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ChinaSource Quarterly

A Look at Reformed Churches in China Today

Bruce P. Baugus,
Guest Editor

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A Look at the Reformed Church in China Today

ChinaSource Quarterly **Winter 2021, Vol. 23, No. 4**

In this issue . . .

Editorial

Rising on a New Tide

By Bruce P. Baugus, Guest Editor

Many remote observers are sure they know one thing about the work of the ministry in China today: it is fast becoming impossible. That, at least, is the impression cast by reports in many Western media outlets. Some of those outlets, however, have been repeating this theme for decades—decades through which China's house churches have found ever more room in society to operate. However, now even the most responsible and nuanced sources, like the information and analysis provided on ChinaSource's various platforms, clearly indicate that the tide has turned and the beaches once opening up for ministry are now awash with a new tide of tightening regulations and stricter enforcement regimes.

As *ChinaSource Quarterly* readers know, the new tide of restrictions is reshaping life and ministry for millions of Christians who worship and labor in China's multitude of unregistered congregations. Over the last five years or so, the situation for China's house churches has become increasingly difficult and prospects for the future are not encouraging. What is more, recent events suggest to many that the situation for China's reforming house churches—the focus of the articles that follow—may be particularly acute.

On December 9, 2018, in a move that attracted international media and government attention, Chinese authorities arrested one of China's most prominent Reformed voices, Wang Yi, a pastor and former dissident lawyer, along with more than a hundred other ministry leaders associated with Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu. Many others associated with this church—members, students, and ministry workers—scattered for protection. While most of those arrested were subsequently released, Wang Yi was sentenced to nine years of imprisonment. The work in Chengdu has not recovered.

> . . . the work of the ministry among the diversity of China's reforming churches not only continues but in some respects is thriving in ways that continue to defy Western expectations.

Given all of this, and the profound complications generated by COVID-response measures on top of it all, this winter's issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly* may surprise some readers; it offers clear evidence that the work of the ministry among the diversity of China's reforming churches not only continues but in some respects is thriving in ways that continue to defy Western expectations. Defying Western expectations is, of course, nothing new for China's house churches. As Rodney Stark notes, smug secular scholars dismissed the Chinese converts Western missionaries left behind in 1949 "as nothing but 'rice Christians'—cynical souls who had frequented the missions for the benefits they provided." Also, "It was widely agreed among social scientists that China soon would be a model of the fully secularized, post-religious society."[1]

Then, in 1966, China launched into a decade-long crusade to enforce Maoist orthodoxy with fanatical zeal that seemed like it might wipe out any remaining vestiges of Christianity. "In countless places," Daniel Bays

observes, “Christians were put through such abuse that many did not survive the ordeal.”[2] Yet, he continues, it appears “that Protestants increased their numbers by a factor of five or six” during the dark decade of the Cultural Revolution. This “very rapid growth rate” translates into roughly “five to six million Protestants” by 1978 when many were actually predicting the end of religion in China.[3]

During the 1980s the church grew rapidly in rural places. Then in the 1990s, defying Western expectations once again, the gospel leaped into the more highly educated and increasingly wealthy urban centers. Suffocating restrictions did not arrest the growth of the church in the Cultural Revolution and increasing levels of education and standards of living did not do so in more recent decades. Estimates of how many Christians are in China today vary widely, but 80 million seems quite reasonable, the majority worshiping in the nation’s innumerable unregistered Protestant churches.

China’s house churches have a long history of defying Western expectations, and every indication is that this history—which is about far more than numerical growth—has not yet run its course. China’s reforming churches are not drowning in the new tide but rising on it. They are embracing the opportunities they see in the new challenges they face and finding creative ways to meet the needs of the church and reach out to the world around them. They are also diving deeper into the theological sources available to them, thinking and debating anew the pressing questions they face even as they are laying a foundation for the future. In it all, they are thanking God for how he is using these developments to gather in and build up his people.

China’s reforming churches are not drowning in the new tide but rising on it.

I trust you will find the following articles both insightful and encouraging. If nothing else, they show that ministry in China is anything but impossible, whatever the age may bring—surely a lesson the global church needs to hear today.

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[1] Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 405. See also Stark, Byron Johnson, and Carson Mencken, “Counting China’s Christians,” *First Things* (May 2011).
[2] Daniel Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 185.
[3] Bays, *A New History*, 185–86.

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China's Reforming Churches, Continued

By Bruce P. Baugus

Image credit: 5u5, on the walk to school via Flickr.

Diversity and the Question of Definition

China's reforming churches make up a relatively small, but surprisingly diverse, portion of China's unregistered congregations. In one dimension, China's reforming churches reflect the diversity found in the global Reformed community. Some bodies within China's family and reforming churches carry a more Continental aspect,[1] others a more Presbyterian aspect. Among the more Presbyterian-appearing bodies there are both American and Korean currents, and their confluence often creates choppy waters. There is also a vibrant Reformed Baptist community.

In another dimension, however, China's reforming churches reflect a diversity that is peculiar to the Chinese context. To appreciate this diversity, one must appreciate something of the historical background and contemporary context of China's reforming churches. There is at least one book devoted to this end: *China's Reforming Churches: Mission, Polity, and Ministry in the Next Christendom*.[2]

That book, however, devoted considerable attention to the development of Presbyterianism within a large swath of China's reforming churches. This issue of the *Quarterly* has a somewhat wider scope and includes contributions by Presbyterian and Reformed Baptist Chinese pastors and emerging scholars.

All of this raises the rather fundamental question of definition: What are China's reforming churches? For a church to make a meaningful claim to being Reformed—whether church is understood as a single congregation or a cluster of congregations operating as a connected body—at least two things should be evident. First, they should adhere to a Reformed confession of faith such as the Westminster Standards (most common among those rooted in the Presbyterian tradition) or Three Forms of Unity (most common among those rooted in the Continental Reformed tradition) or, for Baptists, the Second London Confession (1689), which was an adaptation of the Westminster Standards to Reformed Baptist convictions. These are not the only Reformed confessions, but they are the most common. Others, including newly produced Confessions for the Chinese context, may be regarded as Reformed if, in the main, they agree with these.

Second, the church that subscribes to such a Reformed standard must also embody that doctrine and the fundamental principles on which it rests in its life, ministry, and order. A Reformed church not only affirms that Jesus Christ is the only savior of sinners, that justification is by grace alone through faith alone, and that Scripture is the supreme source and only norm of faith and life, it exemplifies these commitments in its practice. Reformed churches, therefore, exhibit meaningful practices of ministerial training, ordination, and subscription; biblically regulated worship; formal processes of church membership and discipline; and the pursuit of personal holiness through the ordinary means of grace God has provided (word, prayer, and sacraments).

Reformed and Reforming

Many churches in China already exemplify these theological and practical commitments and can be considered Reformed in the same sense that many other churches throughout the world are Reformed. Many more churches in China, however, openly aspire to be Reformed but do not yet fully embrace Reformed doctrine or

do not embody Reformed practices. These latter congregations are often very open about both their aspirations and their perceived shortcomings. They are, often in their own eyes and certainly in the eyes of outside observers, somewhere on the way to becoming Reformed but not yet there. Taken together, those who already appear to be Reformed and those aspiring to be Reformed are China's reforming churches. Although they live and labor under profound pressures, their numbers continue to swell as more pastors and congregants discover the rich theological and pastoral resources the Reformed tradition offers.

