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# The Peace of the Risen Lord: Celebrating Easter in China

Henry Rowold

It has never been easy for people from the West to understand China, not even the church there. The Chinese measure their history by events and epochs very differently than we do. Their language, even their names, are not just unrecognizable but unpronounceable. Their political system has always been an enigma, whether in imperial days or now under communist rule. Adding to these things all the animosity that divided our countries a generation or so ago, and there is not much basis for understanding. Even what we hear about the church in China is so fragmented and contradictory that we do not understand much about it—although what we do hear makes us want to know more.

While this article cannot solve the whole problem,<sup>1</sup> I should like to make a start by inviting its readers to join a medical team from the Wheat Ridge Foundation and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as we shared Easter with Christians in Huai Yin. My hope is that by sharing my notes of the sermon we heard that day, together with some introductory comments and some reflections, the readers will obtain some insight into the life and ministry of the Christian church there.

## The Connection

The occasion for being in China was an invitation to send a medical team to spend a month in a hospital in Huai Yin, doing surgery, performing therapy, instructing doctors and nurses, and sharing our lives and love there. The key to this enterprise, of course, was the medical team itself. There were five members: Dr. Marcy Ditmanson (a retired orthopedic surgeon, born in China of Lutheran missionary parents, interned there by the Japanese during World War 2, a long-term missionary in Taiwan and Bangladesh), his wife Joyce (raised in China and also interned there, an Australian, a nurse), Margaret Klein (a physical therapist), and Pat Shiltgen (an occupational therapist) and her husband. What made this team so valuable was the conjunction of professional expertise (which was formidable) and experience in China (the Ditmansons speaking Chinese with ease and grace) with a commitment to Jesus Christ and to the fullness of life that He gives. Aside from the medical and

training agenda, in other words, the members of this team were coming to China to express their gratitude for salvation and life in Christ (1.) by sharing the healing touch and expertise which God had given them with sufferers in China, (2.) by extending that touch in training doctors and nurses in China, (3.) by giving their spoken witness to the love of Christ wherever possible, (4.) by encouraging local Chinese Christians, and (5.) by providing Christians in the United States and elsewhere a way to bring the love of Christ to China also.

We should mention others involved in this venture aside from the team itself. The Wheat Ridge Foundation has already been mentioned. The agency of the LCMS involved was the China Coordinating Center, established by the LCMS in 1987 to explore and develop just such forms of ministry and witness in China. The other major partner was the Amity Foundation, a social-ministry agency established by Christians in China in 1985 to provide outlets for witness and service in society not otherwise open to the church in China. This seminar was the fourth in a series designed in conjunction, beginning back in 1987.

The point is that the Wheat Ridge medical team was not in Huai Yin by accident, and was not there simply to demonstrate and share medical techniques. What was really happening was that, under the Spirit's guidance, Christians in China were inviting Christians in the United States (from the LCMS and the Wheat Ridge Foundation) to come and serve both the church and the nation of China. The team, in other words, was there in the name of Christ, one part of the body of Christ responding to the call of another, to join in service and praise of the Lord's name.

### **The Place**

Although Huai Yin is a small city by Chinese standards (300,000 people), it was an ideal location for this seminar for several reasons. Its claim to fame, aside from being a major city of northern Jiangsu Province, is that it is the birthplace of Zhou Enlai, premier of China for many years (interestingly his given name literally means "may grace come"). In addition, its comparative isolation means it receives few Western visitors—and thus was very receptive to our

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visit. Another reason that the Amity Foundation chose it, however, was that Huai Yin forms one of the strongest concentrations of Christians in central China. As we learned subsequently, it was also the birthplace of Ruth Bell, daughter of a well-known medical missionary, L. Nelson Bell, and wife of Billy Graham. Aware of some but not all of this background, our team boarded a plane in Hong Kong on Good Friday bound for Nanjing. We completed our journey on Holy Saturday with a four-hour ride by van to Huai Yin, where we met our hosts and settled into our quarters.

### Easter Sunday

The one other thing which we did on Saturday was to meet the escorts assigned to us while we were in Huai Yin. This form of "hospitality" is not uncommon in China, particularly when a group of guests from overseas visits a more out-of-the-way place in China. To put the best construction on things, this is a way of protecting us from anything awkward or unpleasant. One suspects, however, that it is a way of keeping us from getting too close to the common people—and of keeping tabs on whatever we do. This escort service did have one ironic turn, however, which simply shows how the Lord can turn most anything to His purpose. When the members of our team said that we wanted to worship at the Christian church on Easter Sunday morning, "escort duty" meant that the escorts had to walk into church along with us and sit there beside us in the front pew—when as members of the Communist Party they otherwise are forbidden to come anywhere close to a church.<sup>2</sup> (The readers may keep these escorts in mind, as they read the sermon printed below.)

