

Lessons from the Prayer Habits of the Church in China

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The phenomenal growth of the church in China is nothing short of a sovereign move of God. How else can one explain the fact that China, which turned Communist in 1949, now has perhaps the highest number of Christians in any one country? By conservative estimates, there are about fifty million Christians in China today. These are not Christians by birth or by tradition, for there is no Christian tradition in China as in Europe or America. These are people who have made a personal decision to follow Christ, and they are fully aware of the price they may have to pay.

During the past thirty-odd years, the Chinese church has gone through an experience of persecution and dispersion similar to that of the early Christian church. By 1951 all foreign missionaries had left China. In the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese pastors, evangelists, and lay leaders were imprisoned and sent to labor camps. Churches were closed down.

During the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976, even ordinary believers were persecuted throughout the country. Bibles were searched out and burned. All visible traces of Christianity, as well as of other faiths, were completely eradicated.

Nevertheless, the church in China did not die. Like seed, it was buried in the ground, only to rise again—this time with a bumper harvest! Church buildings were confiscated, but the *ekklesia*—those called out by God—continued to meet secretly in homes. These were the house churches. With Bibles and pastors gone, Christians still gathered to sing, pray, and testify to answered prayers.

Amidst political chaos and widespread purges, peace and joy in the lives of Christians witnessed to the power of God. The Lord Himself confirmed His reality with frequent healings, signs and wonders. By 1978 house churches were mushrooming throughout China, and they were filled to overflowing.

The most rapid growth occurred between the years of 1979 and 1982. During this period China launched her open door policy and the Four Modernizations Campaign. There was a general relaxation of restrictions on religious beliefs. By 1983 house churches were estimated to number over 150,000.

Since 1979 the Chinese government has reopened or approved 4,000 churches and meeting points, mainly in urban areas. These churches are under the supervision of the semi-official Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM).

By 1983 many of God's servants were released from prison. Many others did not survive prison and labor camp. But those who did survive preached the gospel with doubled enthusiasm, both in house churches and TSPM churches. They feared nothing, for what more did they have to lose? Their bold witness gave increased impetus to the growth of the church.

The vast majority of China's Christians still worship in house churches. It is in this stream of church movement that evangelization is most active. Divine healing and miracles are common. House churches have come under increasing pressure to join the TSPM and are often threatened with closure if they refuse. Most are reluctant to join for they see the TSPM as the government's tool to control Christianity in China.

But whether believers worship in open churches or house churches, almost every person who has made contact with China's Christians is impressed with their sincerity, enthusiasm, and simplicity of faith. These traits are seen most clearly in their prayer lives. The following observations on the prayer patterns of China's believers are derived through personal contacts, correspondence from China, and interviews with itinerant evangelists and pastors of China's house church movement. I have also consulted with co-workers of several China ministry agencies and those of Asian Outreach. One of our associates has made over 200 trips into China and has met and enjoyed fellowship with Christians in almost all of China's provinces.

Nevertheless, since the Christian population of China is around 50 million and still growing, my observation of China's church is but a glimpse of the total picture. This glimpse does reveal, however, that there are certain clear patterns in the prayer lives in China's believers, particularly those who worship in the house churches. These are not set forth as models to imitate, but as observations from which we can learn. The church in China is not a perfect church, but seeing it at close hand can be both humbling and inspiring.

They Pray at Great Length

A pastor from Hong Kong took several Christian youths to visit China. They enjoyed fellowship with a rural house church for four days. The services were lengthy, continuing from early morning till late evening. But what the Hong Kong pastor remembered most vividly was the time they spent in prayer. He later wrote that the participants felt the forceful leading of the Holy Spirit as the prayers continued at great length. On a couple of days, the prayers lasted three to four hours.

An associate of ours was invited to attend a baptismal service in a village in Henan province where the Holy Spirit is bringing about a phenomenal revival. People began to gather at around 5 p.m. to prepare for the baptism at 7 p.m. There was singing, testifying, and united prayer. The formal meetings started punctually at 7 p.m., but as several leaders began to lead in prayer, it became a chain prayer session. One after another, the believers stood up and prayed. The baptisms did not begin until 11:30 p.m. and went on to almost 2 a.m. the next morning. Altogether there were over five hours of prayer in that one service!

"The lengthiness of our prayers is a consequence of our persecution," an itinerant evangelist/pastor in China explained to me. "For so many years we had no pastors or Bibles or even songbooks. Therefore when we gathered together we could only pray. It became the major focus of our meetings. In fact it was only God's omnipotence and the believers' prayers that sustained our church." This pastor also verified my observation of the frequent fasting of China's believers. He said, "Fasting is very closely associated with prayer life." Most of the believers I know fast regularly and for fairly lengthy periods. Even in private prayers the Chinese Christians pray at length. My family was astonished when we joined our relatives in Shanghai for dinner

during one of our visits. Our niece, no more than ten years old, was asked to say grace. She stood up at the table and prayed for at least ten minutes! The local guests did not seem at all surprised.