Reformed theology is being taught, studied, debated, embraced, and applied to the Chinese scene. Reformed standards and Reformed systems of polity are being adopted and adapted to the particular circumstances of China's house churches. Local congregations and even entire networks are being formed or reformed along Reformed lines—both Presbyterian and Reformed Baptist. New attention is being paid to worship, preaching, and ministerial development. The roots of Reformed Christianity are taking hold in the rich Chinese loess and continuing to bear fruit.

The Chinese appropriation of the Reformed tradition faces numerous difficulties beyond the common challenges of Christian life and ministry in China. The very popularity of the Reformed brand, especially among educated urbanites, has led some bodies to claim it for themselves without a deep and abiding commitment to Reformed theology. This shows in their remarkably un-Reformed teachings and practices.

Sometimes, this is the result of well-intended leaders who are themselves convinced of Reformed theology but have not yet fully persuaded their co-workers and congregants. It is also possible that some go along with claiming Reformed identity for the perceived marketing benefits as they try to tap new urban markets or clothe themselves with the perceived academic credibility often associated with the Reformed tradition. Other times, those who once seemed to be making significant progress in reforming their ministries and churches now seem to be stuck or even veering off course. That, unfortunately, is not unusual either to the Reformed tradition or Christian tradition more broadly.

Fluidity and Reformed Identity

The fluidity involved in the continuing inflow and outflow of China's reforming churches highlights three observations about life and ministry in China's reforming churches and Reformed identity more broadly. First, significant damage is sometimes done to Reformed (and Christian) identity by those who continue to claim to be Reformed (and may espouse certain points of Reformed teaching) while acting in ways that contradict Reformed principles. Certainly, Reformed Christians must not throw a brother and sister in Christ under a bus just to spare themselves the consequences of an embarrassing association. Yet, to be Reformed is to be something in particular and to belong to a particular tradition and global community that is bounded by a set of clearly articulated beliefs and practices.

Those beliefs and practices are, Reformed Christians believe, taught clearly in Scripture. This conviction emboldens the Reformed to codify these points of biblical teaching in written confessions and to require their church officers to subscribe to these confessional standards. The work of clarifying and maintaining those boundaries for the honor of Christ and welfare of his people never ends in this world. As the following articles show, it is being pursued by China's reforming churches today.

Second, the fluidity of China's reforming churches highlights the long-term need for ministerial standards and discipline. This, too, is an ongoing project among leaders of China's reforming churches. This need is particularly acute under the current demand for more trained workers. Theological education, mentoring and training programs, and meaningful processes for examining, trying, and ordaining those God has called to pastoral office continue to be matters of urgent attention. So is the renewed debate over the role of women in minis-

try and turning to gifted women to meet the pressing need for workers—a widespread phenomenon in China but notably less common in China's reforming churches.

Third, the relatively small outflow from China's reforming churches contrasts sharply with the continuing inflow as more students prepare for the ministry at Reformed institutions, more churches are planted on Reformed principles, and more existing churches are being successfully reformed. In many ways China's reforming churches are doing well to just hold fast—and this is all that some are able to manage at this time. And yet , they are finding ways to carry on the work of the ministry, educate their children in the faith, evangelize their neighbors, and negotiate the ever-fraught relationship between church and state.

Harried and challenged on many fronts, Reformed church leaders have found creative ways to minister and are refining their theology by digging deeper in the face of an array of current challenges. In some cases, church leaders have capped the number of people admitted to worship because the numbers of people wanting to come were too great for the present security environment. In other cases, they have multiplied meeting places to accommodate smaller gatherings which, it turns out, facilitates deeper fellowship, and creates more room for numerical growth. That growth has been challenged by COVID mitigation measures, but those measures resulted in a deluge of recorded sermons and worship services posted online and more time for ministers and lay folk to study Reformed theology.

Getting Focused

The articles that follow focus on different aspects of the life and work of China's reforming churches today. Much has changed since *China's Reforming Churches* was released in 2014; seven years is like a lifetime in China's fast-changing culture. In the first focus article, Happy surveys current Reformed perspectives on the relationship between church and state in China, noting a diversity of views that are debated and, we might add, put into practice in sometimes overlapping and complex ways. In the second focus article, Gudao considers how developments of the last five years have impacted life and ministry among China's reforming churches, paying particular attention to worship. In the third, Gao Zhen is joined by his wife, Dong Mei, as they consider the many challenges to Christian discipleship in contemporary Chinese culture, and the ways China's reforming churches are responding to them. The final focus article is an updated report on the state of Reformed theological education in China. Finally, Tony Wang reviews Wilhelmus à Brakel's *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, a four volume system of Reformed theology that, recently translated, is finding new life among China's reforming churches.

I will leave with you an Easter egg. In the pages that follow, a Reformed pastor laments in passing that the retreat of some house churches from more open worship practices means that people will no longer wander in off the street because they will no longer be able to hear the congregation singing. It is a striking lament. The idea that house churches in China worship so openly that people passing by can hear them singing, and that strangers off the street are welcome to wander in to worship, may surprise readers just tuning in. But more striking yet is that this actually happens in China with enough regularity to be on this pastor's radar as a lamentable loss to their outreach efforts (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:24–25).

Such is the way of ministry among those who thank God for how he is using the new restrictions to keep them humble, holy, and focused on the work at hand. I trust you will find the articles that follow both informative and encouraging. I also hope you will see how much we all have in common and how much we have to learn from our brothers and sisters in China—perhaps now more than ever.

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Reformed Churches and Church/ State Relationships

By Happy

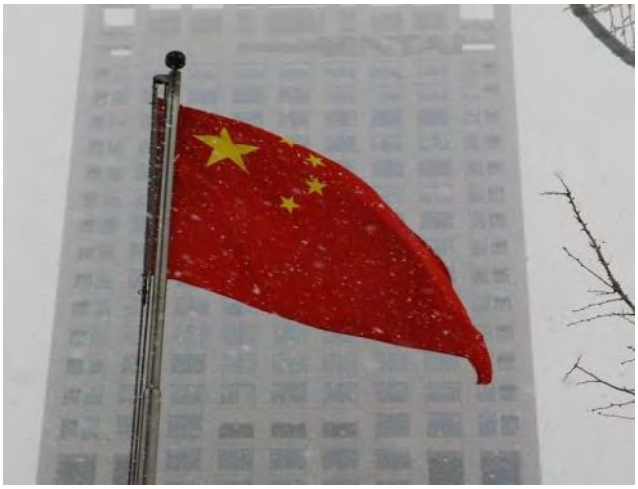

Image credit: PublicDomainPictures via Pixabay.

Reformed theology has spread widely in mainland China during the last twenty or so years. During this time, many Reformed churches (in the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Continental Reformed traditions) have been established. Praise God for all those developments.

Such developments naturally raise the question of the relationship between church and state. Because of the special political situation in mainland China, people within Reformed churches formed a unified view regarding this relationship, which is the "separation of church and state." This view holds that church and state are two different domains: one is spiritual, the other worldly; they cannot be combined. The administrative rights and responsibilities are different for each. Each has its own realm of responsibility.

This principle fits with the essence of the Westminster Confession of Faith as well as the essence of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. It has been adopted by all Reformed churches. However, in mainland China, each region has its own unique political environment regarding the practice of Christianity. Therefore, Reformed churches have differing views towards the application of this principle. They are summarized below.

