious description of the house church: "There is a strong wing who are charismatic or Pentecostal, but they are not in the majority."⁵⁵ Lambert makes this claim and yet he fails to define the crucial terms, charismatic and Pentecostal, or to offer any supporting evidence.

Secondly, Lambert rather consistently refers to charismatics and Pentecostals in a pejorative way. He links Chinese charismatics and Pentecostals with divisive extremists,⁵⁶ uncritically cites a very negative assessment by a TSPM pastor of a prophetic utterance,⁵⁷ refers to the "hyped artificial atmosphere of 'healing meetings'" in the West,⁵⁸ perhaps implies that the teaching of classical Pentecostals is "extreme,"⁵⁹ and speaks of some charismatic (and evangelical) churches in the West where "preaching is at a

discount” and the focus has shifted away from the Bible to “the shifting sands of subjectivism and emotionalism.”⁶⁰

Finally, Lambert generally refuses to refer to Chinese groups and individuals as charismatic or Pentecostal even when they clearly are. This is especially striking with respect to the indigenous Pentecostal groups which emerged in pre-1949 China, the True Jesus Church and the Jesus Family. Lambert discusses these groups in both of his books, but, with one exception, fails to mention that they are Pentecostal.⁶¹ Lambert also cites two testimonies that almost certainly come from Pentecostals. The first testimony is cited as illustrating “the authentic spirit of spiritual revival” and offering “insight into the deeper evangelical spirituality of the house-churches.”⁶² Any reference to the Pentecostal nature of this believer’s faith or church is conspicuously absent. The second testimony is so dramatically Pentecostal that Lambert feels compelled to comment: “Not all Christians in China would be as Pentecostal or charismatic as the writer of this letter.”⁶³ This testimony is reproduced in condensed form in *China’s Christian Millions*, but with all of the overtly Pentecostal content discretely edited out.⁶⁴

My purpose here is not to denigrate what are by all accounts two well-researched, highly readable, and extremely valuable books about the church in China. I simply want to suggest that many evangelical researchers appear loathe to acknowledge the dramatically charismatic and Pentecostal character of the Chinese church. I do believe that this is an omission that needs to be rectified. This is particularly the case, since the most capable and prolific researchers writing on the Chinese church for western Christians are evangelicals with apparently non-charismatic leanings, such as Tony Lambert. I trust my comments will be understood in the larger context of my great appreciation for these men, their gifts, their dedication, and their writings.

So, it would appear that a clearer, more objective assessment of the theology and practice of the Chinese church, at least when it comes to charismatic and Pentecostal issues, is needed. I hope this book represents a small step in that direction. We are all inclined to see only what we want to see. This was certainly the case with many of the missionaries who were contemporaries of those first

indigenous Chinese Christians. As Hunter and Chan, speaking of this largely Pentecostal revivalist movement, note:

The missionaries perhaps failed to appreciate the significance of these expressions of popular religiosity, which they compared unfavourably to the quieter and more orderly forms of worship they advocated themselves. As we look back from the 1990s they seem a quite natural form of religious behaviour among peasant communities and recent immigrants to cities.⁶⁵

I do hope that our generation will not make the same mistake. I trust that we will acknowledge and respect the significance of the powerful, indigenous, and largely Pentecostal form of Christianity that has emerged in China over the past two decades.

¹ My English translation of song #747 found in Lu Xiaomin, *Xin Ling Zhi Sheng* [Sounds of the Heart] (underground house church publication, 2003), p. 806.

² Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions* (London: OMF/Monarch Books, 1999), p. 179. In this book Lambert offers what is by all accounts a conservative estimate of the number of evangelical Christians in China: 30-50 million.

³ Due to the limitations of my knowledge, I am not able to include Chinese Roman Catholics in this study. When I use the terms Christianity or the church, it should be understood that I refer to Protestant Christianity and the Protestant wing of the Christian church.

⁴ On the evangelical character of the Chinese church, see Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (Wheaton, IL: OMF/Harold Shaw, 1994), pp. 282-83 and *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 30-33, 45, 48, 188; Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 82; Ryan Dunch, "Protestant Christianity in China Today: Fragile, Fragmented, Flourishing," in *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*, eds. Stephen Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu (London: East Gate/M.E. Sharpe, 2001), pp. 195-216 (215).

⁵ The emphasis on healing and the miraculous in the Chinese church is noted in Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism*, pp. 85, 145-46; Lambert,

Resurrection, pp. 112-14 and *China's Christian Millions*, p. 112; and Dunch, "Protestant Christianity," p. 203. The experiential focus of the Chinese church is highlighted in Dunch, "Protestant Christianity," pp. 203, 215-16 and Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, pp. 85, 140, 155. Some researchers prefer to use the term "autonomous Christian communities" rather than "house church." See in this regard Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 81.

⁶ D. H. Bays, "China" (1907-49), *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley Burgess and Eduard M. Van der Mass (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 58-63 (58).

⁷ Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 45. Unfortunately, Lambert does not offer a clear definition of the terms, "charismatic" or "Pentecostal."

⁸ This empowering experience might be designated by various terms, including "being filled with the Spirit" or "anointed by the Spirit." However, crucial concepts would include the belief that this experience is given by God in order to equip the believer for service, that it is available to every believer, and that it is logically distinct from conversion.

⁹ See "Introduction," *NIDPCM*, pp. xvii-xxiii (viii-xxi); Bays, "China," *NIDPCM*, p. 58.

¹⁰ Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 155, speaking of China, correctly note that "within the Pentecostalist movement one can find relatively restrained as well as exuberant groups."

¹¹ See the English translation provided by Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 60-64.

¹² These numbers are taken from D, but are also very much in line with the estimates given to me by B, with one exception. D did not give an estimate for the number of believers in the Word of Life Church. B noted that the Word of Life group claims that it represents 23 million believers. This group is quite fragmented and it is difficult to take this estimate seriously. In 1998 an article in *Christianity Today* suggested that this group totaled around three million believers (see Timothy C. Morgan, "A Tale of China's Two Churches," *Christianity Today* 42 [July 13, 1998], pp. 30-39). Although it is likely that this group has grown significantly since then, five million appears to be a more realistic number. A and C did not offer specific estimates, but A indicated that these five groups represented

a significant majority (60 per cent) of the house church Christians in China.

¹³ A Chinese translation of William W. Menzies and Stanley M. Horton, *Bible Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 1993).

¹⁴ B, C, and D all affirmed that the China for Christ Network is classical Pentecostal, although B and C suggested that some might be better termed Pentecostal. A's response was more general, and simply acknowledged that this group and the others listed were at least charismatic and very often Pentecostal in orientation.

¹⁵ D provided this information.

¹⁶ This account and two other experiences recounted above in pp. 36-40 will appear in modified form in Luke Wesley's second book, scheduled to be published in 2005 by Authentic Media, Milton Keynes (U.K.), MK1 1QR.

¹⁷ A characterized this group as at least charismatic with Pentecostal leanings; B characterized this group as charismatic; C had little contact with this group; and D characterized the group as Pentecostal.

¹⁸ The material for the following historical and theological survey of the Word of Life Church comes largely from two unpublished papers, both produced by Chinese Christians: one paper, "A Case Study of The Way of Life (New Birth): A Chinese House Church Network," was written in March, 2001 by an outside observer; the other paper, "Our Church History," was written by a Word of Life Church leader in April, 2003.

¹⁹ Timothy C. Morgan, "A Tale of China's Two Churches," *Christianity Today* 42 (July 13, 1998), pp. 30-39

²⁰ The *Life in the Spirit Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Life Publishers, 2003) was first published as the *Full Life Study Bible* (1992).

²¹ See Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 62 for this English translation. I have included the sentence, "In Christ God grants a diversity of gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church so as to manifest the glory of Christ," which is found in the Chinese original, but which is omitted in Lambert's version. This appears to be an editorial oversight.

²² The Chinese characters translated "outpouring" (*jiao guan*) and "filling" (*chong man*) of the Spirit in this statement are also found in Acts 2:17

("pour out") and Acts 2:4 ("filled") of the *He He Ben* translation, the standard and most widely used Chinese translation of the Bible.

²³ Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 64.

²⁴ The Chinese characters translated by the phrase, "do not impose upon" (*mian qiang*) certainly convey the notion of "force." There is perhaps a slight difference in the nuances of the English terms "impose" and "force," with force representing a slightly stronger term. The semantic range of the Chinese term, *mian qiang*, would certainly include the stronger connotations of "force."

²⁵ Only a few "Jesus only" groups, such as the United Pentecostal Church, would affirm this doctrine. These are fringe groups very much out of sync with mainstream charismatic or Pentecostal groups.

²⁶ This conclusion was affirmed by A, B, C, and D. Of course there are other large, significant groups that are non-charismatic, such as the Little Flock. (I might note that I have spoken to one of the leaders of the Little Flock and he indicated that he has had a Pentecostal experience which included speaking in tongues. This experience and his contact with China for Christ leaders have encouraged him to relate more constructively to other church groups.) However, there are also other large, significant groups which are Pentecostal as well. One such classical Pentecostal group which C relates to is 400,000 strong.

