

WAKE UP CALL 2007 : REBUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR CHURCH AND MISSIONS

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SIGNS OF HOPE

If we look around, there is much in the church to be hopeful and optimistic about in today's church and world.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Robert Morrison's arrival in China. China, already a member of the World Trade Organization, prepares frantically to welcome the world at the Beijing Olympics (2008). In the west, evangelical mega-churches continue to burst at the seams. Creative talents give rise to ever-new expressions of worship in music, drama, video, visual arts, dance. Emergent churches use innovative approaches to engage 21st-century young adults, build community, reach out to the poor and needy. Evangelical seminaries, too, are accepting more students than they have professors and facilities for.

Our short-term mission trips attract thousands of students and adults each year, especially during the summer holidays. Conventions like Urbana (no longer held on the Champaign-Urbana campus of the University of Illinois) remind us of the Student Volunteer Movement (1883). Despite Columbine (April 1999), 9/11 (2001) and Virginia

Tech (April 2007), our young people seem ready to tackle the problems of this broken world, with hearts of selfless service, tender community, and dogged determination. Volunteers poured into Louisiana and Mississippi after Katrina. The adults of the 21st century will rebuild the global chaos which their parents' generation left with them. The church is alive.

The church may be alive – but is she well?

WARNING SIGNS

Perhaps we should be reading some of the "warning signs" as well.

Josh McDowell tells us in 2005 that 91% of teenagers in the evangelical church do not believe that there is absolute truth in the universe. The principles of New Age philosophy continue to invade the industry known as "Christian counseling" (as author Lois Chan reminds us in her *Unholy Alliance*), and to challenge Christians even more insidiously with twisted truths and half-truths such as those boasted by *The Da Vinci Code*. While evangelical mega-churches attract thousands, evangelical and charismatic leaders continue to fall in disgrace, one after another. Evangelical publishers may release solid works like bestseller *Knowing God* (J.I. Packer) and award-winning *The Doctrine of God* (John Frame), but they also publish Catholic authors, as well as heresies like *The Openness of God* (in which Clark Pinnock asserts that God doesn't know everything about the future, page 114). Despite the abundance of available teaching material and the piety of most evangelical believers, churchgoers in the west continue to slumber in their biblical illiteracy, often satisfied by brief lullabies and anecdotes from the Sunday pulpit instructing them that "the most important thing is relationships." I have watched quiz shows on TV where the two competing teams of college students could not answer a single question about the Bible.

Evangelical seminaries of all stripes (Baptist,

Reformed, dispensationalist, Wesleyan, inter-denominational, neo-/quasi-evangelical) may be bursting at the seams; but some of the most talented evangelical theologians are accepting invitations to teach in non-evangelical and non-Protestant schools, one by one, in the west as well as in Asia (e.g. Hong Kong). Liberal publishers welcome manuscripts by evangelical seminary professors. Churches embrace practicing homosexuals as members, pastors and bishops. Billy Graham speaks the gospel to millions, and yet asserts that God will accept followers of non-Christian religions at the final judgment (interview with Robert Schuller, June 1, 1997). In 2006-2007, the Episcopal Church in the USA is going through what the Presbyterians went through in the 1930s, except this time with a twist: African bishops are now appointing missionaries to evangelize American churchgoers. We are witnessing yet another wave of apostasy and evangelical exodus from a mainline denomination.

Short term mission trips continue to go and pave roads, build homes, build friendships with the youth and the poor each year. Churches continue to be encouraged by the video reports as the teams return home. Our young people continue to hug, weep, encourage, give, and love in the aftermath of Katrina and Virginia Tech. They continue to sign decision cards at Urbana to serve as a foreign missionary, if God wills.

But there is something profoundly wrong with the church in the west. It's time for a wake-up call.

SIGNIFICANCE: THE ISSUE AT STAKE

Since 1976 the Lord granted me grace to tackle several problems. I wrote "wake-up call" articles in 1984 to address the need of American-born Chinese in the Chinese church; in 1989 to call the church to a reasoned apologetic to respond to mainland Chinese intellectuals studying in the west; in 1997 to call the church to understand postmodernism; and in 2002, to appeal to cross-cultural service agencies to build a more solid foundation for professionals serving China.

It is time to make another wake-up call. This time, the very existence of the church as the church is at stake. It is something I have been thinking about since 1985 (while attending the "Gospel and Chinese Culture Seminar" sponsored by CCCOWE at the YWCA in Hong Kong). The issue is this:

Beneath the encouraging signs of church growth and missions, the evangelical church is decaying in her very foundations. The church is losing her convictions, her beliefs in Biblical truths. The evangelical church, in a word, is becoming non-evangelical. In this sense, we are re-liv-

ing the years of the 1900s and 1910s.

SIGNPOSTS: THEN AND NOW

The year 1907 may serve as a signpost for us to do a "Then and Now" comparison. The Confucian civil service system was abandoned in China in 1905, leaving a vacuum in national philosophy. The missionary community was celebrating the 100th anniversary of Robert Morrison's arrival in China in 1907. The China Missions Centenary Conference was held in China (the 3rd such all-China conference of Protestant missionaries). Missionaries all felt that China, the sleeping giant, is about to wake up.

In Beijing, the reactionary Empress Dowager, Ci-xi, will be dead by 1908. In 1909, American Methodist businessman John R. Mott will be traveling in America, Britain and Europe, building support for the first-ever World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh (1910). And in 1911, Sun Yat-sen's organizing and fund-raising efforts will succeed to topple the Qing (Manchu) dynasty.

