

Reciting an Ancient Hebrew Blessing in the Offices for Religious Affairs in China

Most of us have heard the stories about the incredible growth of unregistered house churches in China over the last 60 years. But on my recent trip to China, it was wonderful to see how the gospel is spreading in registered, government-recognized churches as well. The gospel simply cannot be chained (2 Tim. 2:9).

I'm aware that "nothing is as it seems in China," to quote a proverbial saying. Yet it is undeniable that the gospel of Jesus is being proclaimed and received by more and more Chinese people, including millions in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), the registered Protestant church movement in China. ("Three-Self" stands for self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating.)

Earlier this year I heard directly from several dozen Chinese house church leaders who informed me persecution has been lessening, especially in the major cities, and this was confirmed to me by other colleagues in China as well. (I am not minimizing past or present persecution; I'm simply reporting what I have heard from these leaders.)

Then, this past week, through a gracious invitation from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, I was one of about 40 Protestant church leaders from America privileged to meet with about 40 Chinese leaders from the TSPM, the China Christian Council, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) and other government and church organizations. We also visited Nanjing Seminary, which is the leading TSPM seminary in China, along with the massive Amity Press, which recently celebrated the printing of its 100 millionth Bible (in Chinese and many

other languages; some are exported, some distributed in China).

I went on this trip with my ears and eyes wide open, since all of my co-workers and friends involved with China have worked with the house church movement, a movement that has endured much persecution and suffering over the decades and a movement known for its faith under fire.

As for the TSPM, the government-recognized church, my impression was that it contained true believers but was marked by a watered-down gospel message, one that was acceptable to the state.

Is there compromise in many TSPM churches? I'm sure there is, but there is plenty of compromise in many American churches as well.

Is the gospel being preached freely in many TSPM churches? Without a doubt it is, and it is resulting in millions of conversions—something that was confirmed to me by members of our Billy Graham delegation who have been working with TSPM Christians for many years.

Do you recall Paul's words in Philippians 1, when he wrote from prison that some preached Jesus with wrong motives yet he still rejoiced because Jesus was still being preached? It appears to be the same in China.

What I mean is that whatever motivated the government to allow the printing and distribution of Bibles and whatever motivated the government to recognize the TSPM, the Word of God is having an impact. And as people read the Scriptures and hear the gospel, they are being transformed.

Some of the pastors on our delegation preached in TSPM churches during our visit, and they were able to preach Jesus freely (it was not just for show, nor was it just for show when the buildings were packed for multiple Sunday services).

Doors are also wide open for others among us to teach in their seminaries or preach in their churches, and they are welcoming interaction based on mutual respect and equality. And government leaders we met with wanted us to know that conditions for unregistered churches are getting better, just as my friends within China have confirmed.

Are there liberal elements in the TSPM church? Absolutely. Are they the majority? It appears not. Why? Because people are reading the Scriptures and pastors are preaching the Scriptures and God is touching the hearts. As the Lord said in Isaiah 55, His Word will not return void.

I heard the testimony of one TSPM seminary graduate who said his training was more liberal but that once he started pastoring, he had no choice but to believe the real gospel—and that is what he preaches. A seminary student shared how he was involved in opera before he was a believer but then got converted and wants to use music for the Lord's work now. That is the power of the gospel!

We also met registered church pastors who work side by side with house church Christians in their regions, and government officials seemed excited to share with us that hundreds of thousands of new Christians are being baptized each year (meaning, in the TSPM churches).

It is true that the main goal of the Chinese government is to maintain social order and harmony, but since Christianity is seen as a positive force, there is no desire to attempt to snuff it out.

Is there complete religious freedom in China the way there is in America? Obviously not, especially when it comes to criticizing the government. (It's the same, of course, in the political realm.)

Are believers still suffering persecution in China, particularly in some parts of the country? Certainly they are,

and that remains an issue of concern.

But is the door wide open for unprecedented exchange between churches in America and China, and is there freedom to preach the true gospel message within church buildings? By God's grace, the answer is yes, and that is certainly good news.

The glorious truth is that the gospel cannot be chained, and even though heaven and earth pass away, the words of our Lord will never pass away (Matt. 24:35).

And perhaps as a sign of good things to come, at the end of an extraordinary meeting with the senior government officials responsible for overseeing all religious groups in China (SARA), I felt prompted to stand and pronounce the priestly blessing in Hebrew (Num. 6:24-26), translating these ancient words into English, which were then translated into Chinese.

All this took place in a historic government building perhaps for the first time in history, and it was warmly welcomed by the top SARA official, who wanted me to know there were many Jews in Shanghai and that Shanghai helped rescue Jews in World War II.

May the word of the Lord go forth throughout China!

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