China's believers are accustomed to sustained intercession. A Western Christian leader reported the testimony of a Chinese believer who prayed unceasingly for 18 months for the healing of a friend. And a veteran itinerant pastor in China told me of believers who prayed for years for the conversion of their local Communist Party secretary until he was finally born again.

They Pray with Intensity

"They are storming the gates of hell and shaking the Throne of Grace," said a co-worker, describing her impression of the prayers of believers in China. "Even when they pray in dialects that I don't understand, I can sense the earnestness of their prayers. I hear it in the urgent, pleading tone of their voices." She said she has yet to hear a prayer in China that sounds bland or insipid.

Several years ago, elderly Pastor Wang Mingdao (王明道), a saint of the church in China, explained to me, "We have nothing—no pastors, no churches, no Bibles...nothing! We only have God. Therefore we go to Him in desperation."

I could detect this intense desperation when I listened recently to a tape of a prayer meeting at a new house church in Xinjiang Province. But earnestness is evident not only in the tone and volume of the believers' prayers. An ex-China missionary told me recently of a period of silence lasting 10 to 15 minutes in a prayer meeting he visited: "There was absolute silence as we sensed the Holy Spirit hovering over us. His presence was so real that everyone was awe-struck. We just knelt there and no one moved. And it was so intense that we were all perspiring!"

I could identify with this missionary's awe. I remember when I first returned to China in 1972 in the midst of the catastrophic Cultural Revolution. I met a group of "underground" believers. We gathered in a small, dimly lit room, and in order not to attract the attention of neighbors, we did not sing. We didn't even say very much. We sat in a small circle and very naturally entered into the realm of prayer. Except for an occasional sob, no one uttered a sound. But the intensity of that prayer meeting cut most deeply into my being. We had talked with God.

They Pray with One Accord

The Chinese Christians love the opportunity to pray together. First of all, they value the presence of other Christians. Christians may number 50 million in China, but they are still a minority among one billion Chinese. They live in an atheistic, unsympathetic environment. Hence the presence and fellowship of other believers are very precious and encouraging. When Christians get together, the most natural thing is to pray.

Secondly, the Chinese Christians place great value on group prayer. They take Jesus at His word: "...If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18:19). So they are eager to pray together and with concerted voices. They listen attentively to the one who prays aloud and echo "Amen!" emphatically.

The other day I saw a video of several hundred believers standing in the courtyard of a house

church. For about twenty minutes they bowed their heads and echoed “Amen” to the prayers of the leaders speaking inside the house. They could not see those leaders and probably could barely hear them, but they were actively participating. The Hong Kong pastor who took the video commented that he noticed China’s believers were far more unified in prayer than the Christians in Hong Kong or in the West. Several of our China co-workers also noticed this. “*Kou ying xin he*” or “echoing with the mouth and agreeing with the heart” is much more enthusiastically demonstrated amongst the believers of China than of the West.

China’s Christians are also more accustomed to verbalizing their prayers. One elderly Bible woman told us, “Even in private devotion, we ‘confess with our mouths.’ And for that I was severely punished in my labor camp. My cellmates would report to the guards that I was still worshipping God and propagating superstition. The officials would beat me and punish me. But I just kept on. Maybe my voice was a little softer, but I was always verbalizing my prayers. For me, to hear my own prayers would strengthen my faith in Jesus. And later when several of the cellmates became Christians, they followed my custom. They prayed fervently and loudly just as they had heard me pray for many years.”

No matter what we may think of the way Chinese believers echo “Amen!” to every utterance, we all admit this habit reinforces their faith. It is also an encouragement to the one leading in prayer. The evaluation of a Chinese itinerant evangelist is positive: “Many of our leaders are themselves new Christians. They need the encouragement of sensing that the congregation is with them. It brings unity.” Another itinerant pastor told me that the unity of the Christians in China is most evident when they pray together. He said, “Recently we had a secret retreat. Pastors from five different provinces came together. Many of us had never met before. But when we started to pray, our hearts were united as we prayed with one accord.”

They Pray with the Language of Scripture

Seven years ago I went with two co-workers to establish contact with a Christian sister in Shanghai. Due to a communications breakdown, no one was at home when we went to her apartment. Since China was still closed at that time, we did not want to attract suspicious attention by leaving and coming back through the neighborhood a second time. So the three of us sat on the doorstep of Sister Yang’s third-floor apartment and waited. It was hours later when she came home from work and let us in. Other families who shared the apartment would be coming home in about a half-hour. After that there would be no privacy.

