

## BOOK REVIEW

David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003), hard, 344 pp., ISBN: 0-89526-128-6, US\$27.95.

As the new millennium begins, some epoch-making books are also setting out the future of Christianity. *Clash of Civilization* by Samuel Huntington forecasts how the new century will be radically different from the past and how new cultures and religious groups will bring about a new world order. Then, *Next Christendom* by Philip Jenkins brings sharply focused attention to non-western Christianity and its pivotal role in the shaping of twenty-first century Christianity. *Jesus in Beijing* drives this apparently new religious and cultural shift to Chinese Christianity, perhaps the new emerging center of Christian powerhouse.

David Aikman is an author, journalist and policy consultant, and is currently a freelance writer and commentator. He served as a Hong Kong correspondent in the 1970s, and subsequently as Beijing Bureau Chief of *Time Magazine* for two years in the 1980s. However, it appears that his serious contact with the Chinese house church movement took place in 1998, and he has since also developed a keen interest in Chinese Christianity in general. The "Introduction" chapter details Aikman's subsequent trips to China as he developed this book. The next chapter is a historical sketch of Chinese Christianity, covering the initial Nestorian contacts in 635, as inscribed in the famous Nestorian stele, until the expulsion of missionaries in 1949.

The next several chapters (chs. 3-6) are a description of the Chinese house church movement, by way of a biographic presentation of leaders. The first of them are the "patriarchs," who began their Christian vocation before the 1949 Communist takeover. They represent the older brave leaders, who link the older Chinese Christians, often marked by the missionary presence, with the new Christian generation, which became apparent around the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. Their lives are very much that of martyrs. Next are the "uncles," representing the active and younger leaders of the house church network. This younger generation is diverse in their leadership and theological leanings, but they continue the martyr-like spirit. To their credit, the post-1970 Chinese Christians have achieved a dramatic resurgence of Chinese Christianity after a series of attempts to "assassinate" Christianity in China. Next are the "aunts, nephews and nieces," a group of younger and yet talented emerging leaders for the house church networks.

The chapters on the house church network conclude with the “underground” training schools and programs which are producing next-generation leaders, evangelists, church planters and missionaries. As expected, diversity is the rule of the programs, and yet the intense nature of the programs and the commitment of the students and teachers are characteristic. In these chapters, the reader is introduced to the “who’s who” in the Chinese house church network.

The next several chapters (chs. 7-12) in a sense continue the historical chapter (ch. 2), in laying out the development of modern Christianity in China. The first two chapters in this section describe the emergence of the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPT) and its struggle, especially during the Cultural Revolution.

The role of Bishop Ding Guangxun in this state church movement receives special treatment by the author. The “tricky circus acts” by Ding and several TSPT leaders, between the state religious policies and genuine Christianity, are presented in an equally delicate manner. Three Self churches and their leaders were subjected to harsh treatment by the state, just as the house churches were, although perhaps less in intensity, and also with the state sanction after the Cultural Revolution.

Chapter 9 showcases the Wenzhou as China’s “Jerusalem.” These adventurously entrepreneurial Wenzhous, with their exceptional business skills, have become successful overseas business people. As the province became the most Christianized in China, the Wenzhou not only demonstrated a unique model of compromise between the “underground” churches and the provincial administration, but also made the province the “Antioch” of China, the missionary launching pad. The author closely ties the next chapter to the previous: “Back to Jerusalem,” the ambitious missionary impulse of the Chinese house church network. Although the origin of this concept may trace back to the pre-1949 era, the organized effort is a recent one. It is encouraging to see that this missionary movement has the potential to bring the diverse house church groups together as a united force.

The last chapter of this group of chapters ends with a good presentation of the Catholic Church in China. Because of its ecclesial tie with the Vatican, its history appears to be more brutal, producing a strong network of unofficial churches, in addition to the recognized Three Self Catholic church.

The next three chapter groups (chs. 12-14) are miscellaneous topics, although by no means less important. The chapter on persecution (ch. 12) has its unique value in providing information about major cults. The next chapter drives the author’s agenda home: the spread of Christianity

among young urban professionals, such as artists, writers, and academics, with their potential to influence the entire society. This is where the author sees a major shift of the rural and grassroots nature in the major Christian force in China. The following chapter (ch. 14) introduces three foreign individuals and English teachers, along with an orphanage ministry by foreign entities, with their significant influence in the shaping of Chinese Christianity. The book concludes with a short chapter (ch. 15) of the author's insights toward the future: the future of Chinese Christianity, its influence on society and on the world. Aikman, in spite of his carefully tentative attitude toward the future, expresses his strong belief that China, through its Christian influence, will become the most powerful deciding factor in the balance of global power.

This book is extremely well written with many first-hand witnesses and extensive research. His presentation of many house church leaders, house church groups, and their institutions, such as training schools, are detailed and vivid in description. Aikman's journalistic expertise shines here.

To many non-China experts like myself, there is a natural wonder whether his dazzling conclusions will ever be contested. And, at the same time, the author's disclosure of many individuals and church groups may come with risk. It was said not long ago that, because of this book, several house church leaders were rounded up by the police.

It is also apparent that the author tried to be fair to the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches. Often, we have heard the "demonizing" tendency of some authors about these recognized churches. Granted, the clear Christian commitment of leaders like Bishop Ding is questionable, in the context of the state's demand for priority loyalty; but it is also true, as this author has presented, that the genuineness of Christian faith among many TSPM churches cannot be denied.

What is significant, particularly to the readers of this journal, is the author's general conclusion that several house church networks have exhibited Pentecostal/charismatic characteristics in their beliefs and worship. In this regard, he highlights the role of Dennis Balcombe in influencing the several house church networks with Pentecostal beliefs and worship (pp. 273-74 in particular). Aikman shows how, from the early 1980s, Balcombe began to make contacts with the house church networks and introduced Pentecostal doctrines and worship. However, whether the "Pentecostal" or charismatic elements of these house church networks can be attributed to him, to such a degree as the author argues,

is being contested.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is possible that the church is naturally charismatic, if there is little theological interference, particularly in the non-western world, and Christianity in China seems to epitomize this argument.<sup>2</sup>

Another powerful presentation of this book is the missionary orientation of Chinese house church Christianity. Their commitment to the “Back to Jerusalem” movement provides reasons why we can expect a forceful role of these churches in the next generation of mission. Missiologists have for some time predicted that China will be the next missionary superpower.

What is also significant is the development of missionary awareness among Chinese Christians, and this came, not through any missiological programs from outside, but through intuitive theological development. Again, this proves that the missionary impetus is part of the church’s instinct.

This book is an excellent resource for those who are interested in Chinese Christianity, its struggles, heroic resurgence of spiritual power, explosive expansion and vision beyond China. The world church is now given the task of carefully standing by the side of this unique church, and assisting it to fulfill its destiny. The so-called “developed” churches should not dare to impose their structure and ethos on what the Holy Spirit has been carefully developing in China.

Reading this book not only “stuffed” me with a wealth of information, but also challenged me as an Asian Christian. It was indeed a spiritual experience for me. The giant is finally awakening and we may see the next Christian and missionary superpower rising right in this part of the world. Do you think of China and wonder what God is doing in the largest country in the world? More importantly, do you want to be a part of the exciting future of Asian Christianity centered around China? Read this book, prayerfully!

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Luke Wesley, *The Church in China: Persecuted, Pentecostal, Powerful* (Baguio City, Philippines: APJS Books, 2004), p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> See, Wonsuk Ma, “Asian Pentecostalism: A Religion Whose Only Limit Is the Sky,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 25:2 (2004), pp. 191-204 (199-20).