²⁷ A word concerning the method used to arrive at these percentages is in order. I have taken the largest five house church groups as representative of house church Christians in China as a whole. I have used the estimated strength of these five churches listed in the methodology section above to arrive at specific percentages. Although these specific numbers may be high, the general proportions they represent are probably relatively accurate. Thus, the percentages for house church Christians were: non-charismatic (10 percent); charismatic (90 percent); Pentecostal (75 percent); and classical Pentecostal (25 percent). I have considered the China Gospel Fellowship and the two Anhui groups to be largely, but not entirely, Pentecostal. This accounts for the variance between the percentages for charismatics (90 percent) and Pentecostals (75 percent). As a result of my own personal observations and my reading of the research available, I have also assumed that in China house church Christians are three times as numerous as Christians affiliated with the TSPM churches. I then estimated, based on my own personal experience, the percentage of TSPM Christians that might be classified as

non-charismatic (50 percent), charismatic (50 percent), Pentecostal (20 percent), and classical Pentecostal (10 percent). This was the rationale, then, behind the final estimates. Note that in the percentages listed above, the numbers for charismatic, Pentecostal, and classical Pentecostal are presented in an overlapping way: classical Pentecostal is a subset of Pentecostal and both are subsets of the broader, inclusive term, charismatic.

²⁸ These conclusions are generally consistent with the assessment of the other researchers consulted: A suggested at least 90 per cent of house church Christians were, at the very least, charismatic; B affirmed that a significant majority were charismatic without stating any specific percentages; C and D also indicated that very large percentages were charismatic and Pentecostal.

²⁹ We have already noted the strong biblical focus of the house church movement and need not repeat it here.

³⁰ Daniel H. Bays, "The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900-1937," in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel Bays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 307-16 (309).

³¹ Bays, "Independent Christianity," p. 310; for similar estimates see Hunter and Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 134 n. 60.

³² Bays, "Independent Christianity," p. 310.

³³ Daniel Bays, "Indigenous Protestant Churches in China, 1900-1937: A Pentecostal Case Study," in *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*, Steven Kaplan (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 124-43 (129).

³⁴ Bays, "Indigenous Protestant Churches," p. 130. Bays also traces a link with a Pentecostal group associated with Pastor M. L. Ryan of Salem, Oregon, which established a Pentecostal center in Shanghai (pp. 130-31).

³⁵ Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 121.

³⁶ Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 121; on the Jesus Family see also Bays, "Independent Christianity," p. 312.

³⁷ Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 121; Bays, "Independent Christianity," p. 312.

³⁸ Bays, "Independent Christianity," pp. 312-13. See also Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, pp. 129-130.

³⁹ Daniel Bays, "Christian Revival in China, 900-1937," in *Modern Christian Revivals*, eds. Edith Blumhofer and Randall Balmer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 161-79 (171).

⁴⁰ Murray Rubinstein, "Holy Spirit Taiwan: Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in the Republic of China," in *Christianity in China* (1996), pp. 353-66 (366) states that the "churches of the Holy Spirit" in Taiwan "have come the furthest toward creating a Christianity that is congruent with basic patterns of traditional Chinese religion" and feels they are on the "cutting edge of Christian progress."

⁴¹ Lambert, *Resurrection*, p. 154.

⁴² See also Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 140.

⁴³ Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 8 refers to the Pentecostal movement as "the most successful social movement of the past century." Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), p. 2 notes that "some historians refer to the 20th century as the 'Pentecostal century.'" See the similar judgment issued by William and Robert Menzies, *Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 15.

⁴⁴ Synan, *Century*, p. 2. The global statistics are conveniently chronicled in D. B. Barrett and T. M. Johnson, "Global Statistics," *NIDPC*, pp. 284-302. See also Synan, *Century*, especially Chapters 14 and 15.

⁴⁵ Synan, *Century*, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁶ Synan, *Century*, p. 383.

⁴⁷ See Barrett & Johnson, "Global Statistics," p. 287.

⁴⁸ See Barrett & Johnson, "Global Statistics," p. 287.

⁴⁹ See the *NIDPC*, p. 58.

⁵⁰ See Barrett & Johnson, "Global Statistics," p. 287.

⁵¹ Dunch, "Protestant Christianity," p. 215 (citing Andrew Walker, "Thoroughly Modern: Sociological Reflections on the Charismatic Movement from the End of the Twentieth Century," in *Charismatic Christianity: Sociological Perspective*, p. 36).

⁵² Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 140.

⁵³ Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 140.

⁵⁴ On the evangelical nature of the Chinese church, see for example Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 282-83 and *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 30-33, 68, and 188. Note also his positive assessment of miracles and healing in the Chinese church in Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 112-14 and *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 117-20.

⁵⁵ Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 45.

⁵⁶ Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 48.

⁵⁷ Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 111.

⁵⁸ Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 120.

⁵⁹ Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 64 and note our discussion of Lambert's interpretation of the house church Statement of Faith above.

⁶⁰ Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, p. 188.

⁶¹ See Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 14, 154, 158, 246, 271; and *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 49-55. The one exception is found in *China's Christian Millions*, p. 49, where Lambert indicates that one of the founders of the True Jesus Church, Paul Wei, was "inspired by the Pentecostal movement." He also mentions various practices of the church, including speaking in tongues. Lambert goes on to discuss the Jesus Family at length (pp. 50-52) without a single reference to their Pentecostal roots or orientation.

⁶² For the testimony see Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 159-62; the first quote is from p. 159, the second from p. 162.

⁶³ For this testimony see Lambert, *Resurrection*, pp. 163-67; the quote is from p. 168.

⁶⁴ See Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, pp. 171-72.

⁶⁵ Hunter & Chan, *Protestantism*, p. 135.

CHAPTER 4

TSPM CHURCHES AND PENTECOSTAL VALUES

Spirit of the Lord Anoint Us Again

The heavens open, the heavens open
The Holy Spirit descends like a dove
Anointing you and renewing me
Life's living water flows like a river, like a stream
Heavenly dove, Spirit of Truth, come dwell forever in our hearts
Take hold of our hands and lead us into the water,
Time and time again
Like a deer thirsts for water from the stream
Our spirits yearn constantly for the Spirit of the Lord
Anoint our hearts and revive us again.¹

The rural church was packed with people. They listened attentively as the minister, a Chinese pastor from Hong Kong with charismatic leanings, spoke passionately about the work of the Spirit. A TSPM pastor and friend had brought us to this place to meet with local believers and speak to them. As the minister from Hong Kong came to the end of his sermon, he challenged the congregation to seek the infilling of the Holy Spirit. He then did something that, in my almost ten years of experience in the church in China, I have never seen a TSPM minister do. He called for anyone who wanted to be filled with the Spirit to come forward for prayer. The believers streamed down to the front of the church. The visiting minister then encouraged me and our TSPM pastor-friend to join with him as he prayed for the people, who now filled the altar

area. I joined him and together we began to pray with and for the believers. Many began to cry out and pray in loud voices. I glanced at my TSPM friend, who was still standing in his pew, wondering how he would respond. I knew that what was happening was unique for most TSPM churches, which tend to shy away from any hint of emotion in their services. As the volume of prayer grew and the prayer time reached its climax, our TSPM friend strode to the front of the church and in a loud voice began to pray a concluding prayer. The message was clear: he was not comfortable with what was happening and felt that he needed to stop the meeting. The believers quickly dispersed back to their seats and the service came to an end.

In the previous chapter, I have depicted the church in China as predominantly Pentecostal. Yet the experience recounted above illustrates the significant gulf that often exists between the largely Pentecostal piety of house church Christians and the very traditional, unemotional, and non-Pentecostal character of most TSPM churches. This reality calls for some explanation and analysis. In the following chapter this is precisely what I would like to provide. Whereas in Chapter Three I focused almost exclusively on the house church movement, in the ensuing pages I would like to describe the TSPM (or government recognized) church's response to Pentecostal theology and praxis. I will begin with a review of the most recent and significant book on the Holy Spirit published within China by the TSPM church. This book offers rare and revealing insights into the perspectives on the work of the Spirit which TSPM church leaders wish to propagate in China. I will then shift from theory to practice and examine what is actually happening in TSPM churches in terms of Pentecostal experience.

1. Theory: TSPM Attitudes toward the Work of the Spirit

In March of 2002, the TSPM church of Hebei Province published a book penned by a TSPM pastor, Jing Jiuwei, entitled, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*.² This book is significant for several reasons. First, since it was written by a recognized TSPM church leader and published in China by the TSPM church, it represents an important description of the theological orientation of the

government-recognized church. Secondly, the book, a lengthy work covering 381 pages, deals with a wide array of topics. The themes it addresses, and more particularly the amount of space devoted to specific questions, helps us identify a number of key issues currently confronting the Chinese church. Thirdly, the way in which the book was written, its sources, format, and approach, offers insights into the way in which theology is being done in TSPM circles in China today. Let's look at this interesting and important book.

The Work of the Holy Spirit offers a systematic study of the work of the Holy Spirit. A wide range of topics are considered in the 23 chapters contained in the book. Traditional topics such as the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's place in the trinity are discussed alongside summaries of biblical topics such as the names of the Holy Spirit and the various operations of the Holy Spirit. What is particularly striking is the amount of space given to topics related to Pentecostal or charismatic concerns. The largest chapters in the book all deal with these issues: a total of 23 pages are devoted to a discussion of the baptism in the Holy Spirit; 27 pages deal with signs and wonders; 29 pages treat the gifts of the Spirit; 38 pages seek to clarify what it means to be filled with the Spirit; and 41 pages deal with spiritual healing and exorcism. The final 38 pages of the book, just prior to the conclusion, discuss the history, nature, and strengths and weaknesses of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements.

The book treats these topics from an essentially evangelical perspective, but one that would recognize the validity of all of the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12 for the contemporary church. The book is not an academic treatise, so there are no footnotes. One unusual feature of the book is the frequent use of extended quotations from other Chinese authors. Unfortunately, there is no bibliography, so it is difficult to track the nature of all of these sources. It is evident, however, that most of these authors are not Pentecostal and generally quite negative in their assessment of the charismatic movement. The book deals with an impressive array of issues, often utilizing a question and answer format. It is packed with useful information and certainly geared toward pastoral issues confronting the Chinese church.