These are years of growth for the missionary movement based in Britain, Europe and North America. China's missionary force continues to grow since the rise of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (1883), peaking in 1926 with 8,000. YMCA membership was growing explosively between 1900 and 1920. Protestant church membership in China was also on the rise. In 1907, missionary statesmen like Timothy Richard had served in China for over 35 years, profoundly influencing the course of 19th century Chinese history. In the not-so-distant future, a new wave of missionary statesmen like John Leighton Stuart, Pearl Buck, and Edgar Snow will be making their mark on 20th century Chinese history.

But, as the church grows in numbers and outreach in the west and in China in 1907, the church was eroding in her foundations. In a word, the church was becoming apostate.

In the 1870s (shortly after the Civil War, 1861-65), social forces were unleashed in the large cities of the United States: immigrants were flooding in from the South (including liberated slaves and non-Protestant Europe. Germany's universities were giving American professors new ideas to teach: Darwin's evolution, biblical criticism, liberal doctrines of God, man and salvation. (On the conservative end of the spectrum, evangelicals in America were also going to hear about dispensationalism for the first time, starting with Presbyterians, in the 1870s.) By the 1880s, the Presbyterian church held a trail to adjudicate the liberal views of a professor at Union Theological Seminary of New York (which was started in 1841 by Presbyterians sympathetic to revivals). By the dawn of the 20th century,



missionaries with liberal convictions (who did not believe in the miracles like the Virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ) were setting sail for China. Timothy Richard was transformed from a fervent mission-minded seminary student (Wales, 1860s) to a universalist – he was hoping for a world religion to swallow up both Christianity and Chinese philosophy.

By the 1920s, there were not to be a heresy trial for a liberal Presbyterian minister, but a movement (symbolized by the Auburn Affirmation) which was calling doctrines like the Virgin Birth and Resurrection of Christ "non-essentials": i.e., Christians can be real Christians without believing in these truths. In 1929, the most important Presbyterian school, Princeton Theological Seminary, forced the exodus of brilliant conservative New Testament scholar J. Gresham Machen. In 1925, conservatives in Texas formed Dallas Theological Seminary.

WHY THE EROSION?

How could it be that, while in the 1880s the Student Volunteer Movement was getting organized, and evangelical Presbyterians could protest the liberal views of a Union Seminary, yet by 1910 Timothy Richard was preaching universalism and in the 1920s liberal theology controlled the Presbyterian church? Was the church asleep? My analysis is this:

(1) The church has always had a godly foundation of laypeople. Yet piety without doctrinal vigilance will lead to apostasy (liberalism).

(2) The missionary movement must be built on not only fervor, but conviction in the unchanging truths of the Bible. If not, the needs and opportunities of the world (e.g. China the awakening giant of 1900) will sweep over the hearts and minds of missionaries, turning their attention away from the absolute claims of the gospel.

(3) Therefore, seminaries and mission agencies must insist in a strong doctrinal foundation for their missionary recruits, and provide ongoing training in Bible doctrine for mid-career, mature missionaries.

If not, the church today will go the way of the church of 1907. She will move into an era in which the evangelicals of the 1940s will no longer recognize the so-called "evangelical church" of the 2010s. The evangelical church's convictions of the 2010s will be so similar to the liberal church of the 1960s, that the label "evangelical" will become totally meaningless.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Is there anything that can be done? Yes there is, but it will take all the heart, blood, sweat and tears of the evangelical church.

(1) Laypeople must take drastic steps to educate themselves in Bible doctrine, apologetics, ethics, to enhance their basic understanding of the Bible.

(2) Congregations must insist that their pastors and guest preachers strongly believe that the Bible is inspired – every word – and that the Bible is inerrant, internally consistent, and that it teaches absolute truth. Leaders (elders, deacons, retreat planners) must be alert to liberal views of those who preach God's Word from the pulpit.

(3) Pastors must preach exegetical sermons filled with Bible doctrine, not satisfied with "chicken soup for the soul."

(4) Mission conferences could be turned (back) into Bible conferences (like in the 1870s): Bible exposition and doctrinal teaching about the gospel and the lostness of man should be restored.

(5) the present movement to repent and pray for the church in North America need to be strengthened. We need to call not only the United States, but "the church in America, turn to God!"

(6) The evangelical church and seminary must build our response to the sufferings of the world from the foundation that God is not only loving (as George W. Bush reminded us on April 16, 2007), but sovereign. Jesus still sits on the throne. From this vantage point we proclaim the kingdom of God among the poor and suffering.

(7) Evangelical thinkers must provide solid, Bible-based answers to the most significant intellectual challenges

to the church today, such as: Did the church oppress authentic views (such as Gnosticism)? Were heretical texts (such as the Gospel of Thomas) really an alternative (a better alternative) as a Christian source text? Did Jesus get married? Isn't the most important need of man "self-esteem"? Shouldn't we love ourselves? Shouldn't we welcome the ordination of prophets and apostles today? Doesn't God give new revelation in addition to the Bible? Isn't culture (philosophy) God's revelation to mankind? Didn't Lao Zi speak for God? Shouldn't we give up the claim that the Bible speaks absolute truth?

Will we continue to sleep? If so, one day the Third World Church will come and evangelize North America. She has already begun to do so.

(The author is the President of China Horizon)

For Further Reading :

David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Chinese translation: "A lonely God" 孤獨的神).

Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

J.I. Packer, *Truth and Power*.

Peter Jones' Pagans in the Pew. www.spirit-wars.org, www.cwipp.org.

John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (cf. chapters on the problem of evil, and free will). www.frame-poythress.org.

Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (video also available).

Lois Chan, *Unholy Alliance*. www.chinesechristiandiscernment.org.

Josh McDowell, *From Beliefs to Convictions*.