The View of Submission

People who hold this view believe that God is sovereign over everything. The government is assigned by God, and its authority is from God (Romans 13:1). Being obedient to the government is equal to being obedient to God. Even though the church and state belong to two different domains, power will be abused because of the Fall. However, in order to be a witness of submission, Christians should not openly disobey the government. Instead, they should respect the authority of the government, even at the cost of their suffering. Therefore, when facing persecution, Christians either escape (relocate) or are martyred. "To this you were called, because Christ . . . leaving you an example, . . . you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

This view is more common among the more conservative Reformed Presbyterian churches, and some Reformed Baptist churches. Churches that hold this view rarely speak up when it comes to political activities; they also have fewer connections to other Reformed churches (especially those that hold a view different from their own). This lack of connections shows in a lack of cooperation with other churches in theological training and seminars as well as evangelistic endeavors. Nevertheless, these churches do put a lot of weight on theological training of their leadership, discipleship training, and church planting within their own organizations.

The View of Faithful Disobedience

People adhering to this view believe that God has set boundaries for the church and the state, and each should function within its own boundaries. The Bible has not given any branch of government the authority to run the church or to interfere with the faith of Christians.[1] When the government oversteps its boundary and interferes with the church, the church has no obligation to obey the government. In this case, the government does not perform within the boundary set by God and thus loses its authority. Christians can disobey the government because of their faith since God's law is greater than man's law.

The majority of Reformed churches (including both Presbyterian churches and Baptist churches) do not hold this view, but those churches that do have great impact. Believers in those churches are ready to pay the cost for their faith. When the government's laws and policies go against the Bible, they are the first to protest. They openly announce their opinions towards the government's laws and principles and call for more churches to resist any of these that go against the Bible. They will often use the law to defend their right to practice their faith and also use the law to fight for the freedom of their faith.

The process is very difficult, but these Christians show great perseverance before the government. They proactively start Christian education ministries, teach the Christian faith to their children, and refuse to hand their children over to the public education system. All these actions are against the polices of the government, but these parents believe that God has given this obligation to them and to the church; both church and Christian parents have the right to do this.

The View of Progressivism

People following this view believe that the church is salt and light for this world (Matthew 5:13, 14), and that the church should display God's kingdom on earth. Therefore, whether the government steps over the boundary to interfere with the church or not, as long as the government does not act righteously, justly, or fairly, the church is obligated to stand against it for the sake of justice. Since the establishment of government is for justice and peace, and because the Christian faith makes us love righteousness, the church should help the government move towards righteousness and justice.[2]

Only a small number of Reformed churches hold this view, and those churches are mainly Presbyterian churches. They are active in public affairs, caring for the disadvantaged, looking after orphans and widows, and working for charitable causes. For example, they launch anti-abortion ministries, care for people who are defending their rights, visit the families of those who are sentenced to prison because of their speaking out, and openly condemn unjust and unrighteous matters in society. They proactively shine as light for the Lord in all areas, and they always strive for excellence no matter the area whether it be finance, the arts, or any other.

The View of Separation[3]

People who hold this view believe that we should give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Faith is faith; politics is politics. Faith should not interfere with politics, and politics should not interfere with faith. Each shall function within its own boundaries and shall have nothing to do with the other.

Churches holding this view are mainly house churches who later adopted Reformed theology, including a few of the Reformed Baptist churches. Under the influence of this view, believers in these churches actively evangelize outsiders. They do not care about political topics and have no passion for public affairs. They care about the return of Christ, spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth, establishing churches in all nations, and promoting cross-cultural evangelism. These believers are willing to donate money to evangelical ministries.

Conclusion

The views presented above are from my observations of mainland Reformed churches. While I have used different labels to summarize each view, I do not mean them in a negative way. These views are not independent of each other. Sometimes in a given church, more than one of the above views will be present. I have only described them here and do not offer any assessment. I have written this article so that readers will have a general idea of the situation and will understand the differences.

Translated by ChinaSource.

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[1] Yi Wang, *My Declaration of Faithful Disobedience,* December 12, 2018, *Christian Times* https://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=156491&Pid=104&Version=0&Cid=2053&Charset=big5_hkscs (accessed December 6, 2021).
[2] DengXing Jiang, "The Publicity of the House Church and the Relationship between the Chinese Church and State," *Church*, January 2009 (the 15th volume).
[3] Editor's note: All four views described by our author embrace the principle of separation of church and state. The view described here is a particular application of that principle.

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China's Reforming Churches, Continued

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[1] The Continental Reformed tradition refers to the Reformed churches on the continent of Europe and includes the Swiss, French, German, and Dutch Reformed churches. This strand of the Reformed tradition is intimately related to but somewhat distinct from the Presbyterian strand rooted in Scotland.
[2] Bruce P. Baugus, ed., *China's Reforming Churches: Mission, Polity, and Ministry in the Next Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014).

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Recent Characteristics of Reformed Churches in China

By Gudao

Image credit: Emma Gawen, Nanjing in winter show via Flickr.

SIGNIFICANT CHANGES ARE TAKING PLACE in post-COVID -19 house churches in China, including within the Reformed church.

Reformed house churches in China were beginning to be established around 2000. In the 1990s, the percentage of young and educated Christians in house churches significantly increased, leading many traditional house churches to became Reformed churches. Reformed theology's rigorous knowledge system, theological structure, and rational approach attracted many educated Christians. Especially through the preaching of foreign Reformed Christian workers, more and more young, urban house churches in China became Reformed churches.

Reformed theology emphasizes the supremacy of the word of God, the purity of doctrine, and the importance of the church. Since 2010, many Reformed house churches have attempted to transition from private house gatherings to more public settings. Some Reformed churches no longer wanted to remain hidden but rather become a city on the hill. This transformation, however, failed. The 2018 Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs and the 2020 pandemic have almost completely changed everything about the existence of China's house churches. Right now, the gathering of any house church of a reasonable size is almost impossible.

Under such circumstances, the gatherings of Reformed churches are taking on a few new characteristics. The following five trends are particularly notable.

Smaller, Less Visible Gatherings

Small group gatherings within families are replacing public, churchwide gatherings. Since Reformed churches place a lot of weight on the public reading of the word, church sacraments, and cooperate worship, this has been a fairly challenging change for them. For many Reformed pastors and believers, the larger, public gatherings for corporate worship practiced by Western churches were regarded as the correct way to worship. For them, small group gatherings within families were incorrect. Some who thought this way even objected to the small-group model of family worship believing that such gatherings are contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures. However, with the change of circumstances, fewer and fewer people are rejecting small group gatherings within families. More and more churches are adapting to the circumstances, replacing large gatherings for public worship with small group family worship.*

However, these changes alter people's view of worship. In the past, many Christians believed that a proper worship gathering needed a public space specially dedicated to worship, a full-time pastor, and a choir. Nowadays, designated spaces, choirs, and public gatherings can no longer be regarded as basic elements of worship. What matters most are the correct preaching of the word, the carrying out of the sacraments, prayers, and fellowship (cf. Acts 2:42). Some churches also share a meal after the Sunday worship.