The theological perspective of the book is perhaps most clearly revealed in the sections that discuss the baptism in the Spirit, the fullness of the Spirit, and the charismatic movement. We shall treat these topics in order.

1.1 Spirit Baptism

Jing begins his discussion of baptism in the Spirit by noting how this issue has become a source of contention in the church. He acknowledges that Christians are divided on how to understand this experience. Some, he notes, link Spirit baptism to the rite of water baptism. Others see it as a second work of grace. Still others suggest that it is the same as being filled with the Spirit. Jing rejects all of these explanations.

He understands baptism in the Spirit very much in evangelical terms. Interpreting the key passages largely in the light of 1 Corinthians 12:13, a text he often cites, Jing argues that baptism in the Spirit is the means by which a believer is ushered into the body of Christ. It is, then, the moment when one becomes regenerate, the essential aspect of conversion and rebirth. Jing states, "Baptism in the Spirit is that work of the Holy Spirit which unites the believer with Christ...it enables the believer to become a member of the body of Christ."³

Jing is aware that some would seek to distinguish Luke's usage of the term, particularly as it is applied to the Pentecost account in Acts 1-2, from that of Paul. In fact, he raises the question, "Are there two kinds of baptism in the Spirit?"⁴ But ultimately he provides a negative answer. Baptism in the Spirit, Jing insists, is not a second blessing nor distinct from conversion, but rather the crucial and decisive element of one's conversion and new birth. Jing, then, makes no distinction between Luke's usage and that of Paul and constantly cites Pauline passages, especially 1 Corinthians 12:13, to support his thesis.

His treatment of the Pentecost account in Acts 2 is striking and somewhat puzzling. He argues that baptism in the Spirit and the fullness of the Spirit are two, distinct experiences, although at Pentecost they happened simultaneously in the lives of the believers. This apparently explains why Luke describes the

disciples' experience at Pentecost with a variety of phrases, including "you will be baptized with the Spirit" (Acts 1:5) and they "were filled with the Spirit" (Acts 2:4). Jing, speaking of the Pentecost experience in Acts 2, declares: "This is the first time 'Spirit baptism' and 'the fullness of the Spirit' are linked together (or received at the same time): the former enables a believer to become a member of the body of Christ; the latter enables a believer to serve the Lord."⁵

Jing also insists that the experience of the disciples at Pentecost cannot be a model for our experience today, because "this was the first time the Holy Spirit descended and the disciples represented not only a few people, but the church world-wide."⁶ The logic here is not entirely clear. If the first disciples served as representatives of the whole church, then one would assume that their experience does indeed serve as a model for us today. It is possible that Jing is seeking to assert that the disciples' experience, coming as it did at the pivot of history (i.e., they lived through the crucial events of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection), is unique and unrepeatable. However, this is not clearly stated.

Jing continues to treat the main passages in Acts, including Acts 8, 10, and 19. He generally states his case rather than arguing for it, but he does interpret the bestowal of the Spirit on Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:44) in light of Acts 11:18. This enables Jing to assert that the purpose of Spirit baptism is not tongues-speech, but rather "repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).⁷

In short, Jing consistently interprets the baptism in the Spirit in Pauline terms as that experience through which believers receive new life and become Christians. He makes a clear distinction between this experience, which takes place at conversion, and the experience of being filled with the Spirit, which normally takes place after conversion and is multifaceted in its purpose and impact. Neither of these experiences is necessarily linked to tongues.

1.2 The Fullness of the Spirit

Jing begins his chapter on "Being Filled with the Spirit" by citing two references: Acts 2:1-4 and Ephesians 5:18-20. This is revealing, because according to Jing, the fullness of the Spirit

represents a post-conversion work of the Holy Spirit that incorporates elements of both of these texts. Jing explains, "Actually, when we seek to be filled with the Spirit, we are really seeking to live a more spiritual life, to become a witness for the Lord, and to live for the Lord." To be filled with the Spirit, Jing states, "causes us to reflect the love of Christ in our lives, to live a holy life, a life that is glorifying to him and bears witness to him."⁸

Although Jing paints his picture of the fullness of the Spirit with quick and easy strokes, his real concern is to deal with the problematic issue of tongues. Therefore, the chapter is quite lengthy and focused primarily on addressing this issue. In fact, right at the beginning of the chapter (after the two quotations cited above), Jing speaks of the confusion and problems caused by charismatics who have influenced believers in his province. Later, he writes of his own personal experience as a young man and then a young seminary student. He describes the frustrations he felt at not being able to speak in tongues as a young believer and the disruptive influence of a tongues-speaking friend in seminary. Finally, he describes the largely negative impact of an American Chinese pastor who brought his Pentecostal message and teaching to Jing's seminary. He also recounts his own experience, when he finally did speak in tongues, and dismisses it as not very consequential. Jing writes, "Although I have experienced speaking in tongues, I do not lift up speaking in tongues. I do not think that being able to speak in tongues is especially wonderful, and I have never laid hands on any one and prayed that they might speak in tongues."⁹

These personal experiences highlight some of the key pastoral issues Jing and others have faced. Against this background, Jing proceeds to argue that not all believers are able to speak in tongues. Here Jing follows standard evangelical exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12:29, "Do all speak in tongues?"¹⁰ Jing also insists that tongues-speech is not a sign or evidence of fullness of the Spirit. In fact, although Jing clearly states that we should not forbid speaking in tongues, he also asserts that believers should not elevate tongues nor should we ask God for the ability to speak in tongues. Rather, we should seek love and more beneficial gifts, such as the gift of prophecy.

1.3 The Charismatic Movement

Jing offers a helpful and informative summary of the history of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Following Peter Wagner, he speaks of three waves of the charismatic movement: the first wave represents the Pentecostal movement birthed in 1906 at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles; the second wave refers to the impact of charismatic experiences and teaching in mainline churches beginning around 1960; and the third wave designates the more recent move of the Spirit among evangelical Christians. The origins of the Third Wave are associated with John Wimber and the Vineyard Church.¹¹

Jing proceeds by asking the question, “What factors gave birth to the charismatic movement?” He responds with three answers:

- 1) The lifelessness of the traditional church could not meet the needs of believers.
- 2) Today people are more and more eager for quick success: they want to see results very quickly, and to satisfy their need to see with their eyes and feel with their hearts—the charismatic movement is able to meet these needs.
- 3) Many evangelists and brothers and sisters at first heard many reports concerning the charismatic movement and refused to accept it. But then they met charismatic believers, and became fearful that they might be resisting the Holy Spirit. They said, “If all who love the Lord are fearful, what hope is there for one who loves the Lord to be filled with the Spirit?” So gradually they begin to watch and to try; first once, then twice, and then they turn 180 degrees in the opposite direction and begin to believe anything, and walk down the path of extremism.¹²

The decidedly negative slant of this presentation sets the tone for much of the following discussion. There can be little doubt that Jing is not a fan of the charismatic movement and views it and its influence largely in negative terms. Jing’s summary of the differences between charismatics and evangelicals is relatively neutral and quite accurate: “Charismatics emphasize the dynamic

and external manifestations of the Spirit; for example, speaking in tongues, miracles, etc.” Evangelicals, on the other hand, emphasize the interior work of the Spirit, perhaps most clearly illustrated in repentance.¹³

The more pejorative element comes to the fore in the final section of the book, a section where Jing enumerates the positive and negative ways in which the charismatic movement has impacted the Chinese church. Jing begins by highlighting the positive influences. He states that the charismatic movement:

- 1) Values the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit.
- 2) Highlights spiritual warfare.
- 3) Values the equipping of the saints for ministry.
- 4) Encourages worship with one's whole body and heart.
- 5) Values fervent prayer and preaching.
- 6) Gives generously.¹⁴

Jing, of course, also lists the negative influences of the charismatic movement. He asserts that charismatics:

- 1) Over-emphasize subjective experience.
- 2) Establish an absolute connection between physical illness and demonic influence.
- 3) Quote God's word out of context. Jing writes: "These brothers and sisters do not stress serious study of God's word, but they only strive for experience; they strive to encourage others to seek to speak in tongues and receive other gifts. They unwaveringly hold to various forms of worship as spiritual (e.g., calling out while praying with loud shrieks and cries until one is slain in the Spirit) even though they are not spiritual."¹⁵
- 4) Exaggerate Satan's power.
- 5) Belittle other believers and cause division.

It is evident that Jing feels compelled not only to highlight the deficiencies of the charismatic movement, but also to caution Chinese Christians against acceptance of and involvement in these views and practices. He concludes on a note of warning: "...the

Chinese church blindly advances the cause of the charismatic movement. I still believe this is not appropriate, for if we compare the quality of the faith of Chinese believers with that of the overseas church, there is still a relatively big difference. There are still not enough [in China] who have grasped the truths of Scripture, and in this way, they seek the Holy Spirit without being watchful. My great fear is that they may go astray.”¹⁶

How shall we evaluate Rev. Jing’s book, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*? One could criticize the lack of footnotes, bibliography, or interaction with more recent Pentecostal scholarship. One could quibble with the lengthy quotations that dot the pages of the book or point out that the sources employed tend to reflect a similar, one-sided perspective. One could take exception to the stereotypic criticisms and the condescending remarks. Yet, in the final analysis, one must acknowledge that this is a significant book. It is a book that thoughtfully deals with an astonishing array of issues. It also provides a tremendous amount of information and presents it in a clear and concise manner. And Jing does it all with the passionate heart of a pastor, sensitive to the needs of the Chinese church.