On arriving at the church I must admit that my first impression was some disappointment. Having seen quite impressive church buildings elsewhere in China, I was assuming that in this Christian stronghold we should have the joy of joining hundreds, perhaps even upwards of a thousand, in a sanctuary decorated to reflect the festive Easter message. The reality was that the church there had no real sanctuary, only an old ramshackle residence, gray and quite austere.

When we arrived, we were escorted inside, into what might have been a living room, one end of which served as a small chancel. Other rooms opened onto this one, as well as porches and walk-

ways. I counted some four to five hundred people in sight, tightly packed, fully aware that there were probably others outside on all sides. There was a small organ, which was helpful because the student leading the singing was seemingly blessed with more exuberance than musical skill. After several hymns (sung by congregation and choir), prayer, and readings from Scripture, a Pastor Lin, from one of the churches in Nanjing arose to preach. The congregation settled down, with hardly a distracting sound anywhere, for the full fifty minutes of the sermon. (As others read my notes of the sermon, they would do well to imagine themselves surrounded by hundreds of people, many of whom suffered for the Lord during the Cultural Revolution, who talk of a resurgence of the church with joy, and who are hungry to hear the gospel rather than the worn-out and empty slogans of the Communist Party.)

**The Sermon (in Abridged Form):  
"The Peace of the Risen Lord"**

"Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may the peace of the Lord be with you. How wonderful it is to be with so many of you today to celebrate our Lord's resurrection. Can there be a stronger witness to His resurrection than this church bursting with people today? The number of people who claim Him as Lord is increasing daily, and each person adds another voice to the chorus of people praising Him. Today that chorus is even stronger, with the presence of several foreigners worshipping with us. May you all have the peace of the Lord.

"Today we are celebrating the second of our two great Christian festivals, Easter. In reality, however, they are really one inseparable festival of our Lord giving Himself and His peace to this world. At Christmas Jesus came to bring 'peace on earth.' After He gave His life on the cross for our sins, and rose again, His first words were 'Peace be with you.' That Lord and that peace are ours. We who believe in Him truly have the peace of reconciliation with God, the peace that comes only from the love of God, the peace that kindles in us also love among each other, the peace that makes and characterizes us as His disciples. That peace and love of God in Christ have brought our foreign brothers and sisters among us in

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China (to share the love of God with the ill and suffering), and that peace and love of God has called each of us here to worship him this morning.

"The will of Christ, of course, is that the entire world have peace, the peace which He has come to bring. We are the Lord's. We have His peace. We live to share that peace, the peace of His gospel, with all people in this world. After all, our Lord's first word after He rose from the dead was this proclamation of His resurrection: 'Peace be with you!'

"Indirectly, that peace also means stability in society. We all know, of course, that the more Christians there are in society, the more stability society will enjoy, because Christians live by peace and love, and they desire to give a good witness to our Lord. What our nation needs, obviously, for real stability is a full measure of the gospel and a steady increase of Christians.

"Indirectly, too, Christian peace results in a concern for the wholeness of the body, physical health. In fact, Christians, like our foreign guests also, have always helped give and sustain health, so that people may have a tangible witness to the love of Christ. When one of my classmates needed to see a doctor, he always went to a Christian doctor, because he knew that doctor prayed before he began any operations, and always viewed each patient as a special gift from God and an opportunity to share the love and peace of God.

"When one of my friends, who happened to be a Communist (and as such forbidden to believe in God) was close to death, he said that he felt a deep sense of peace, because of his Christian wife, her love for him and her trust in God. Although he had not been allowed to believe in God or practice religion, he knew that now, at the point of death, he was beyond the control of the Communist Party. His request was that when he died he be given a Christian funeral. As it happened, not long after he died, his wife also lay at death's door, suffering from cancer at only fifty years of age. I went to visit her and pray with her. What does a person pray for in such a situation? We spoke our farewells, and I could not keep the tears from forming. She told me not to cry, however, because 'I know where

I am going.' She encouraged her child to continue her faith and worship of God, and she eventually died. In this family, we see one of the clearest marks of a Christian. In knowing a depth of peace beyond mere physical and temporal life, a Christian has something a non-Christian does not.

"I have another classmate who also understands that he lives to bring the peace of God into the physical lives of others. He is a farmer, who understands that his work of providing food and health to people is his form of service to both God and his fellow human beings. God has certainly given different gifts to different people, so that each of us has different ways of glorifying God, serving Him, and sharing His peace. We also recall that before the liberation,<sup>3</sup> the Christian church operated many hospitals, where it provided healing for many people. The doctors who served there, even the medicine they prepared, were gifts of God for healing and for peace.