Renewed Focus on Doctrine

Reformed house churches used to focus much more on church membership, church constitutions, and church

regulations. Now the focus is on the teaching of doctrines, including the study of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. This transformation is a change from a focus on the external to a focus on the internal. Many pastors are spending more energy on studying the Confession of Faith. They publish their study notes online and share with each other. This process has laid a solid foundation for faith. More and more churches are focusing on Scripture reading and prayer as well as on living a godly life every day.

Urgent Need for Laborers

The demand for coworkers increased drastically because churches were divided into small groups. Before the pandemic, a lot of Reformed churches began to forbid women from preaching or serving in authoritative positions. However, due to the severe lack of workers right now, Reformed churches have started to allow women to serve in leadership. Not only can women be group leaders, but they can also preach in front of the congregation.

Because of the great need for workers, the focus of church ministries has also turned toward discipleship and staff training. Churches used to host many different activities and ministries which cost a great amount of time, money, and energy. Now churches are more focused on discipleship training and ministry training. In the model of family small groups, the equipping of group leaders and host families is of utmost importance.

Embracing Missions

Since the pandemic last year, the Chinese house churches have suddenly started to pay more attention to missions. Many online mission activities have sprung up rapidly, including online evangelism training meetings and online prayer meetings with a focus on missions. Reformed churches in China used to have a more internal focus, paying more attention to teaching and building up families. However, nowadays, because of the influence of other churches, Reformed churches have started to focus on missions. Foreign mission organizations used to play a critical part in missions in the past, but as these foreign workers and mission organizations withdrew from China due to the pandemic, the main force in mission activities is now local Chinese missionaries and churches.

Serving Other Branches of the Church in China and the World

Chinese house churches and Western churches have some obvious differences. These include different understandings of the gospel, the church, and different views of social responsibility. After the pandemic, many house churches in China started to reflect on their theology, ecclesiology, missiology, the gospel, and the cultural mandate. Reformed house churches, in turn, have felt the need to establish an indigenous theological framework that is both scripturally sound and localized to help Chinese house churches more broadly to establish churches that follow God's will, are filled with the power of the Spirit, and suitable for their unique Chinese circumstances. Such a framework could be beneficial not only to Chinese house churches in general but also to the global church as well.

Conclusion

The above is a rough sketch of the changes in Reformed churches after the pandemic. It is an imperfect description owing to the authors limited observations and own limited perspective. It is, however, this author's report and is offered for your reference.

Translated by ChinaSource.

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Thoughts on Culture and Contextualization

By Zhen Gao and Dong Mei

Image credit: Pixabay

The media continually repeats the narrative that Chinese house churches face difficult circumstances, and this is true. However, in an era of great changes in China—the end of the Cultural Revolution, Reform and Opening Up, Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, rise of the market economy, and common prosperity—Chinese house churches have achieved significant development that cannot be overshadowed by temporary or occasional suffering. Historically, God has used the faithful and sacrificial service of his missionaries, pastors, and preachers, and even the oppression of the governing authorities, to watch over his church, to make his church stand firm, to have the church spread the true gospel, and to give believers true faith.

The Current Situation of Chinese House Churches

Today, Chinese house churches vary greatly—ranging from white-collared, well-educated churches in large urban centers; to the well-organized, mission-focused networks in Wenzhou; to small gatherings of rural migrant workers in cities. The development and diversity of China's house churches raises many questions about the contextualization of the gospel. Healthy contextualization means, on the one hand, recognizing the supremacy of the Bible and not compromising the essence and character of the gospel and, on the other hand, adjusting the methods of sharing the gospel and the models of ministry to reach a given culture. Below, we analyze some key features of the cultural context of Chinese house churches.

Regulatory Environment

The *Regulations on the Administration of Religious Affairs* and *Five-Year Planning Outline for Advancing the Sinification of Christianity (2018–2022)* make up the main body of the regulatory laws.[1] The main effect of the former on urban house churches is that they are required to register or face a variety of consequences. Since house churches typically choose not to register their venue, they are not legally recognized. The latter is the plan of the China Christian Council (CCC) and National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches in China (TSPM) for the contextualization of the Chinese church. Their primary goal is clear:

> Sinification is the sustaining direction for religions in China; meaning that religious doctrines are to be guided by the core socialist values, are to promote excellent Chinese traditions, and cultivate ideas such as unity, progress, peace, and tolerance; extracting content from the doctrines that are conducive to social harmony, contemporary progress, health, and civility, while preserving fundamental beliefs, core religious doctrine, and ritual systems. . . . During the process of promoting the Sinification of Christianity, the following guidelines must be followed: uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China, follow the guidance of the core socialist values, and affirm the system, path, theory, and culture of development in our nation.[2]

Many churches hope to rely on the constitutional freedom of religion as a defense against such laws and regulations, but practically speaking this does not work. To some extent, the constitution in China is not settled law—judicial and executive agencies do not base their judicial and enforcement choices on the constitution. Of course, when house churches face persecution, using the constitution as protection is a way of increasing pressure on the authorities. How to protect the church and protect believers in a situation where their existence is justified and reasonable but lacks legality is a serious problem faced by house churches. From this perspective, the authorities are actually fairly lenient towards house churches since they have not truly enforced the laws and regulations mentioned. This needs to be taken into account.

Economic Challenges

The second environmental factor faced by Chinese house churches is the immense economic pressures of life. In the face of such pressures, the order of one's priorities changes. In Chinese Christian families, often both husband and wife hold fulltime jobs, and conflict sometimes arises over the roles of family members because of a difference in income.

Life's pressures can steal joy from people. While people attend worship services, they refrain from participating in additional church activities such as prayer meetings, Bible studies, and visitation. At the same time, problems such as high rent and property values, change of workplace, a lack of a societal safety net, and *hukou* difficulties requiring children entering high school to return to their place of origin cause great mobility among lay Christians.

How to sufficiently convey the truth in a limited time is a pastoral challenge. How to nourish and care for believers, strengthening their faith and building a bridge between the temporary and the eternal is an urgent question. A pursuit of worldly goals will cause a rift in a Christian's life: during the week he is busy with work and family, and on Sunday he is busy worshipping and repairing his relationship with God. Such a cycle causes spiritual life to wither.

It is extremely important to equip believers with the truth so that instead of struggling on their own, caught up by themselves in the pressures of life, they can more deeply surrender to and rely on God (cf. Matthew 6:26, 34). It is necessary for the church to teach believers according to the Bible how to properly view wealth. Christians must be taught, for example, to live within their means, to not take out high-risk loans, to stay far away from illegal fundraising and multi-level marketing. We must be vigilant against the prosperity gospel's misleading teachings on this topic.

Educational Opportunities

Christian education is an urgent and practical need. The establishment of church schools has provided an important path for Christians to educate their children, but they also face many difficulties. In the crosshairs of various laws, schools founded by churches lack "legality" and they are repeatedly attacked on all sides.

Still, establishing Christian schools is very meaningful and very important to nourish covenant children and prepare future church leaders. This is especially so in a country without sufficient freedom of religion. Just as the current crackdown on after-school education does not prevent responsible parents from seeking tutoring for their children, the church must not give up on preparing future Christian workers to accomplish the Great Commission Christ has entrusted to us.