It is also difficult to blame Jing for the lack of balance with reference to his sources. He does attempt to present the views of Pentecostals and charismatics in a thoughtful and fair way, even if at times his summaries miss important points. Pentecostals and charismatics need to pause and consider why Jing’s sources are so dominantly critical. It appears that much of the openness in the West to the things of the Spirit, which to some extent has been encouraged by advances in evangelical and Pentecostal scholarship, has not yet impacted the educated Chinese community. I believe this is in large measure due to the lack of significant books currently available in Chinese which present an alternative, Pentecostal perspective.

Jing’s book is also important for what it implies. The strong emphasis on responding to Pentecostal issues indicates that this is a very real concern for TSPM church leaders in China. Surely Jing would not spend the bulk of his time rebutting Pentecostal views on Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues, if these views were not being propagated among his people. This focus is especially striking, given the relative lack of Pentecostal influence in the

TSPM churches. It may indicate that Pentecostal influence in the TSPM churches is greater than many of our current estimates. More likely, however, it suggests that Jing is attempting to speak to many who are either in or being impacted by the house church movement. In this backhanded way, Jing's book actually supports my own conclusion in the previous chapter concerning the predominantly Pentecostal character of the Chinese church.

Above all, Jing's book illuminates for us the theological perspective of the TSPM church. A book of this nature does not get printed in China, if the church hierarchy is not solidly behind it. This book, penned by a respected TSPM pastor and published by the TSPM church, clearly reflects the preferred position of the TSPM leadership. It is a perspective that many evangelicals in the West will find comforting. It is a perspective that TSPM leaders no doubt feel is safe. In fact, the book can be viewed as an apologetic for the TSPM church over against the house church movement. The message, strikingly similar to the one promoted in the political arena, is this: if you want to avoid chaos, stick with us; we are the only ones who can provide a safe and stable environment. Perhaps Jing's unfavorable comparison of the Chinese church, which he sees as lacking in biblical truth, with its western counterpart, the warnings about quoting Scripture out of context, and his fears that many will lose their way, should all be seen in this context.

The book clearly rejects the Pentecostal understanding of Spirit baptism, with its emphasis on an empowering for bold and defiant witness. Any hint of tongues serving as a sign of Spirit baptism is also flatly denied. This too is significant, for in Luke's scheme, tongues serve as a reminder to the church that we are to be God's prophetic community. Although the validity of the gifts of the Spirit, including the more controversial ones, such as tongues, prophecy, and healing, is affirmed, it is done so in a tepid manner. The strong critique of the charismatic movement, the cautions concerning emotionalism, and an undue emphasis on subjective experience, all serve as important qualifiers. In the final analysis, the message is clear: watch out for those emotional, easily excitable, and at times fanatical Pentecostals and charismatics. As we turn to look at the praxis within the TSPM churches, we shall find that this message is all too often heeded in the extreme.

2. Praxis: TSPM Practice with Reference to the Work of the Spirit

I walked into the church, found a pew, and sat down. It was a large church in a large city. The building was massive and sturdy, built largely of granite block. The architecture, with its tall bell tower and high, vaulted ceilings, evoked images of a bygone era. The atmosphere inside was cold and impersonal. The elderly saints who had gathered were obviously faithful, but largely spectators. Some napped during the sermon, others watched. The service ended and the flock quietly filed out to go to their respective homes.

As I reflected on this particular service, I was reminded that, while there are many very committed and earnest believers in the TSPM churches and numerous churches (especially in the rural areas) that defy the pattern, some general characteristics about church life in the TSPM can be identified:

- 1) The TSPM churches are dominated by the paid clergy, with little involvement on the part of the laity. The large corporate meetings are organized and led by recognized church leaders; small group meetings are generally prohibited or discouraged.
- 2) The large, corporate gatherings are very traditional and formal, with a set pattern of worship that includes the singing of hymns and preaching.
- 3) The atmosphere in the churches is generally somber and serious. Little emotion, including joy or expressions of heart-felt thanksgiving, is displayed.
- 4) The services tend to be quite cognitive, with an emphasis on teaching, but there is little emphasis on corporate worship, prayer for one another, or calls for response. I have never seen an altar call (that is, a call for a public display of one's decision to follow Christ) or any call for believers to come forward for prayer given by a TSPM minister in the context of a TSPM church service.

In short, the TSPM churches tend to be clergy dominated, traditional in worship style, reserved in tone, extremely cautious regarding any display of emotion, and reluctant to issue calls for public response. These characteristics all tend to militate against Pentecostal or charismatic experiences being expressed within the confines of the TSPM church. In what TSPM setting would a normal Chinese believer have opportunity to minister to others through exercising gifts of the Spirit? In what setting might lay believers gather together for mutual prayer and encouragement? What would happen in most TSPM churches if anyone attempted to give a word of wisdom or a word of prophecy? And where would one go to find encouragement and prayer so that they might be filled with the Spirit and boldly bear witness for Christ?

The answer to these questions is quite clear. In a church that is highly institutional, tightly structured, and clergy-led, the very notion of charismatic phenomena represents a significant challenge. In a church that walks a tightrope between remaining faithful to Scripture and not offending powerful politicians, Pentecostal empowering and Spirit-inspired boldness signal problems and conflict. Little wonder, then, that the TSPM church tends to be non-Pentecostal and, at best, cautious concerning the charismatic dimension.

Of course the church in China, including the TSPM church, is not monolithic and, as I have noted, many exceptions to the above descriptions can be found.

About a year ago, I arranged for a team of visiting Christians to minister in a rural village where I had ministered in the past. The team included 12 people. Since the group was rather large, I rented a van and asked the driver to take us as far up the mountain as possible. The village we were to visit is located high in the mountains in a remote and very poor area of our province. The road conditions were rough and finally, with a gasp, the driver pulled over and said that he had driven as far as possible. We would need to hike the rest of the way.

After a short hike, we arrived to the sort of welcome that only rural Christians can give. Believers lined the path singing songs of welcome and encouragement. They led us in this manner into the church. Although the population of the village is less than 200, a sea

of over 250 smiling faces had packed into the church. This village and church is a center of Christian activity in the area and many had come from surrounding villages to worship with us.

The service began and I was quickly reminded that there are few things as humbling as participating in a worship service like this. You see, these rural people assume that everyone can sing. They are wonderful singers and their choirs are renowned for the exquisite beauty of their songs. And, it does no good to protest, visitors must always contribute at least one song. I had prepared the group in advance, so we marched up to the front of the church and sang our Chinese rendition of a few simple choruses. Afterwards, their choir assembled at the front and began to sing. The power and beauty of their worship was breathtaking. Our team sat in awe as these simple people from the mountains—a people who, prior to receiving the gospel a little over one hundred years ago, were viewed as savages—sang songs that would have been welcomed in any cathedral in the world. And then their children's choir sang. It was wonderful.

When the singing came to an end, our team began to share about God's love and his power to change lives. After a couple of testimonies, a visiting pastor spoke from Acts 2 on Pentecost. He shared how God had been pouring out his Spirit on many—men, women, and children—in their church and encouraged the local believers to open their hearts to God's gifts. In spite of the simplicity of my translation, the message struck a chord in the hearts of these people. After the message, we asked for those who wanted prayer to stand. The entire congregation rose to their feet. Our team fanned out among the people and we all began to lay on hands and pray. The Spirit filled the place and many began to cry, shake, and worship with a loud voice. It was Pentecost all over again, but this time in the mountains of China. I had never seen anything like this in a TSPM church. This particular group tended to be rather formal and reserved in their manner and worship. But now, an incredible sense of hunger for and openness to the things of the Spirit permeated the place. Formalities were laid aside as people entered into the presence of God.

I must admit I wondered how the pastor of the church would respond. After I had prayed for a few people, I moved toward the

front of the church in an effort to find him and speak to him. When I finally found him, he was standing with hands raised, tears streaming down his face, and crying out to God.

In the midst of all of this, I noticed that the driver of our van was standing in the middle of the congregation and, with wide eyes, was taking it all in. I walked over and asked him what he thought about all of this. He replied, "This is wonderful. I am deeply moved." I asked him if he knew Jesus. He replied, "No, not yet; but I am ready!" The impact of God's presence and authentic worship was evident. I shared the gospel with this man and then led him in the sinner's prayer. There was a lot of rejoicing in our van that day as we returned home.¹⁷

I have also heard that there have been significant Pentecostal revivals within the TSPM church in various parts of China. For example, several years ago in an area in the southern part of China, what began as a series of worship seminars turned into a significant Pentecostal revival, with many being baptized in the Spirit.

A friend of mine also reported the following story. In 1994 a group of pastors from one minority group began to speak in tongues. They had many questions about this experience and mentioned it to my friend. It was determined that a Malaysian Chinese pastor, a charismatic believer, would come and share about baptism in the Spirit from a Pentecostal perspective. This brother came at the invitation of local TSPM leaders for a series of four meetings in four separate TSPM churches. The churches were packed with around one thousand believers in each instance. Church leaders from several different counties attended. During the first service, there was a tremendous response to the message. The entire congregation began to seek God and most of those present were baptized in the Spirit and spoke in tongues. One lady was reported to have spoken in tongues for two hours straight. This pattern of revival continued throughout the other three meetings. Large numbers of people were baptized in the Spirit, greatly encouraged, and many spoke in tongues. One elder, 74 years of age, was baptized in the Spirit and declared, "I wish I had known about this when I was younger!" Various forms of contemporary worship were also introduced to those attending the meetings and the response was very positive. The leaders present at these meetings

returned to their churches and the Pentecostal message and experience began to flourish among this particular people group.