The sister then suggested that we should pray for one another. I was the only brother in the group, so following Chinese culture, I was asked to begin. I prayed longer than I usually do and used a heavy dose of pious vocabulary. I thought I was following the pattern of China’s church. And then it was Sister Yang’s turn. In a most natural and free-flowing manner, she began to pray in the language of Scripture. Quoting passages from Romans to Genesis to Philippians to the Psalms, Sister Yang used Scripture throughout her entire prayer of ten to fifteen minutes. She claimed God’s promises using Scripture; she responded positively to God’s call—again using Scripture. By the time Sister Yang had finished, we were awed! There was absolutely no pretentiousness on her part. It was all very natural and sincere.

Later as we shared this incident with others who have prayed with China’s believers, we

discovered that Sister Yang was not exceptional. A former China missionary said, “Even before I was forced out of China, I noticed that Chinese Christians prayed eloquently. And now when I return I hear not just the same eloquence, but often long passages of Scripture being prayed aloud by the believers.”

She attributed this to the fact that for 30 years Bibles have been in extremely short supply. For many of China’s believers, the Word of God consists of what they have memorized from a borrowed Bible or a Scripture portion copied by hand. Scripture memorization comes naturally to them, partly due to practice and necessity, but also due to a love of the Word. “Often they pray through their entire theology,” a scholar of a leading Chinese Christian research center commented. “They pray in Scripture language, not only as a reinforcement of what they have memorized, but also as a verbalization of their theology—the way some of us recite the Apostle’s Creed. But their repetition of Scriptures is personal and relevant to their current situation. We outsiders sometimes think that the person leading in prayer is trying to sermonize. This may not be the case, for often believers pray through their theology in their private prayers as well.”

Praying in Scripture language is actually being taught in a mushrooming house church movement in Henan province. I read in its hand copied “Pastoral Care Manual” that using Scriptures in prayer is one certain way of praying according to the will of God. Our coworkers who have close contact with China’s believers all feel we should learn this lesson—that praying in the language of God’s Word brings God-glorifying results.

They Pray on All Occasions

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests” (Eph 6:18). This verse is most aptly demonstrated in the prayer patterns of the church in China. China’s house churches, in particular, are conservative, very evangelistic, and have a large segment of practicing Pentecostals. It could be said that in many respects, the majority of China’s house church Christians are “charismatic,” even though they are often not familiar themselves with this term.

But whether they pray in tongues or only with understanding, the Christians in China are known for their sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. They have gone through twenty-odd years of suffering and persecution when they lived as though treading on thin ice. During these times they developed a high sensitivity to the Spirit. They needed this to survive. They trusted in the promise of Isaiah 30:20–21: “Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more... Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”

China’s present political climate is not as austere as in the past, but it is still subject to capricious changes. Something considered good today may be bad tomorrow. Christians have learned to depend not on human understanding but on the Holy Spirit’s leading.

Since the daily living of China’s Christians is Spirit-directed, it is natural that the Holy Spirit is predominant in their prayers. One Western China scholar made this observation, and a widely travelled itinerant evangelist agrees: “Outside of China the Church emphasizes organization.

Inside China, the Church emphasizes direction—the direction of the Holy Spirit. Thus the believers pray much in the Spirit.”

The second most common observation by the people I interviewed is this: “They pray on all occasions.” In frequency it followed the observation that China’s believers pray long prayers. “Praying is their frame of mind,” an ex-China missionary said. And I tend to agree with her. In 1977 I took a Westerner to visit the leader of a vibrant house church in Shanghai quite late in the evening. Quite a few people were sleeping outdoors because of the summer heat and our arrival attracted far too much attention. By the time we got to the leader’s little house, a sizeable crowd was following us. It was most unwise to linger on our visit. We greeted the leader, paid our respects, and prepared to leave. But without a word she motioned us into the hallway and closed the door. Then she began to pray. It was perfectly natural to her that this occasion called for prayer.

Later the Western Christian wrote in his report: “With my limited exposure to the house church Christians in China, I have noticed that they pray on all occasions.” I believe this is so because in the lives of Chinese believers, so many occasions arise which necessitate prayer. Living under the Communist system, people constantly encounter obstacles and practical difficulties. Goods and services that we take for granted are often hard to come by because of the bureaucratic maze, apathy of service personnel, lack of efficiency, and simple lack of supplies. A rampant “back door” system that is facilitated by gifts or personal connections forces the most ethical and conservative Christians of China to turn to God on every occasion. They must acknowledge and rely on Him in all things.