Students in church schools may not all become fulltime pastors or preachers. Their courses of study must equip them with a level equal to public education across all subject areas, yet, as explained by a pastor in the book *Christian Education*, the goals of Christian education are completely unique:

1. To further God's glory;
2. To teach truth;
3. To bless the child in all aspects; and
4. To bless society.

Pandemic Response

COVID-19 has caused broad-reaching changes in China (and the world) with "isolation" as the key word. Traffic between different regions has been shut down, and anywhere one goes there are tracking apps, temperature checks, COVID tests, and mask mandates. Church services are constantly adjusting between being online and in person. Despite the disadvantages of online worship, the recordings they generate are precious riches; we can listen to them repeatedly and think on them deeply. To mitigate the lack of large gatherings during a time of isolation, we should establish flexible roles of service in various churches, recruit and train more church workers, and encourage theological study courses.

To love is to give. The more we give, the deeper our relationships grow. The spiritual lives of believers who do not serve are in stagnation. Once we give up serving, then we have cast aside many spiritual blessings, and given away our birthright.

Political Correctness

Political correctness is the idea that we are to say what is accepted as correct or ought not to speak. Under this premise, anything that disagrees with central policies and the speeches of leaders is regarded as incorrect and dangerous. To protect oneself, one might choose to stay silent or give up expressing one's views. Christianity often finds itself politically incorrect.

Political correctness brings at least two severe consequences. The first is that one stops thinking about a certain topic, either believing whatever is claimed or ignoring it altogether. The second is division. Family members, friends, and colleagues might fall out with one another because of differences in political views. This makes gatherings and meals a time of staying sensitive to subtleties.

Contextualization Practices

Other challenges include beliefs and practices related to science, technology, entrepreneurism, atheism, and materialism. How should house churches respond to these challenges? There are at least three practices of contextualization among China's house churches.

Active Engagement

The most notable example of this practice is the Early Rain Covenant Church. Early Rain pastor, Wang Yi, outlined four commissions for the urban churches of this era in his article, "On the House Church Tradition and Making Urban Center Churches Public."[3] First, he addresses the priestly commission of being rooted in truth, building up the church, and theological education. Second is the prophetic commission of striving for religious freedom, aiding rural churches to bring an end to political persecution, and finishing the transformation of church governance. Third, he speaks to the apostolic commission of going out from urban centers and evangelizing surrounding towns. Fourth, he focuses on the kingly commission of undertaking to influence mainstream society and culture. In a 2017 article, Yang Yage strongly criticizes this latter practice as a diversion from the gospel by saying, "When the church is drunk on politics, they will be unable to testify to the gospel."[4]

Survival

In his article, "Tendency towards Anti-intellectualism and Individualism in Chinese House Churches,"[5] Shi

Hengtan of the Chinese Academy of Social Science wrote that the actual context of Chinese house churches is that they cannot be public and must seek to avoid attention. They exist only on the margins of society and have few opportunities to participate in public life. Therefore, as organizations, they play no role in social works such as education, medicine, charity, elderly care, disability assistance, and welfare. They have no public image and no open societal standing.

While house churches usually adopt a low-key method of operation with good reason, this low-key approach brings its own set of problems. When churches do not open their doors, every new person who comes is brought by someone. No one walks in because they heard the sound of worship music. Furthermore, churches cannot properly serve in their traditional roles of assisting the disabled, aiding orphans and widows, and the like. Taken to the extreme, a closed church begins to treat church security as an idol. Members act carefully, surreptitiously, drawing the suspicion of bystanders. In addition, a closed environment breeds ignorance and anti-intellectualism; only openness can overcome these.

A Third Way

Some house churches have managed to balance biblical truth and culture in their practice of contextualization. There are a few obvious characteristics of this third way:

1. An emphasis on family and marriage;
2. An emphasis on church planting;
3. An emphasis on discipleship and leadership training;
4. Preaching a gospel the congregation can understand, while not avoiding the topic of sin;
5. Particular emphasis on the Christian education of covenant children.

Conclusion

The church does not exist in a vacuum. It consciously or unconsciously responds to various cultural factors by seeking advantages, avoiding disadvantages, or being proactive. Here are some examples relating to the cultural complexities mentioned above:

1. Interacting with governing authorities: from hard resistance to avoidance to pursuing positive interactions.
2. Focusing sermons on biblical truth and not extending them to make political or sensitive connections.
3. Setting clear church expectations: not participating in business, forbidding loans between members, and avoiding the worldly disputes that cause weakness and stumbling.
4. Setting rules for leading gatherings and other forms of service, achieving unity within the church through ritual.
5. Getting to know believers' current situations through Bible study groups and helping believers through timely visitations, fellowship, and sharing, to avoid sheep going astray.
6. Making public financial and ministry updates through congregational meetings.
7. Gradually establishing presbyterian government and democratic processes.
8. Encouraging the continual growth of preachers through church planting so that there is continual renewal and improvement of sermons, pastoring, and governing.
9. Maintaining normal communication with landlords, property management, local police, neighborhood committees, village committees, and maintaining good relationships with neighbors.
10. Keeping the situation of believers confidential, being careful not to break confidentiality in sermon examples to avoid causing discomfort or dissatisfaction.

How the next generation will turn out is the most important question. The crisis of faith has intensified in the

twenty-first century, and this is a global issue. Islam is growing in Europe; technological advances are causing the spread of worry over human value; materialism, diversification, and secularism are penetrating ever more deeply. The Christian faith will be less and less tolerated by the world and will even become a minority religion instead of a majority religion. In such circumstances, it is the people who have a steadfast faith, are well equipped, and were trained up since childhood who will courageously take on the responsibilities of the future.

Translated and adapted from 中国家庭教会对文化和处境化的思考 by ChinaSource and Bruce Baugus. The entire article in Chinese may be downloaded here.

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[1] 推进我国基督教中国化五年工作规划纲要（2018-2022) *The Protestant Churches in China,* March 27, 2018, https://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/10283 (accessed December 8, 2021). An unofficial English translation, "Five-Year Planning Outline for Advancing the Sinification of Christianity (2018-2022)," is available from *China Law Translate*推进我国基督教中国化五年工作规划纲要（2018-2022）（chinalawtranslate.com).

[2] This English translation is adapted from the one provided at https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/outline-of-the-five-year-plan-for-promoting-the-sinification-of-christianity（2018-2022) .

[3] The article referred to is available in Chinese in two parts, 论家庭教会传统和城市教会的公开化（上）http://biweeklyarchive.hrichina.org/article/270.html and 论家庭教会传统和城市教会的公开化（下）http://biweeklyarchive.hrichina.org/article/290.html（both accessed December 8, 2021). The "four commissions" mentioned are listed in part two.

[4] Editor's note: This article was originally published on WeChat in two parts. The first part can be found at https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ePC6PTNkQcM4xeW1bh3gxw and was published on May 18, 2018. The second part is no longer available on WeChat. And unofficial version can be found at 青草, https://grassgreenlee.com/2018/12/20/%E5%BD%93%E6%95%99%E4%BC%9A%E9%86%89%E5%BF%83%E6%94%BF%E6%B2%BB%EF%BC%8C%E7%BB%88%E5%B0%86%E6%97%A0%E5%8A%9B%E8%A7%81%E8%AF%81%E7%A6%8F%E9%9F%B3-%E5%8D%8E%E4%BA%BA%E6%95%99%E4%BC%9A/（accessed on December 7, 2021).