The response was so significant that for several years Malaysian Chinese pastors came on a monthly basis and taught on Pentecostal themes. After four years, 35,000 believers had been baptized in the Spirit and a total of 51 churches had been impacted by the revival. Today, it is estimated that in this county there are around 50,000 Pentecostal believers from this specific minority group. One of these minority believers returned to his home area in another province and has started a significant church movement.

In 1996 every pastor from this particular minority group, around 130, gathered together for a week of meetings and discussed Pentecostal issues. At that time, 75 percent of them affirmed that they were supportive of the Pentecostal emphasis on baptism in the Spirit. However, during the meetings there was opposition by one TSPM church leader who was not a member of this minority group. In the midst of the meetings, he routinely stood and voiced his opposition. After the meetings had concluded and my foreign friend had returned to the main city in his region, this TSPM church leader reported him to the authorities in an attempt to have him thrown out of the country. However, the TSPM minority leader who had organized the meetings came to his defense, and the issue was peacefully resolved.

These stories illustrate the fact that there are many Pentecostals within the TSPM church. It should also be noted that, while many TSPM churches may be reluctant to embrace Pentecostal or charismatic teaching and experience, they nonetheless exhibit tremendous vitality. There are countless TSPM churches that worship in traditional patterns that are evangelical (but not Pentecostal) in theology, and which aggressively engage in evangelism and are growing rapidly.

Nevertheless, TSPM churches tend to exhibit the characteristics noted above. There can be little doubt that they are predominantly non-Pentecostal in theology and practice. This in itself is not striking. There are traditional churches around the world that follow these same patterns and which are non-Pentecostal. What is striking in China, however, is the stark contrast that we find

between this kind of church life and that which exists in the house church movement.

3. Conclusion

Our examination of TSPM attitudes towards Pentecostal doctrine has revealed a largely negative stance. The TSPM theological position, revealed most clearly in the recently published book, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, is non-Pentecostal.¹⁸ The book rejects the Pentecostal positions on Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues. The book does recognize the validity of the gifts of the Spirit, including the more controversial ones, such as tongues, prophecy, and healing. However, the overall tone is one of caution. The book includes a strong critique of the charismatic movement and warnings concerning the dangers of unbridled emotionalism. The message that the TSPM seeks to communicate is this: avoid those easily excitable and often fanatical Pentecostals and charismatics.

Our analysis of church life within TSPM institutions suggests that this message has been heeded, often in the extreme. We have found that TSPM churches tend to be clergy dominated, traditional in worship style, reserved in tone, extremely cautious regarding any display of emotion, and reluctant to issue calls for public response. These characteristics, of course, all tend to militate against Pentecostal or charismatic experiences being expressed within the confines of the TSPM church.

These conclusions at first glance may not appear significant. Many traditional churches and denominations around the world reflect these same patterns and characteristics. However, when we view these conclusions in the larger context of China's church, they take on new significance. They signify that there is a stark contrast between the theological orientation and praxis of the TSPM churches and that which is found and expressed in the house churches. The contrast is indeed sharp and requires explanation. We will examine the possible causes of this contrast in the following chapter.

- ¹ Lu Xiaomin, *Xin Ling Zhi Sheng* [Sounds of the Heart], p. 197 (Song #173).
- ² Jing Jiuwei, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo* (Hebei: Hebei Jidujiao Shehui, 2002).
- ³ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, pp. 83-84. Chapter 9 (pp. 82-105) deals with the baptism in the Holy Spirit.
- ⁴ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, pp. 84-85 (quote from 84).
- ⁵ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, p. 87.
- ⁶ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, p. 87.
- ⁷ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, p. 89.
- ⁸ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, p. 174 (both quotes).
- ⁹ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, pp. 167-68.
- ¹⁰ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, pp. 159-160.
- ¹¹ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, pp. 339-48.
- ¹² Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, pp. 348-49.
- ¹³ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, p. 349.
- ¹⁴ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, pp. 354-362.
- ¹⁵ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, p. 365. The other points in this list are taken from pp. 363-68.
- ¹⁶ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*, p. 375.
- ¹⁷ This account also appears in Luke Wesley's second book, scheduled to be published in 2005 by Authentic Media, Milton Keynes (U.K.), MK1 1QR.
- ¹⁸ Jing, *Sheng Ling de Gong Zuo*.

Part Three

Powerful

CHAPTER 5

THE CORRELATION OF PERSECUTION AND POWER IN THE CHINESE CHURCH

The Power of the Holy Spirit

Power, power, the Holy Spirit's power
Full of support and comfort
Leading you and leading me
The world cannot see clearly
The world cannot comprehend
This is a kind of immeasurable power
Power, power, it comes from Jehovah
Power, power, on Jehovah's troops
He clothes his sons and daughters with this power
In this time of darkness, rays of light shine into the distance
The Holy Spirit's power, great and incomparable
Holds together all things, created the heavens and the earth
The hearts of men are laid bare before Him
No one is able to run and hide
The Holy Spirit's power renews you and me
The Holy Spirit's power shakes you and me
He has directed us to walk on the right path
He leads us directly to the new heaven and new earth.¹

There can be little doubt that the TSPM church is largely non-Pentecostal. On the other hand, we have demonstrated that the house church movement is predominantly Pentecostal. How shall we explain this puzzling paradox? Why is the TSPM church largely non-Pentecostal, while the house church movement is

predominantly Pentecostal? In the following pages, we will seek to answer these questions.

1. Why Is the TSPM Church so Different?

I believe there are a number of factors that have influenced the way in which the TSPM Christians, on the one hand, and house church believers, on the other, read and appropriate the key Pentecostal texts in the book of Acts. These factors include: differences in church structure; pressure on TSPM church leaders to conform; the differing contexts in which the two groups live and minister; and foreign influence. However, I would suggest that the experience of persecution in the house churches and the lack of it in the TSPM is the single most significant factor shaping the outlook of these two distinct groups.

1.1 Church Structure

As we have noted, churches that are highly institutional and tightly structured do not tend to encourage or nurture the charismatic dimension. A key reason for this has to do with the way leaders are selected and the manner in which services are conducted. Churches that select leaders on the basis of their training and their standing within the institution (i.e., how they are perceived by the hierarchy) are often unable to make room for many spiritually qualified and gifted leaders. The more rigid the selection process, the harder it is to make allowance for gifted leaders who do not fit the normal pattern. This problem is especially acute in the TSPM, where the process for becoming an ordained minister is very narrowly defined.

First, a prospective minister must study at a TSPM seminary. This is tremendously limiting, since educational levels in the countryside are often too low for admission. The prospective student must have recommendations from a TSPM pastor and thus prior experience in the a TSPM church, and the number of students admitted into TSPM seminaries each year is ridiculously low due to

government restrictions. After graduation, the earnest young believer often serves an apprenticeship in a designated church under designated leadership. Given the mixed character of the TSPM, this can be a very challenging experience. Finally, the ministerial candidate must be viewed as acceptable by both church and government leaders in order to be ordained.

Given these factors, we can understand why so many gifted young believers gravitate to house church settings. Here is an environment where they can exercise leadership gifts without going through a rigorous process that, in most cases, is not open to them anyway. Many opportunities to explore and develop their potential giftings are available in small group settings. And, while underground training opportunities are increasingly available to house church Christians, strong emphasis is placed on practical ministry. This tends to foster and strengthen the development of spiritual gifts. In the house church, anyone may emerge as a leader. The only qualifications are spiritual in nature.

We have also noted that TSPM churches tend to be dominated by the clergy. They do not feature participation or ministry on the part of the laity. The large Sunday worship services are, if possible, always led by professional clergy. Furthermore, small group meetings where lay leadership might be encouraged and developed are generally not tolerated. Meetings must take place at designated places, at designated times, and with designated leadership. This limitation seriously impacts the life of the church, for these are precisely the contexts where gifts of the Spirit might be exercised and the body built up.

Of course, the house church is very, very different. Virtually everyone participates and anyone may contribute a song, a testimony, or a prayer. When I attend TSPM churches, I am always encouraged to participate, but generally I know that I will not be an active participant in terms of edifying the larger group. When I attend a house church service, I always go with a sense of expectancy, knowing that I will have many opportunities to share, to pray, and to encourage others.

1.2 Pressure to Comply

The TSPM church lives with very real restrictions. The manner in which these restrictions are followed and enforced varies widely, depending on the local government and church leadership. But the restrictions are there nonetheless and they do impact the life of the church. We have already noted that the government does influence the selection of leaders and it does restrict the settings in which the church can meet. But the government may also influence the theology and practice of the church in a more subtle way. If compliance with government regulations is a key concern for church leaders, then will they not naturally be more controlling in their handling of church life? Will they not inevitably be less open to allowing Spirit-led people to engage in ministry for fear that they might break the rules?

Certainly many ministers in traditional churches in the West are reluctant to give opportunity to untutored lay people to speak or exercise public ministry in the church. It is often viewed as simply being too risky. As one ministerial friend in the West put it, "I have prepared for the service. I know what needs to be said and what needs to happen better than anyone else." When it came to the exercise of spiritual gifts in corporate gatherings, this man was not willing to hazard the risks. Therefore, when much more is at stake than simply suffering through an embarrassing moment or facing a disgruntled parishioner, how will leaders respond? Understandably, the context of church life in the TSPM encourages leaders to avoid taking what may be viewed as unnecessary risks. It encourages them to exercise more control.

Of course, this sort of posture puts them squarely at odds with believers who feel led by the Spirit to minister beyond the confines of the limitations imposed upon them. I have watched TSPM leaders struggle with how to deal with earnest, eager believers who feel led to engage in evangelism in ways considered illegal in China. It is not easy for these leaders to maintain their integrity as Christians and at the same time stay out of trouble. In this context, the message of Pentecostal empowering surely must at times appear risky. The stories in the book of Acts that speak of bold, Spirit-inspired witness in the face of opposition are easily perceived

as threatening. The temptation to avoid taking risks or to allow others to do so is very strong.