One of my co-workers who has regular contact with the Christians in rural China explains: “In most parts of rural China, poverty, disasters—both natural and man-made—and the lack of all kinds of resources, drive the Christians to total dependence on God. He is not their last resort. He is the first and only resort.” And they go to Him first “with all kinds of prayers and requests” for all kinds of things, including animals. In rural China it is very common to pray for the healing of a pig or for the retrieval of lost animals. Livestock are important to their livelihood. God answers these prayers almost without fail, sometimes instantaneously.

For example, we received this interesting testimony in 1982: A family in rural Henan had seven goats. One day two goats were missing. The family searched hills and valleys and could not find them. They brought the matter to the prayer meeting that night. Christians prayed over it. When the meeting was over and they opened the door to leave, they found the two missing goats right outside the door.

In living out Ephesians 6:18, China’s Christians view prayer as an all-powerful means because it reaches the all-powerful God. From experience they know that they can survive without Bibles, churches, pastors and many other things as long as they have a “hotline to heaven.” And this they have fully used to move mountains. Answered prayer is probably the most common cause of new conversions in China.

They Pray with Empathy

My associate who has enjoyed fellowship with thousands of Chinese Christians during his 200-

plus visits explained to me why the believers always cry during their prayers. It is not just a sign of their earnestness and desperation, or that the Chinese are more emotional; it demonstrates empathy.

First, they identify with those who are suffering (Heb 13:3). “Even as late as 1984 after the nation’s new policy of a religious freedom became a norm,” my associate said, “I have attended all-night prayer meetings in which hundreds of believers prayed and cried tears of sympathy, identifying with those pastors and leaders who were still imprisoned. They were also keenly aware of the difficulties of those who were released from prison—many of them frail and without any kind of income.”

Secondly, they readily identify with the backsliders of the church. They will cry and pray for certain individuals who have drifted away from the Lord. But also they pray tears of repentance on behalf of the church as a whole. For instance, on more than one occasion I have witnessed China’s Christians crying for the prevailing apathy of the church in Hong Kong. “Oh Lord, we are piercing your heart and nailing you to the cross again,” is a common lament. Perhaps because of their close communion with God, they tend to identify more sensitively with the grief and suffering of Jesus Christ (Phil 3:10).

Third, they identify with those who are lost without Christ. I have listened to a tape of a spontaneous prayer meeting when about 15 pastors met in Canton last February. They came from several different provinces. One by one they wept and interceded for the salvation of people in each province of China as well as for the world. One cannot but be moved by their earnestness in interceding for the lost. “Have mercy on us, Lord God, have mercy on us!” they cried out to God for hours. And they repented that they had not done enough to reach the world, even though almost to a man they had been imprisoned for their faith and zeal. This type of prayer is common among ordinary believers as well, and even among new babes in Christ.

They Pray with Thanksgiving

Visitors, particularly those from the West, sometimes notice that China’s believers are not very celebrative in their worship and prayers. Usually their meetings are quite solemn. This is a valid observation. In fact, some churches warn their people that they should not laugh too loudly “in order to protect the image of the church.” This seriousness is reflected in their sobbing, crying, and wailing during prayers. But nevertheless they are thankful to God! Even in what we would consider a very distressed or even poverty-stricken state, the Christians in China give thanks.

One of our co-workers was taken to a house church prayer meeting in Swatow. The room was small, dimly lit, and packed with people. There were a few rickety benches for people to sit on. Others were sitting on the bed, which was just a board laid across two benches. Children and young people were even crouching underneath the bed! The room was stuffy because there was only one tiny window. To our coworker, the place was anything but pleasant, and the believers there had few earthly possessions. But when they prayed, sounds of “Thank you, Father!” filled the room. They prayed as though they were in heaven, totally oblivious of their surroundings. This thankful attitude is carried over into other aspects of life. It is quite obvious that as a whole, the Christians in China have “learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Phil 4:11).

In a recent retreat a coworker of Asian Outreach gave thanks to God for allowing him to get acquainted with the Christians of China. He said, “Our ministry to China is definitely not just one way, from us to them. In my fellowship with China’s Christians, I have learned a great deal from their simplicity of faith, their spiritual depth, and their spirit of contentment.” I believe this inner strength and beauty must have a bearing on the prayer patterns of the believers in China.

Dr. James Hudson Taylor III, a great-grandson of Hudson Taylor and currently General Director of Overseas Missionary Fellowship, likens China’s Christians to the believers in the book of Acts. They were known as “those who call on the name of the Lord.” They were a people of prayer. And Dr. Taylor asks, “I wonder if we (the Christians of the free world) would be described as such? Or have we lost something of that life of prayer?”

Perhaps we should humble ourselves, and like a disciple of old, come to Jesus and ask, “Lord, teach us to pray!” (Lk 11:1).