[5] 中国家庭教会的反智倾向与个人化倾向，石衡潭 on *Pu Shi Institute for Social Science*, September 15, 2009, http://www.pacilution.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=2040 (accessed on December 7, 2021.

Zhen Gao is the pastor of a Chinese house church. His wife, Ms. Dong Mei, serves with her husband

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An Updated Report on the State of Reformed Theological Education in China

By Bruce P. Baugus

Image credit: Alex BergerFollow, The Mountain Path via Flickr.

In 2014, I wrote "A Report on the State of Reformed Theological Education in China" for an edited volume of papers entitled *China's Reforming Churches*.[1] A little later, in January of 2016, I was invited to be a panelist on the topic of "Christian Theological Education" at Acton Institute's China seminar. In both cases I tried to offer a sober-minded assessment of the need, challenges, and opportunities for theological education in China. I was, in both reports, optimistic about the ability of China's reforming churches to provide a theologically educated and well-trained ministry. It is time to revisit this assessment in light of developments over the intervening years—developments that make 2014 feel like a world ago in China.

Readers of *ChinaSource Quarterly* are aware of many of the changes impacting life and ministry in China over the last several years. The incredibly rapid rate of cultural change China has been experiencing for decades has been complicated by, among other things, new regulations of religious affairs, tightening enforcement regimes, shifting economic and diplomatic prospects, and COVID-19 response measures. Some view these developments as if China is reverting to an older form of life that many had thought (and hoped) was a relic of the past. Perhaps a better view is that China is charting a new and unprecedented course, both like and unlike the former ways, that is making the work of the ministry more precarious and prospects for the future increasingly uncertain.

Since my last report in 2016, a hub of activity within one influential network of China's reforming churches—Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu and its associated ministries which included a vibrant seminary—was shut down by authorities. More than 100 ministry leaders were detained and Wang Yi, the church's high-profile pastor and a former activist lawyer, has since been sentenced to nine years imprisonment, and punished in other ways, for "inciting subversion." These facts have been widely reported in the West and, for a time, turned an unwanted light on the wider Reformed community in China.

Early Rain and Wang Yi, as a couple of articles in this issue of the *Quarterly* suggest, are outliers in the Reformed community in regard to both their high public profile and activist posture. It would be a mistake, therefore, to regard this case as generally representative of either the wider Reformed community in China or of the treatment of that community by civil authorities. That said, the tide of religious repression in China has turned, and a once rising civil society is now, at least for a time, retreating. This has impacted the current state and future prospects of Reformed theological education across China.

China's Many Seminaries

The theological education of ministers and other kinds of church workers in China often occurs in seminaries. What counts as a seminary in China and how these seminaries educate their students varies widely. While I do not know of any credible count as to how many there may be—back in 2006 David Aikman guessed hundreds[2]—it seems certain that there are many more seminaries in China than in North America.

Among China's many seminaries, however, relatively few are confessionally Reformed and devoted to serving China's reforming churches. Yet, the demand for Reformed theological education in China remains very strong. This is partly because Reformed Christianity continues to grow rapidly in China and because Reformed Christians tend to value (and deliver) high-quality education. It may also be because options to pursue Reformed theological education are few and it is nearly impossible for students to travel abroad right now. In the main, Reformed seminaries in China continue to maintain relatively high academic standards, highly qualified instructors, and robust mentoring programs in the intense, communal, and spiritually vibrant format that is characteristic of Chinese seminaries more broadly.

Challenges

The Chinese context requires creativity and flexibility on many levels, especially on the delivery of this education. However, what China's churches need most from the schools and programs that serve them (besides a comprehensive orthodox education in biblical and theological studies), are stability, simplicity, and continuity over time. Administrators must be creative and pioneering in order to maintain stable programs of reliably rigorous theological education in the face of challenging and sometimes unpredictable circumstances.

The cultural flux of urban China, where most Reformed churches and seminaries are found, extends into the house churches where ecclesiological disorder still abounds. Under these conditions, house churches are vulnerable to the excesses of unchecked church leaders, doctrinal errors, splintering, the elevation of preferences or pragmatism over principles, and a host of other problems that undermine healthy discipline, consistent witness, and vibrant ministry. These are problems that Reformed theological education can help alleviate but that also represent clear challenges to stable church-seminary relations and seminary development and governance. To address some of these issues, Reformed seminaries have, among other measures, worked diligently at developing viable models of governance, cultivated close relationships to stable networks of Reformed house churches, and developed an accrediting body to provide meaningful and mutual accountability.

The business of providing theological education in China remains delicate for those serving the house churches—all the more so given the considerable tightening that has occurred over the last five or six years. Seminaries and similar programs of theological education have seldom enjoyed the same measure of tolerance as local congregations and are, for a variety of reasons, particularly precarious. Schools, by their very nature, are nodes of relational connections and influence in larger (formal and informal) networks. Limiting class size, dividing student housing, scattering meeting places, and other obvious, if inconvenient, steps can help and are standard practices. Foreign involvement, including foreign funding, faculty, and participation in governance, also invites closer scrutiny. The work is more difficult now than it was five years ago and yet programs of Reformed theological education not only continue to operate but even manage to expand and multiply.

Like many of their peer institutions in other theological traditions, Reformed seminaries tend to go about their work quietly. As I have written elsewhere, "This is not an attempt to hide—most assume officials are aware of who they are and what they are doing—so much as it is a way of showing respect for authorities" as they seek to live peacefully with others.[3] Knowledge of their existence spreads by word of mouth and this limits potential student access to these programs. Access continues to be limited by relatively significant financial and opportunity costs, such as the difficulty of travel and taking time off work for many students, and also by the necessary caps on student enrollment many Reformed seminaries have adopted.

A generational challenge for China's reforming churches is the need for local faculty and resources. Resources include both Reformed Chinese scholarship and library holdings. Currently, Reformed seminaries rely heavily on a supply of instructors and books from outside of China delivered to students via translation (and, since

COVID, a variety of teleconference platforms), to supplement local resources (see the book review in this issue of the *Quarterly*). What is needed are dedicated and specially trained Chinese faculty members producing Reformed resources in Chinese for China's reforming churches and the wider Christian community. There are encouraging developments on this front—some Reformed Chinese students are receiving advanced degrees and returning home, eager to write and teach; others, already returned, are making important contributions in the classroom and through mentoring programs in local churches—but the need is deep and wide and will take a generation or longer, it seems, to meet.

Theological Education and Reformation

The development of local Reformed theological faculties is vital for the long-term health of China's reforming churches. Certainly, there are a number of practical advantages such as increasing operational efficiency and reducing expenses and risks associated with relying on guest instructors. It would also facilitate greater faculty accountability to the local church, more direct faculty participation in mentoring programs, and the development of these schools into fully self-governed, self-propagating, and self-supporting institutions.

The most basic theological need for the future of China's reforming churches, however, remains the indigenization and contextualization of the Reformed tradition itself. This is already happening on multiple levels. Reformed theology is being taught, preached, believed, and confessed both in congregations and classrooms across the country. Existing house churches are being reformed or new ones are being organized according to Reformed convictions about covenant theology, salvation, church government, worship, sacraments, and the like. The Reformation continues today in China.