There are undoubtedly a variety of reasons for the largely non-Pentecostal stance of TSPM churches, but one cannot avoid feeling that this characteristic of TSPM church life is exaggerated by the need to comply with government regulations. The government wants safe and reliable people controlling the church and its meetings, people that it can depend on not to cause problems, or to flagrantly transgress the party line. In the TSPM, too much fire and fervency is problematic.

1.3 Different Contexts

While TSPM church leaders feel pressure to tow the line, house church pastors and evangelists face a very different challenge. By definition, their activities are illegal and they face the constant threat of arrest and imprisonment. As we have seen, this is not an idle threat. It is this context of persecution (or, with reference to the TSPM, the lack of it) which, in my opinion, impacts most significantly how Pentecostal texts are read and appropriated.

When it comes to persecution, the situation of the TSPM church and the house church movement is indeed very different. Christians who worship and serve within TSPM circles have determined to accommodate the laws of the land. This entails certain advantages, the foremost being that they are allowed to meet together openly and express their faith publicly. Of course, the disadvantages are also evident and, as we have noted, the restrictions do impact various aspects of church life. However, this willingness to accommodate the government does mean that TSPM Christians, for the most part, do not face the threat of persecution. If their activities remain within the prescribed boundaries, they can be relatively confident that they will not be fined, arrested, beaten, or imprisoned. This stance of accommodation, I have suggested, impacts how one reads and appropriates certain texts. In TSPM settings, the book of Acts, if interpreted along Pentecostal lines, can be especially troublesome and provocative. One can easily understand why TSPM leadership would encourage a different approach.

House church believers have chosen a different path. They have decided that they cannot accommodate the restrictions imposed by the state. They have determined that the benefits of acceptance and open worship are not worth the costs, which they perceive to be the loss of control of important aspects of church life. This stance puts them in a precarious position. Whenever they meet, they do so illegally and thus they run the risk of arrest and imprisonment. The threat of persecution is ever present and real. Most of the leaders in the house church movement have already spent time in prison. This is no coincidence. Imprisonment is an important experience which serves to validate the ministry of pastors and evangelists in the house church movement.

In this context, the stories in the book of Acts take on new meaning. The experiences of Peter, Stephen, and Paul often parallel their own. House church believers identify with their vulnerability, their weaknesses, and their need for divine strength. Stories of bold, Spirit-inspired witness in the face of opposition offer much-needed encouragement. Indeed, the Pentecostal reading of the text and the experience of which it speaks are often exactly what is needed to face the opposition and persecution that lie ahead.

We will explore this important topic in more detail in the following pages. For now, it is sufficient to note that the context of persecution (or the lack of it) appears to exert significant influence on how key Pentecostal texts are read in China.

1.4 Foreign Influence

One striking difference between the TSPM churches and the house churches is the extent to which they have appropriated foreign influences. This is especially apparent when it comes to styles of worship. When one walks into a TSPM church, one often has a feeling of *déjà vue*. Everything seems familiar: the architecture, the hymns (the tunes, if not the words), and the structure of the service. TSPM services are remarkably similar to the worship services in mainline Protestant churches in the West. The key distinguishing feature is the matter of language. In the early 1980s, after over thirty years of forced isolation, when TSPM churches began to reopen and once again function, it appears that

these churches and their leaders picked up right where they left off in the late 1940s. The church life, which had previously been so influenced by foreign missionaries, now continued to be perpetuated in TSPM churches across China.

Worship in the house church setting is remarkably different. The architecture is unfamiliar, because one normally is worshipping in an apartment or a rural house. The songs are almost entirely indigenous and thus unfamiliar to visiting westerners. I have provided a sampling of some of these powerful songs at the beginning of each of the chapters in this book. They offer rare insights into the life and perspective of house church Christians. The structure of the service is also quite different. The services tend to be very informal, with a lot of emphasis on personal testimonies, prayers, and participation. It is with some legitimacy, then, that one house church leader declared, "We are the true 'Three Self' church."

In view of the strong legacy of foreign influence in the TSPM churches, it may be argued that foreign influence is a key factor in the resistance to Pentecostal influences. After all, the Pentecostal movement was not widely accepted in western Protestant circles in the 1930s and 1940s. It is possible that the perspectives of western church leaders and missionaries from this previous era have exerted considerable influence on attitudes within the TSPM today. The forced isolation of the Chinese church over much of the past fifty years may have also hindered current TSPM church leaders from having much contact with more recent and positive developments, such as the assimilation of Pentecostal churches into the larger church world, the emergence of the charismatic movement, and the rise of Third Wave Christianity.

One may also argue with some force that the house church movement reflects a strand of Chinese Christianity that follows more in the footsteps of the indigenous Chinese churches, such as the True Jesus Church, the Jesus Family, and the Little Flock. Thus, it has been more resistant to foreign influence and has developed, to a large extent, its own patterns of worship and its own theology. In this way, the house church movement has remained largely unaffected by the anti-Pentecostal attitudes of western church leaders in the 1930s and 1940s.

Of course, some would argue that it is precisely through foreign influence that the house church movement has become largely Pentecostal. More recently, David Aikman has suggested that in the late 1980s, “as a direct result of Dennis Balcombe’s teaching, the *majority* of China’s major house church movements...became Charismatic in their theology.”² Certainly all would agree that Dennis Balcombe has exerted a strong and powerful Pentecostal influence on the house church movement. In the course of a private conversation, one knowledgeable missionary colleague declared, “Dennis Balcombe has done more to encourage Pentecostal revival in China than any other foreign minister.” And yet, while we can agree that Balcombe’s influence has been significant, Aikman’s judgment appears to be overstated. The fact remains that major church leaders, such as Sister D of the Fangcheng Church, insist that they came into their Pentecostal experience and theology on their own, independent of foreign teaching or influence.³ And historically it is clear that there were strong Pentecostal currents within the Chinese indigenous churches that predate Balcombe’s ministry by fifty years. Although key leaders of these indigenous churches did have contact with foreign Pentecostals who had come to China fresh from the Azusa Street revival, these leaders developed their own structures, worship styles, and theology, for the most part, independent of foreign influence or control.

1.5 Persecution: The Central Factor

I have suggested that a number of factors have impacted the Chinese churches and their responses to Pentecostal teaching. Certainly the forces shaping current perceptions in China are complex. Nevertheless, I believe that the experience of persecution, or the lack of it, is formative in shaping attitudes toward Pentecostal values within the TSPM churches, on the one hand, and within the house church movement, on the other. This is the case, at least in part, because there is a certain logical priority to it. Persecution significantly impacts all of the other factors noted above.

I have also noted that church structure has impacted perceptions and practice in both sectors of the Chinese church. The TSPM church is very much ordered by a professional clergy. Additionally,

TSPM believers are normally not free to meet outside the confines of the large meetings directed by the recognized leaders. This creates a church life that lacks lay involvement and spontaneity, and which significantly curtails opportunities for expression of gifts of the Spirit. All of this is intensified by the pressure placed upon TSPM leaders to conform to government guidelines. Government pressure encourages TSPM pastors to exercise tight control.

Certainly these factors are significant, but they are each shaped in large measure by the context of persecution. For example, consider the matter of church structure. The TSPM church has decided that it will acquiesce to the demands of the government and comply with certain restrictions in order to be free from the threat of persecution. This in turn limits the church's ability to meet in various settings (e.g., small groups) which might encourage body ministry, lay participation, and the exercise of gifts of the Spirit. It also limits the church's ability to train and select its own leadership. A very rigid process for ordination has been established, one that involves a certain level of government interference and which discourages many spiritually qualified and gifted candidates. In this way, the decision not to face persecution impacts the structure of the church. It is evident that in China, freedom to meet openly comes at a great price.

Let us also consider the question of pressure on TSPM leaders to ensure that their church and fellow believers conform to government regulations. As we have noted, this tends to create a culture of control that can obstruct an openness to the Spirit's leading. Again, the central issue is the threat of persecution. The driving force behind the desire to conform and to bring others into conformity is fear—fear of persecution. In short, persecution or the threat of it may be seen as shaping a structure which is resistant to charismatic expression and a culture that intensifies this problem.

I have also noted the fact that the TSPM church reflects significant influence from Protestant churches in the West. The impact of the West upon the house churches has been more muted. I would add that the nature of this western influence has been shaped by government restrictions and persecution. We observed that much of the western influence reflected in the TSPM churches appears to have come from a previous generation, one that was

decidedly anti-Pentecostal. This is largely the case due to the fact that, for most of the past fifty years, the Chinese church has been isolated from the rest of the worldwide Christian community. As a result, for example, TSPM leaders appear to be, for the most part, largely unaware of the remarkable ascent of Pentecostal Christianity around the globe in the past fifty years. They also seem to be oblivious to the way in which Pentecostal theology and practice has in more recent years significantly impacted the larger church world, especially through the charismatic and Third Wave movements. In short, while the TSPM reflects more western influence, this western legacy reflects the prevailing anti-Pentecostal attitudes of the pre-1949 mainline churches. The house church movement, by way of contrast, as a truly indigenous Chinese church movement, has been largely unaffected by the attitudes and practices of western churches. Again, persecution must be seen as a major factor. As a result of the isolation which persecution or its threat breeds, the TSPM has been exposed to a dated and limited range of western influence; and the house church has moved forward, until more recently, in almost total isolation, oblivious to it all.