"There is always, however, a peace of the heart which is even more fundamental than the peace of the body. Luke 10 (18-19) talks of preaching the gospel to the poor—the poor of heart, the poor of soul. It is only the gospel which can truly fill the heart and give peace. It gives sight to the spiritually blind and life to the dead. We have a peace that enables us to give our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord. That kind of giving, that kind of peace is what a true Christian has.

"What makes that giving possible is the freedom Christ in His death and resurrection gives us, freedom from sin, freedom from death. A person may have physical health, but if his heart is burdened, what kind of freedom or peace is there? In fact, when that peace of the soul is missing, we hear about suicide, inner torment, mental and physical illnesses, and other problems. Thanks be to Christ, however, who rose to give us a peace that cannot be threatened by any problem now, not even by death!

"How much people want a peace like that can be seen in the Lunar New Year custom of pasting sayings on door-frames expressing hope for peace.<sup>4</sup> What a joy it is for Christians to write on theirs, 'May God give you peace.' This wish is an echo of the

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Lord's peace, the peace He brought at Christmas, the peace He gave on the cross, the peace He proclaimed at Easter. 'Peace I give to you, My peace.'

"I recently received a sad letter from an old friend. He found in his old age that he had cancer of the colon, and needed an operation. 'I am concerned about my family, especially about the children who are still not on their own. This is my last letter.' I felt badly because he died with a heavy burden, without peace.

"By contrast, I have another friend in Heilungjiang, a member of the Communist Party for more than forty years. He told me, 'I believe in Jesus, but how, after all these years and especially in retirement, can I resign from the party?'<sup>5</sup> 'What decision you make,' I told him, 'is up to you. You certainly have the greatest treasure in the world in Jesus. He not only changes hearts, but changes lives. By comparison everything else in the world is worthless. In Christ God has given Himself to us and for us. We have forgiveness, reconciliation, life and peace eternal. When He gives His blessing of peace, that is also a blessing of power.'

"Brothers and sisters, that blessing of peace was our Lord's first word after His resurrection. It was also His final word before His ascension. Rejoice! The Lord is risen. The Lord lives among us—in our church, in our homes, in our hearts. May the peace of the Lord which passes all understanding be yours now and forever."

### The Afterglow of the Peace of Christ

Things did not end with the sermon. As if to punctuate the message of the Lord's resurrection, ten people came forward to be baptized into name of the Lord—not more than ten feet from those members of the Communist Party who represented a different power, an atheistic power. After that, another seven people from mission stations of the surrounding countryside came forward to be installed as evangelists of the one proclaimed dead by that party. It is truly a powerful peace that passes not only all understanding, but all parties and powers, one that even passes borders and unites people of all countries into one Father's family—a peace that even reaches out to slightly ill-at-ease members of the Communist Party who were



unsuspecting guests of honor at a divine party.

More, however, was still to come. Once the peace was proclaimed in the benediction, people flocked around to share greetings and shake hands—toothless old grandmas, shy high school students, seminary field workers, doctors from local hospitals, people from all ages and walks of life. It seemed as though there was no end. Those I could see when I sat down in church numbered about five hundred. I did not realize that there was an upstairs; actually it was just a bunch of bedrooms cleared of all furniture, except for very crude benches and a loudspeaker. There was even a basement—dank, dark, uninviting, but also filled with benches. In addition, there were still people standing! What seemed like a grossly inflated estimate of some three thousand people worshipping together was perhaps right on the mark.

The rising awareness of the power and manifest presence of the risen Lord in the heartland of China led me to rethink my sense of disappointment when we came to an aging, bleak residence rather than a festive sanctuary. There was still room for disappointment, to be sure; conversation quickly uncovered the fact that it was only official intransigence that was keeping the church from having the kind of sanctuary for which they yearn—where they could all see each other and bounce their praises back and forth off the walls. On the other hand, there could hardly be a clearer reminder that the church is never a sanctuary, but is the living, praising, glowing company of God's holy people, gathered around (and, in the case of the church in Huai Yin, also above and below) God's word. We finally left church, some three hours after we arrived there, and we were beaming, seeming hardly to touch the pavement as we walked back to our hostel. We had heard a powerful and joyful proclamation that the Lord is indeed risen—and that the Lord is indeed Lord.