Yet, a basic principle of Reformed Christianity is to be Reformed and always reforming. This does not mean that Reformed theology is constantly evolving, but rather that we must be constantly repenting and pressing deeper into our knowledge of God as he has revealed himself to us in Scripture. To facilitate the ongoing and ever-deepening need for personal and church reformation, China's reforming churches need Reformed faculties who embody Reformed theology and also think, speak, and write—as well as eat, sleep, and breathe—in Chinese. Only then will there be a Chinese Reformed tradition to take its place alongside the Swiss, French, German, Dutch, Scottish, American, Brazilian, and others in this international theological tradition.

The rise of Chinese Reformed Theology is not just something China's reforming churches need, but something the global Reformed community needs. There continues to be a stream of Chinese scholars serving in China's reforming churches, but there is, to my knowledge, no fully Chinese Reformed faculty at any of China's Reformed seminaries. Despite the rise of some prominent Reformed voices, there is not yet a steady stream of Reformed scholarship in Chinese for the benefit of China's reforming churches, the wider Christian community in China, and the world.

Conclusion

The context of Reformed theological education in China is certainly more challenging than it was in 2014 or 2016, but I remain optimistic about the ability of China's reforming churches to provide a theologically educated and well-trained ministry and even to cultivate a Chinese Reformed theological tradition. The former is already happening and continues in the face of many challenges; the latter appears to be on the cusp of major advances, though this remains a generational project. Whatever the future may bring, however, the Reformed tradition is taking hold and spreading throughout China today. Her programs of Reformed education are humming away as Reformed educators keep teaching, the number of China's reforming churches keeps growing, and the extent and depth of reforms keep advancing.

[1] Bruce P. Baugus, ed., *China's Reforming Churches: Mission, Polity, and Ministry in the Next Christendom* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2014): 269–287.
[2] David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2006), p. 140.
[3] Baugus, *China's Reforming Churches*, p. 278.

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Recent Characteristics of Reformed Churches in China

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[*] Editor's note: The Reformed tradition has generally opposed the celebration of the sacraments in private services only open to and held for the benefit of a single individual or family. This was a common practice within elite society in the medieval church and was continued after the Reformation in some traditions. The Reformed tradition recognizes the prudence, or even necessity, of small gatherings of believers in family homes and other settings—including woods, caves, barns, basements, and catacombs at times—when the church is unable to convene safely in larger numbers or in more open settings. Reformed Christians in China may be better served by considering the practices of Huguenots in France, Nonconforming Puritans in England, or even the Waldensians prior to the Reformation rather than ordinary practices in contemporary Western nations. That said, even many Reformed churches in the West have adopted variations of "small group family worship" on a temporary basis under COVID restrictions.

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Book Review

Theoretical Theology with Practical Application

Reviewed by Tony Wang

The Christian's Reasonable Service, Chinese Edition: 威廉默斯 • 阿 • 布雷克，*理所当然的侍奉*，王志勇等译（北京：当代中国出版社，2013). Translated by Wang Zhiyong and others (Beijing: Contemporary China Press, 2013). Available from Reformation Heritage Books.

The Christian's Reasonable Service, English edition: Wilhelmus à Brakel. 4 vols., translated from the Dutch by Bartel Elshout, edited by Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992-–—1995). Available from the publisher and on Amazon.

Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711) was a pastor and theologian who ministered during the Dutch "Further Reformation," which was a Puritan-like movement in the Netherlands during the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries. His major systematic work, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (*CRS*), combines theoretical theology with practical application and is presented with warm pastoral affection for his readers. It is a complete and "deeply devotional" system of Reformed theology that was first introduced to Chinese readers in 2013.[1]

The Chinese edition of *CRS* has been well received by the church in China; most of the 21,000 copies printed were sold before sales were suspended by authorities. As one of the few systematic theologies published in mainland China it was much prized by local seminaries, house churches, lay preachers, and the wider Christian community. Some house churches even organized small groups to study *CRS* to more fully harness the benefits its publication offers.

Brakel's stated goal for *CRS* was to serve his own local congregation in Rotterdam. Received well in its own time, now, more than three centuries later, the service Brakel rendered to his local congregation has been extended to China's many house churches. For many Chinese Christians, Brakel's *CRS* is like rain in abundance, showered down from heaven to feed the hungry souls in God's church in China. Its combination of the theoretical and practical aspects of theology aptly meets the church's spiritual needs in China.

Theoretical Theology

First, as a theoretical work of theology, *CRS* meets the educational needs of the Chinese church for a robust system of doctrine. The house churches in China are largely conservative, Bible-believing, and less exposed to and influenced by liberal and progressive theologies than those in the West. The church in China has not, however, fully benefited from the biblical and doctrinal developments of the global church for many reasons. One reason is that there are not many doctrinal works available in Mandarin. The Chinese edition of *CRS* is therefore a rare and precious gift to many Chinese Christians.

Vitally, *CRS* is a system of biblical doctrine. Brakel constantly grounds his teachings in Scripture, adopting a plain and accessible style of argument that includes many scriptural proofs. These characteristics are helpful for Christians in China since many are unfamiliar with scholastic methods and philosophical arguments but

have a good working knowledge of the Bible. When he does use some of the technical terms of scholastic theology, he generally defines those terms in simple language. Someone new to theology does not need a theological dictionary to read *CRS*.

Covenant theology, a hallmark of Reformed thought, figures prominently in *CRS* and serves as a major framework in organizing Brakel's thoughts.[2] He also, however, gets into the details of Reformed covenant theology.[3] This is helpful because this central biblical theology is very much undertaught in the churches in China.[4] Notably, his order of doctrine differs from many other Reformed systems in that he treats the doctrine of the church between the doctrines of Christ and salvation rather than after the doctrine of salvation. Adopting this order does not signal a deviation from standard Reformed covenant theology, however. He simply thinks readers need to learn what partaking of the covenant of grace is before learning how one becomes a participant of that covenant. This further amplifies the importance of covenant theology to Brakel, whose presentation should help the churches in China give attention to this important biblical doctrine.

Furthermore, Brakel has a very useful and considerate way of dealing with doctrinal differences and errors in the history of the church. He adopts the practice of always introducing the difference or error before defending his own position. This practice is very helpful to many Chinese Christians, including preachers, because many of us are unfamiliar with the range of theological differences and errors in history. Brakel's apologetic method is also helpful, as he typically raises a question and then answers it in plain terms, arguing from the Scriptures. These features of *CRS* meet the polemical and apologetic needs of Chinese Christians very well.

These characteristics of *CRS* as a theoretical work of theology meet Chinese Christians where they are. In *CRS* we have a classic and thorough work of systematic theology in the Reformed tradition. However, just as importantly, we also have a work that is highly approachable. This makes *CRS* a useful instrument for teaching doctrinal truths to Christians of all classes in China.

Practical Theology

Second, as a practical work of theology, *CRS* meets the educational needs of the Church in China because it is full of warm pastoral counsels and gives much attention to practical, spiritual topics—so much so that it can be likened to a manual of Christian counseling. Brakel is not the only Reformed theologian to integrate practical theology into the system of doctrine, but the level of attention he gives to Christian virtues makes his book unusual in the history of systematic theology.[5] One rarely finds a work that so fully joins together the theoretical and practical aspects of theology. For those who are familiar with the genre of cases of conscience in the seventeenth century, Brakel's treatment of spiritual topics will be quite familiar.[6] In *CRS*, the theology of conscience has been skillfully transformed into a practical theology.