Of course the TSPM church and the house church movement represent different responses to the threat of persecution. The TSPM church, for better or for worse, has sought to avoid persecution. This shapes the context in which it lives and ministers. And, I would argue, this context in turn shapes how it reads and appropriates key texts in the book of Acts. When one does not face persecution or struggle with the threat of persecution, texts which promise power for bold witness in the face of opposition (e.g., Luke 12:11-12; Acts 1:8; 4:31; 7:55) become less important. Their message is not urgent. Indeed, explanations of these promises as primarily directed to others—the early church or perhaps those with special gifts—may appear especially attractive.

House church believers, on the other hand, have made a different choice. Rather than choosing to avoid persecution, they have chosen to embrace it if necessary. This decision has greatly impacted their lives and the context in which they serve. Again, this context shapes how they read and appropriate Scripture. When one faces persecution or the ever-present threat of it, texts which

promise power for bold witness in the face of opposition take on tremendous significance. Their message is vitally urgent. And the burning questions that one asks are very simple: Is it for me? If so, how do I appropriate this power?

The key reality that shapes the lives of believers in the house church movement and which distinguishes their lives from those of believers in the TSPM churches is, in a word, persecution. I have suggested that this reality—the threat of persecution or the lack of it—impacts the structure of their churches, the attitudes of their leaders, their exposure to western influences, and the way in which they read the Scriptures. Persecution, then, is the key factor that shapes attitudes toward Pentecostal values in the Chinese church. This judgment is supported by the testimonies of key house church leaders as cited in Chapter Three. It is, I would argue, confirmed by the following brief testimony.

2. The Correlation of Persecution and Pentecostal Power

The Wenzhou Church is one of the many vibrant and rapidly growing house church groups in China. Not long ago I spoke with Brother Y, one of the original seven members of the Wenzhou Church. Their church was established around 1970, when, in the context of the Cultural Revolution and great persecution, a group of seven believers began to meet together and worship in one of their homes. Brother Y noted that none of them had any formal training, so they depended on the Holy Spirit. He indicated that they emphasized repentance, faith in Christ, and being born again, as well as the power of the Holy Spirit, baptism in the Spirit, speaking in tongues, and spiritual gifts.

When I asked how they came to these theological beliefs, Brother Y answered: “from a simple reading of the Bible.” He said that early on, prior to 1949, a group of missionaries had provided a strong evangelical influence. Brother Y noted that these missionaries did not place much emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit. But, he said, the Chinese believers (the original seven) chose to follow what they felt was clearly taught in Scripture. Thus, from

the beginning, they have emphasized Spirit-baptism, speaking in tongues, and especially the believer's need for the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Brother Y stressed that their church was established and grew in the midst of great opposition and persecution. After 1976, the Three-Self church began to operate more openly in their area. Some of their people joined the TSPM church, but most continued to meet in homes. Brother Y suggested that they (i.e., the house church believers) were the true "three self" or "indigenous" church. Their unwillingness to join the TSPM church marked them as "subversive" in the eyes of the government. Continued harassment and persecution were the inevitable result. This setting of persecution, then, was the context in which they came to their Pentecostal reading of the Bible.

The Wenzhou Church has experienced rapid growth, although they are not a tightly connected network like some of the other house church networks. For example, they do not appear to have Wenzhou churches in other areas, but rather they assist and encourage churches to develop a largely autonomous identity in other areas. They do, however, continue to experience significant persecution. For example, Brother Y has been in prison on several occasions and is a "marked" man. Yet there he was, in a distant region of China, proclaiming the gospel and encouraging the saints.

Recently I met with a long-time friend, an overseas Chinese pastor, who regularly travels into China to minister in house church settings. He is a Pentecostal pastor but associated with a broadly-evangelical mission when he ministers in China. He stated that his mission had sent him to minister to the Wenzhou churches because the Wenzhou leaders had specifically asked this evangelical group to send them Pentecostal pastors.

3. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, there are many vibrant, committed, and powerful Christians in the TSPM church. I know many personally. It is also equally clear that there are many dynamic house church Christians

who would not identify themselves as Pentecostal. Nevertheless, when one looks at the overwhelming trends within the Chinese church, the results are striking. The house church is predominantly Pentecostal; the vast majority of TSPM believers are not.

We have argued that, while a number of factors impact these divergent perspectives, the crucial factor in shaping attitudes towards Pentecostal values is persecution—and, more specifically, how believers relate to it. Those who have little to fear will very likely not embrace a Pentecostal reading of the book of Acts. Spirit-baptism will probably be understood in light of 1 Corinthians 12:13 as an experience which every believer, by definition, has already received. Yet those who stand in the midst of the flames are very likely to embrace the promise of Pentecostal power as if it were their own. And their understanding of Spirit-baptism will, with few exceptions, be shaped by Acts 1:8 and the experiences of Peter, Stephen, and Paul.

House church Christians in China challenge us to reflect again on the book of Acts. Their experience and perspective call us to recognize that persecution and Pentecostal power go hand in hand.

¹ Lu Xiaomin, *Xin Ling Zhi Sheng* [Sounds of the Heart], p. 21 (Song #16).

² David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003), p. 81 (emphasis his). See also pp. 82, 104, 273-74 for comments on Balcombe's influence.

³ See my Nov. 26, 2002 interview with Sister D of the Fangcheng Church cited in Chapter Three above.

CONCLUSION

We have examined three specific aspects of the church in China. The evidence, I have argued, indicates that the Chinese church is persecuted, Pentecostal, and powerful. In Part One we chronicled the persecution of Christians throughout the country, and then more specifically in Honghe County. We found that the situation in China is complex: there is a paradoxical mixture of openness and oppression. This complexity is reflected in the differences between the TSPM church and the house church movement. These groups represent different responses to the threat of persecution. Their differing responses in turn dramatically shape the contexts in which they live and minister. We examined in detail one specific instance of persecution. The related public documents reveal the reality of on-going, state-sponsored persecution of Christians in China. In this particular instance, the disregard for human rights, the obvious attempt by the government to slander Christians, and the public nature of these abuses were all deeply disturbing. One wonders how the church is able to survive in the context of such oppression. And yet, the church is not simply surviving, it is thriving.

In Part Two we looked at one possible reason for the strength of the Chinese house church movement in the face of this kind of persecution and opposition: its Pentecostal nature. The testimonies of Chinese believers, such as Sister D of the China for Christ Church and the elderly pastor we cited in the Introduction, suggest that a large number of Chinese Christians have found strength through an experience of Pentecostal power. This conclusion is strengthened by the statement of faith produced by the leaders of four major house church networks. This statement echoes the book of Acts, when it affirms that every believer may “experience the outpouring and filling of the Holy Spirit.” It is evident that a large

segment of the church in China understands its own experience in light of that of the early church as recorded in the book of Acts. In the face of persecution, Chinese believers, like their apostolic counterparts, have cried out to God for strength. And they have been “filled with the Holy Spirit” and witnessed boldly. In the face of persecution, their experience of the Holy Spirit has provided comfort, strength, and joy.

The TSPM church’s response to Pentecostal teaching and experience has been less positive. The TSPM position is clearly non-Pentecostal and calls for caution with respect to charismatic experience. This message, for the most part, has been heeded in the TSPM churches, which tend to be clergy-dominated, traditional in worship style, reserved in tone, and extremely cautious concerning any display of emotion.

In Part Three we sought to explain this striking contrast: Why is the TSPM church largely non-Pentecostal, while the house church movement is predominantly Pentecostal? Our answer highlighted numerous factors, including differences in church structure, the pressure on TSPM church leaders to conform, the differing contexts in which the two groups function, and foreign influence. We concluded, however, that the experience of persecution in the house churches and the lack of it in the TSPM is the single most significant factor shaping the outlook of these two, distinct groups. We observed that persecution and Pentecostal power are closely related.

Throughout this book we have attempted to capture and relate a bit of the power of the church in China. All of the interviews, documents, and stories bear witness to a single reality: God’s power is being revealed in a remarkable way in and through the house churches of China. I pray that the experience of house church believers in China will challenge and inspire Christians in the West to embrace the double promise of Pentecost: the anointing of the Spirit brings power and opposition. The Chinese church reminds us that it is difficult to maintain one without the other.

APPENDIX: SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Document 1: The Newspaper Article

[The following article appeared in the June 30, 1998 edition of the *Honghe Xianbao* (Honghe County Newspaper). My English translation.]

[Several slogans appeared above the title:]

“Strengthen the Legal System;
Stabilize Society;
Unite the minorities”

“Our County’s Lawful Efforts to Punish Illegal Religious Activity
in Luoen Township Meet with Initial Success”

In order to maintain public order, promote unity among minorities, and encourage the healthy development and construction of the “two civilizations” [material and spiritual civilization], our county has adopted strong measures. Its lawful efforts to punish illegal religious activity in Luoen Township have met with initial success.

In recent years in various parts of our county, especially in the remote mountain regions inhabited by minority groups, a group of illegal religious organizations, which violate the spirit of socialism and disrupt the construction of civilization, have appeared. According to government statistics, the activities of these illegal organizations have impacted five townships (Baohua, Leyu, Jiaying, Menglong, and Luoen) and include 30 different meeting points. The illegal activity is most rampant in Luoen Township.

The religious groups active in Luoen Township have not received permission from the appropriate government department, nor have they received the approval of recognized religious bodies. A few lawless persons, cloaked in religious garb and waving the banner of Christianity have, without authorization, established religious organizations and engaged in illegal religious activity. These people first seek to influence a family, then the members of the clan, and finally the extended family and their friends. They then reach out to influence the entire village and the outlying area. These methods have had a snow-ball effect and enabled them to form a network comprised of large groups, which meet together and which are also divided up into smaller groups. This network's influence extends to six administrative villages in Luoen (Niangzong, Duojiang, Caoguo, Pumi, Cinong, and Labo), including 22 natural villages. A total of 18 meeting points have been utilized by the 235 families and 425 people engaged in these illegal religious activities.