### **The Peace of Christ in Perspective**

As we reflected on the word we had heard and celebrated that day, we were constantly impressed at the crystal clarity of the gospel message. All eyes were pointed to the Risen Lord. Try as I might, I could detect no trace of any political overtones, nor could I sense any attempt to blunt the gospel or to short-circuit the message of the

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resurrection. In fact, the presence of those members of the Communist Party seemed a divine catalyst to draw out implications of the Christian gospel with transparent clarity: the participation of Christians in a global family (including also non-Chinese); the contrast of the peace which the party desires and promises with the peace which only Christ can give, the peace which the Communist on his death-bed (out of the control of the party) could know; the need of China for the gospel (and by implication the lordship and presence of Christ). Although a seminary professor might have shortened the sermon and tightened it up a bit, there were few wasted words spoken.

The church in China, of course, does not always live on such a high plane, nor does the church anywhere. In fact, it is aware that it is only a pilgrim church, very vulnerable and very fragile. It is facing almost impossible problems—training leaders for its next generation (with an average clergy age of more than seventy years), feeling heavy (and occasionally capricious and hostile) pressures from the government, dealing with tensions in the church about how to deal with those pressures, dealing with heresies and schisms in more remote areas of China, trying to preserve the unity of the church in the face of forces seeking to split it.

Problems aside, however, the church of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, is very much alive in the People's Republic of China. To see that church at worship is both a very humbling and exhilarating experience. It is humbling because we realize how much many have sacrificed for their Lord and their faith. It is exhilarating for the same reason—now that these people are celebrating, shouting the praises of the risen Lord openly.

### **Our Part in the Peace of Christ**

Although the LCMS cannot, because of political realities, enter China as a church body and begin residential missionary work in the traditional way, there is much that the LCMS can do and is presently doing. Through medical teams (or social workers) the LCMS is providing strength, encouragement, and added credibility to the Christian church there—to say nothing of bringing occasional members of the Communist Party along to church. Through our

three English teachers, we are doing even more, because they are able to live in China for two years, not just a month, all the while relating to future leaders of China as respected—and Christian—teachers.<sup>6</sup> We also share religious and theological literature with pastors, leaders, and students of the church, and in the process we provide the voices and pens of servants like Luther, Walther, and others through whom the Lord continues to build up His church. Mention should also be made of the worship resources which the International Lutheran Laymen's League provides through its cassette ministry.

As China continues to open, the opportunities will expand, and the LCMS is well-poised with its China Coordinating Center in Hong Kong to continue to develop and expand them. The readers of this article are invited to pray for the church in China and for ways in which we can enhance its ministry, to alert us to people who can serve as short-term workers in China (English teachers, people with medical, social, or other expertise), to share with us contacts among Chinese people who have connections in China, to include on tours of China time to worship with local Christians (the CCC can provide details and even orientation), to invite Chinese people into local churches, and to inform the CCC of how it can support the ministry of others. For the present, however, it is enough simply to have shared this brief record of Easter in Huai Yin—as a reminder that Jesus Christ is Lord of all people and is worshipped as such by a growing church in China.

### Endnotes

1. A summary view of the church in the PRC (People's Republic of China) is given in Henry Rowold, "God's Miracle of Life: The Church in China," *Concordia Journal*, XV (1989), 1, pp. 10-28. Although this article needs updating to reflect the tensions surrounding the democratic movement of the spring of 1989 as well as ongoing developments in the church, it is still a helpful overview of major features of the church in China.

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2. The policy currently governing religious matters in the PRC states that "the policy of freedom of religious belief is directed towards the citizens of our country; it is not applicable to party members. Unlike the average citizen, the party member belongs to a Marxist political party, and there can be no doubt at all that he must be an atheist and not a theist." Cf. "The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period" (Document #19 of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China), *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice*, edited by Donald MacInnis (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 20.
  3. "Liberation" is the term universally used in the People's Republic of China to refer to the takeover of China by the Communists in 1949.
  4. Pastor Lin refers to the Chinese New Year associated with the custom of pasting onto door-frames red sheets of paper on which are written auspicious words or blessings. Although it may have religious or magical roots, it is seen merely as a folk custom by many, especially in the PRC, but has been used by Christians as a form of witness. Any connection with the daubing of the blood of the Passover lamb on door-frames, which some have suggested, is doubtful.
  5. This is the second reference to the reality that members of the Communist Party are forbidden not only to be a member of a religious group but even to have a religious faith. The fact that an increasing number of members is ignoring that prohibition is a cause of no small embarrassment to the party, which in turn prompts an otherwise unexpected, if localized, tightening of pressure on the church.
  6. Those English teachers include Jonathan Rowold, son of the author, Anastasia Wilch, from the Lutheran Church-Canada, and Pamela Shaper, former teacher in Merrillville, Indiana. Jonathan is completing his second year, while Anastasia and Pamela are beginning their first.

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