Brakel deploys the theology of conscience to develop his teachings on holiness and sanctification. In so doing, he combines the traditional elements of an exposition of the Decalogue and the Lord's Prayer with more than two dozen virtues carefully sourced from the era's cases of conscience. By folding this practical instruction on piety into his systematic theology, he goes well beyond earlier Reformed theologians. This section of the work contains forty chapters on virtues and goes a long way toward fulfilling his stated purpose of defending both the truth and true godliness.[7]

Conclusion

For Chinese Christians who desire to live for God, *CRS* is a great companion. It is a deep well from which Christians, counselors, and preachers alike can learn doctrinal truths and draw practical wisdom. From this perspective, *CRS* is like rain in abundance, showered down from heaven to feed the hungry souls in God's church

in China.

The Chinese edition of Brakel's *CRS* has been especially well received among China's Reformed Christians who are grateful to have it. There are some minor issues in the Chinese edition: the added Chinese titles to each volume may not be helpful as they do not show the structural significance of the theology of the covenant;[8] the decision to leave the indexes out, especially the scripture index, is unfortunate; also unfortunate was the decision to leave an introductory essay about the Dutch Second Reformation untranslated; and Brakel's pastoral warmth may get lost a bit in the Chinese translation. All these are minor issues, however, that have not obstructed its usefulness. I commend and recommend this translation of this classic work of Reformed theology and am grateful that it is now available in Chinese.

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[1] Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Theology: Historical, Experiential, and Practical Studies for the Whole Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 351.
[2] See *CRS*, introduction notes to chapters. 24 and 30.
[3] See *CRS*, chapters. 12, 13, and 16.
[4] Editor's note: Reformed theology emphasizes God's covenants with humanity as the biblical framework for holding all the various parts of Scripture together and displaying the theological unity and coherency of the whole. Here, our reviewer is suggesting that many believers in China who know the stories, commands, promises, proverbs, and praises of Scripture still frequently fail to grasp the covenantal structure and unity of its teachings which Brakel's work emphasizes.
[5] William Ames, *Marrow of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1997), originally published in 1623, and Petrus van Mastricht's more academic *Theoretical-Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018–), originally published 1683–1698, are similar to CRS in in their attention to practical spiritual and pastoral concerns.
[6] Cf. Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* (available online at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A69129.0001.001). In short, the genre of cases of conscience offers practical guidance according to God's moral laws, "applied with moral integrity to various situations." It is also known as "casuistry" and is a branch of biblical theology. See Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Theology*, 325.
[7] See the preface of the third edition of *CRS* (1, cxvi): "May the Lord also bless this edition. May it be useful in defending the truth and true godliness, both of which are under assault in these days. They are assaulted on the one side by people of a corrupt mind who propose reason to be the rule for doctrine and life; on the other side by people who, in striving for holiness and love, set aside the truth and stray towards a religion which proceeds from nature, revolving around the practice of virtue."
[8] The added titles for the four volumes are 神圣之道， 信心之道， 美德之道，and 生命之道.

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ChinaSource Perspective

Taking the Long View

By Brent Fulton

Image credit: miquitos, Huangshan Mountains in Winter via Flickr.

With its confrontational stance toward the government, a home-grown Christian school, an outspoken public voice on social issues such as abortion, and a thriving seminary, Chengdu's Early Rain Reformed Church appeared to many as the epitome of the Reformed movement in China. Featured in Ian Johnson's *The Souls of China* and in countless Western journalistic accounts of China's "underground" church, Early Rain became a kind of poster child for Chinese Christianity—a picture of what was possible in the relative openness of urban China in the mid 2000s to mid 2010s. Yet, like so many of the images of China's church that have gained currency in the West, the idealized picture of the Reformed faith in China epitomized by Early Rain in large part reflected the expectations of foreign Christians, who looked to China's church to validate their own convictions about what the church should stand for, whether doctrinally, politically, or otherwise.

As Bruce Baugus points out in this issue of *China Source Quarterly*, Early Rain is not representative of China's reformed and reforming churches as a whole. It may have provided Western observers, including Christian groups outside China, with a convenient stereotype, but in doing so it obscured much of the diversity that is found even within those churches that fit broadly under the Reformed umbrella.

Baugus closes his lead article by suggesting that we in the West have much to learn from China's church. As we've alluded to above, and as many of the articles in this issue point out, one core lesson is that God works through the diversity of his church. In contrast to the one-dimensional image often presented by outside observers, we have in this issue of the *Quarterly* a multi-faceted picture of churches that may identify with one another confessionally, but which differ on questions of where and how to worship, the role of women in the church, and how to relate to government authorities. Far from representing a rigid, cookie-cutter approach to church life, the Reformed tradition as it is currently lived out in China is dynamic and adaptable, reflecting the resourcefulness that has enabled the church to thrive amidst all kinds of adversity.

Gudao, a house church pastor in China, describes this flexibility:

> After the pandemic, many house churches in China started to reflect on their theology, ecclesiology, missiology, the gospel, and the cultural mandate. Reformed house churches, in turn, have felt the need to establish an indigenous theological framework that is both scripturally sound and localized to help Chinese house churches more broadly to establish churches that follow God's will, are filled with the power of the Spirit, and suitable for their unique Chinese circumstances. Such a framework could be beneficial not only to Chinese house churches in general but also to the global church as well.[1]

Rather than pointing to the church in China and saying, as many in the West are prone to do, "Look, they're doing it just like us," we would do better to look deeper and have the humility for some ecclesiastical head scratching: "Hmmm, that's different; I wonder why. Perhaps they're onto something. What can we learn here?"

Christians in the culturally divided West can also learn much from the example of believers in China as they

navigate their own cultural minefields. Pastor Gao Zhen and his wife, Dong Mei, offer several practical measures, including pursuing positive interactions with government officials, focusing sermons on biblical truth and not extending them to make political or sensitive connections, avoiding the worldly disputes that cause weakness and stumbling, and achieving unity within the church through ritual.

Finally, the perseverance of China's Reformed believers in a time of increased tightening is a reminder that the church's success does not depend on political favor, nor does political persecution spell its demise (contrary to the perceptions of those who saw Early Rain's closure in 2018 as the end of the contemporary Reformed experiment in China). While the fate of Early Rain and other large, unregistered congregations may have signaled the end, at least for now, of the megachurch movement in China, the rethinking and restructuring underway will ultimately serve to strengthen the church.

Taking the long view, as Baugus does in his article on Reformed theological education, these adjustments are further steps in the generations-long process of indigenizing and contextualizing the Reformed tradition. From this perspective, the cultural complexities, political pressure, and sheer difficulty of doing ministry in China that characterize the current era are not simply obstacles to the church's growth but are integral to the formation of God's people in China.

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[1] Gudao, "Recent Characteristics of Reformed Churches in China," *ChinaSource Quarterly,* Winter 2021, Vol. 23, No. 4.

Brent Fulton is the founder of ChinaSource. He has served as the first president of ChinaSource, the managing director of the Institute for Chinese Studies at Wheaton College, and the founding US director of China Ministries International. Dr. Fulton holds MA and PhD degrees in political science from the University of Southern California and a BA in radio-TV-film from Messiah College. An avid China watcher, he has written and taught extensively on the church in China and on Chinese social and political phenomena. He is the author of two books and is currently working on a new book on Western narratives about the church in China.

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