So called "missionaries," in order to realize their wild ambitions and satisfy their selfish desires, have created and spread fallacious rumors. These illegal religious persons proclaim that "believers are noble people; non-believers are maggots, devils and low-lives. Hani believers must desert their people and not respect the Hani customs, practices, and village regulations. Believers should not have contact or friendly interaction with the masses. Believers should not loan items to non-believers or help them with their needs. Believers should neither adhere to village policies, nor accept the government's restrictions on family planning [that is, the one-child policy]. Believers should not participate in any public welfare activity," etc. These are words they fallaciously speak. By saying these things, they have seriously hindered economic development and harmed the social stability of this rural area. More specifically, they have:

- 1) Seriously damaged the dignity and self-esteem of the Hani minority people.
- 2) Created internal conflict and divisions within this minority group.
- 3) Obstructed marriages and disrupted family harmony.

- 4) Seriously disrupted economic development and social progress.
- 5) Seriously blocked the implementation of the family planning policy and other village policies.
- 6) Deceived simple-minded villagers and used religion for their own profit and illegal gain.
- 7) Antagonized village leaders and destabilized authority at the grass-roots level, etc.

In accordance with the Honghe State Communist Party Committee, the State Government, and the gist of Document #3, "Official Report Concerning The Legal Punishment of Illegal Religious Activity in Parts of Honghe and Luchun" (1998), on May 27, the leaders of our county's five leading groups [the Communist Party; the County Government; the County People's Congress; the People's Political Consultative Conference; and the Commission for Inspecting Discipline], together with those officials of the state, who are supervising this matter, researched this issue of enforcement and established "A Committee of Leaders for Punishment in Accordance with the Law." The chairman of this committee, Dou Yuntao, is the Vice-Secretary of the county's Communist Party and also the Secretary of the county's Political Committee. The vice-chairmen of the committee are: Li Puzhong, who is also the Vice-Deputy of the county; Pan Lingsen, who serves as the Director of the County Propaganda Department; Li Hongguan, the Vice-Secretary and full-time cadre of the county's Political Committee; and Qian Zhili, the Vice-Deputy of the Public Security Bureau. On June 13, the People's Government of the county issued a public notice entitled, "The People's Government of Honghe County Announces a Ban on Illegal Religious Activity." Furthermore, the government quickly selected 98 comrades, all very professional and of high political quality, and formed "The Ban Illegal Religious Activity in Luo'en Township Work Group." In order to deal with the problem, this group focused on Luo'en Township.

At 2:30 p.m. on June 12, Vice-Secretary Dou commanded all the members of the work group and the Honghe state officials responsible for supervising this matter, including Huang Wenlin

and Bai Keyang, to rush by car to Luoen Township. That evening at 8:40 p.m., the group gathered together in the third-floor meeting room of the Luoen township government building for an urgent meeting. During this meeting, Vice-Secretary Dou discussed measures and formed a plan for the enforcement work. He determined they would:

- 1) Ban, in accordance with the law, illegal religious activity.
- 2) Severely attack the key members of the groups propagating religion.
- 3) Strengthen the ideological work among the masses.
- 4) Investigate the situation in the villages and manage their economic development.

At 2:00 a.m., in the morning of the 13th, the work group separated into three groups and boldly and powerfully launched their attack, rushing toward their prearranged objectives: the villages of Suoma, Yangpu, and Taian. Two believers in Suoma village, Li Hukan and Li Huli, grabbed a knife and attempted to block the work group from carrying out their official business. These men were lawfully arrested. At Yangpu village, in the home of the religious ringleader Chen Wenqing, the work group discovered and seized over 20 illegal evangelistic books, including *A Complete Bible* (Old and New Testaments), *The Three-Self according to Scripture*, *Hymns of Praise*, and *A Commentary on First Corinthians*. The first phase of the enforcement work, meticulously directed by the County Communist Party Committee and government, dealt a severe blow to the ringleaders propagating religion, achieved notable results, and, by deeply developing the enforcement work and striking at the foundation, prepared the way for the next step.

At 1:00 p.m. on the 13th, the County Communist Party Secretary, Zhang Jun, after enduring the hardships of a long and hurried journey, arrived in Luoen Township. He then issued important instructions pertaining to the work "concerning the ban on illegal religious activity." Vice-Secretary Dou gave directives for the next step, including the following concrete tasks and plans pertaining to the temporary occupation and search of the villages:

- 1) Resolutely carry out at the state and county levels the decision to ban illegal religious activity in Luo'en Township.
- 2) Earnestly convene "four meetings": a meeting of the branch committee [the most basic, grassroots level organization of the Communist Party]; a meeting of the extended branch committee; a meeting of the entire village; and all forms of forums.

[The Chinese original mistakenly numbers the next point as no. 4.]

- 3) Distinguish between the different natures [of people]: severely punish the chief criminals; use administrative, economic, and legal sanctions to punish the ringleaders; and hold criticism sessions for ordinary believers.
- 4) Issue arrest warrants for the four principal criminals who have already escaped, and quickly bring them to justice.
- 5) Carry out the investigation, and obtain irrefutable evidence and the full facts.
- 6) Continue to energetically carry out the enforcement work for an extended period, so that the illegal religious activity might be completely eliminated.

The enforcement work, under the correct leadership of the County Communist Party Committee and government, continues to develop in depth, but its task is formidable due to the large, evil force which opposes it. How does one eliminate and uproot these illegal religious organizations and activities? In the morning of June 14, another meeting of the temporary occupation and search work group was convened. After County Vice-Deputy Li Puzhong summarized the first stage of the work, he made four concrete proposals:

- 1) Unify the thinking [of the people], deepen understanding, act in close coordination, and fight side by side.
- 2) Mobilize and rely upon the masses in order to eliminate illegal religious organizations and activity.

- 3) Distinguish between the different natures [of people] and the different degrees [of the crimes]. Deal with and teach the believers properly.
- 4) After the temporary occupation and search of the village is completed, we should investigate and understand the situation in the villages, block organizations, and help the masses order their thinking concerning economic development. We should, on behalf of the broad masses, act in accordance with the facts and solve these concrete problems.

Li Puzhong also emphasized that the goal of this activity is to clear away decadent and ignorant “culture” from the minds of the people, strongly propagate the policies of the Communist Party, and use the correct method in order to guide the masses in their flight from poverty to civilization. This is crucial for our enforcement work.

In the afternoon of the 14th, the work group divided into several sub-groups (the group for the investigation of evidence; the group investigating items; the group guiding education) and occupied six administrative villages: Caoguo, Cinong, Duojiang, Pumi, etc. Currently, the work of rooting out and eliminating [illegal religious activity] continues to develop in an aggressive and orderly manner.

[Author:] Wen Hu

Document 2: A Public Notice

[The following public notice was posted in Honghe County of Yunnan Province, China, dated June 13, 1998. My English translation.]

“The People’s Government of Honghe County Announces a Ban on Illegal Religious Activity”

For a number of years, various parts of our county have been influenced by illegal religious forces foreign to our county. This has resulted in illegal activity associated with religious organizations—activity which is incompatible with our socialist society. A few lawless persons, cloaked in religious garb, are spreading heretical ideas that are harmful to the masses and our society. These people have disrupted public order and hindered the economic growth of the region. In order to maintain social stability and promote the healthy development and construction of the “two civilizations” [material and spiritual civilization] in our county, and in accordance with our country’s laws, regulations, and policies and the directives of our state’s [Communist Party] committee and government, the government of Honghe County makes the following declaration:

- 1) All religious meetings associated with places that have not been registered with the government and received government approval are illegal, and will be strictly banned.
- 2) All people will be prohibited from engaging in illegal religious activity, regardless of the means, methods, or location.
- 3) The leaders of these illegal religious organizations and activities must immediately stop their illegal activities and, by June 14-20, 1998, go to the appropriate government offices of their respective administrative villages and townships and give an accounting of their actions. If their attitudes are good, they will be treated with leniency.

Otherwise, they will be severely punished. Those who have participated in these illegal activities must simply refrain from further involvement, and the government will not investigate the matter further.

- 4) This announcement is effective as of the date of publication.

The People's Government of Honghe County
June 13, 1998

Document 3: A Legal Document

[My English translation of a legal document from the People's Court of Honghe County, dated October 28, 1998.]

The People's Law Court of Honghe County,
Yunnan Province

Criminal Record Book

(1998) Honghe County Criminal Record #36

The Public Prosecutor's Office of Honghe County
People's Procuratorate

The accused, Li Huli, a male born on December 20, 1975 of the Hani minority group, a resident of Honghe County in Yunnan Province, a farmer who lived in the natural village of Suoma, a part of the administrative village of Zongcun in Luo'en Township of Honghe County, is now deceased.

On September 25, 1998, the People's Procuratorate of Honghe County began to prosecute the accused, Li Huli, on the charge that he had jeopardized public affairs. This court, in accordance with the law, arranged for a group of judges to try the case. During the trial, on September 30, 1998, the accused, Li Huli, died. In accordance with the law as stated in *The Criminal Code of the People's Republic of China*, section 15, line 5, we issue the following judgment:

The trial of this man is closed and the investigation of the accused, Li Huli, to determine whether he was responsible for criminal acts will not be continued.

This judgment will be effective immediately upon delivery.

Presiding Judge: Li Longhe

Judge: Xu Guofa

Judge: Li Jiqiang

October 28, 1998

Court Clerk: Yang Junwu

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