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The Church in War Time China

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The Church in War-time China.

THE situation in China changes so rapidly that anyone who has been away from the country for a period of some months can no longer speak with authority on current affairs there. As over half a year has gone by since I left China, I am not in a position to write about developments in that country since the Japanese surrender, but during the most of the Second World War I was in one part or another of Free China, and saw the work and witness of the Church in several provinces.

When the Japanese surrender was announced, I was in Sian, at that time one of the two B.M.S. stations continuing to function in China. Four years previously I was also in Sian, which until Pearl Harbour was a frequent target for Japanese bombers. But although at the end of the Pacific War I found myself back in the same city as at the start of that war, I had, during the interval, travelled through almost every province in Free China, particularly in the south, and had seen at close quarters the impact of the war upon the Chinese peasant and the Chinese Church. During my eighteen months' absence from Sian I was out of touch with the work of the B.M.S., but had many opportunities of seeing the way in which Churches with a different Christian tradition maintained their witness in various environments despite peculiar hardships.

In order to form a proper picture of the place of the Church in war-time China, it is first necessary to examine the background against which the Church performed its task during those difficult years. Since the end of the Pacific War and the return of missionaries to what was once Occupied China, much has come to light concerning the way in which the work of the Church there was maintained in spite of enemy occupation and the internment of missionaries. But although "Free" China consisted *ipso facto* of that part of the country which was not under Japanese occupation, it was none the less a country run on a war footing, and a country, too, from which missionaries were, at certain periods, being evacuated in large numbers owing to the threat, which in most cases materialised, of Japanese advance and occupation.

From the middle of April, 1944, until the beginning of December of that year, the fear of further Japanese advance, first in North China, then during the summer and autumn in central and south-western China, finally during the early winter in Kweiyang and in Chungking itself, coloured everyone's mind. In place of the easy optimism of early 1944 that spoke in terms of "the year of victory" and "counter-offensive," there came panic,

or the pessimism which concluded that the Japanese who had captured one impregnable stronghold with little opposition could as easily conquer the next. The more defeatist a rumour, the more readily it gained a hearing; the more strenuously an evil rumour was denied, the greater the suspicion which attached to the denial.

Evacuation became an obsession in every mind—not such an evacuation as took place from some of our big cities during certain periods of the air war, but something much more despairing, because of its finality and the misery it brought with it. As the threat of Japanese occupation grew more intense, the local authorities in one town after another along the line of their advance took three successive steps to empty the town of its civilian population. First there would be a period of voluntary evacuation, when the more cautious would pack up their belongings and make their way to some place of greater safety. The next stage was called "urgent evacuation." During the days that followed this announcement shops would put up their shutters, and the most valuable stocks would be packed and taken away by the shopkeeper and his staff of assistants, by motor-truck if they were exceptionally fortunate, by train if they had enough influence or good fortune to hire a wagon, or by some method of human transport if competition had already become too severe on the railway. Government organisation would close down and move further inland, obtaining transport priority over private businessmen and individual families. The man in the street would pack what belongings he could carry by his own unaided strength and walk to the railway station, there to wait hour after hour for the next train. When it came, he would battle for a place inside, on the roof, or in front of the engine, taking care that his luggage remained intact and was not lost or stolen in the disorder. But even under such conditions, trains have a limited capacity, and in despair, many would give up the contest for a place, and join the long procession of those who escaped on foot to a place of greater safety. These desperate conditions would be intensified by the time the third stage, that of compulsory evacuation, was reached. The life of the city would come to a standstill, and the military would enforce the departure of those who were unwilling to take a step which meant leaving their homes, taking only what could be carried on a pole over their shoulders, and literally stepping out into a future holding no hope of economic security.

With a military situation which led to such desperate abandonment of possessions, security and hope, there frequently went a spiritual apathy and a tendency to consider any state of affairs better than the status quo. Refugees on their way south

or west would comment as they heard rumours of desertion and mass surrender to the enemy, "Who can blame them—what benefit do they get out of fighting, or we out of their continued resistance?" In contrast to our own country, the sympathy of the general public lay more often with a deserter than with the authorities who might be looking for him. As was inevitable in such circumstances, the Government, whether local or national, came in for a good deal of privately expressed criticism, and one old farmer was even heard to express his dissatisfaction by saying that it even rained more plentifully in the Communist area than upon Central Government territory!

The economic effects of the war were disastrous and were more keenly felt than in Britain. In spite of the vastness of China, the repercussions arising from the Japanese advance penetrated to the most remote villages in all the provinces concerned. Provincial Governments, for example, would evacuate from the capital of the province, and as an emergency measure, the various departments, finance, education, health, and so forth, would scatter to previously selected emergency centres. Often these would be, not places of importance, but small market towns chosen for their comparative inaccessibility. The inhabitants would suddenly find themselves coping with a peaceful invasion by their own countrymen, involving a complete dislocation of their economic life, and scarcity for both parties. Again, remote villages would often find their population multiplied several times within a few days as a wave of refugees, permanent or temporary, descended like locusts on the land. Commodity prices, always tending to rise, would soar, in geometric rather than arithmetic progression. Meanwhile, whether the enemy were near or far, taxation would continue on a heavy scale, and crops would be commandeered to feed the defending armies. Since war involved such bitter hardships for the peasant and the small tradesman, it is little wonder that the official exhortation, "Military and Civilians must Co-operate" generally went unheeded, and in some places blood was shed in clashes between civilians and the soldiers billeted on them.

Such were the conditions under which the Church continued its work, particularly in the depressing days of 1944 when no news was too bad to be believed, but also in varying degrees throughout the whole eight years of war between China and Japan. The ordinary Church member could not but be affected by the course of events—he might find himself a refugee fleeing from the Japanese, his son might be conscripted to serve in the army in some distant part of China with no hope of leave, his crops would probably prove insufficient to maintain his family after taxation had accounted for the major share. These hard-

ships he would share with his non-Christian neighbours, to whom he was often an example of Christian faith and patience in the face of such losses as arose out of the war. Furthermore, in many parts of Free China the Church was faced with the challenge of maintaining its witness unsupported by funds or personnel from abroad, at a time when the war made an exceptionally heavy drain on local resources, both of money and of man-power. Scores of missionaries, British and American, were evacuated towards Kunming and India from southern and central China during the summer of 1944 by British military trucks, which were only one means of transport among many. The "free" areas of whole provinces such as Kiangsi and Fukien were left with no more than half a dozen Protestant missionaries apiece, though mention should be made of Swiss missionaries and Irish priests in this area who stayed at their posts, willing to take a chance on their neutrality, in spite of knowing what had happened to neutrals in other invaded areas.

It was my privilege to meet with Christians in several of these centres from which missionaries had recently been evacuated, and to see how the work of the Church was being maintained by the Chinese leaders. It was an interesting experience at a time when I had travelled farther than ever before from Sian, my old mission station, to meet Mr. P'eng, priest in charge of the Anglican Church at Kienyang in Fukien. He had previously been one of the clergy in Sian, and had left shortly before I had arrived there. We spent a happy evening together, talking about our old friends in the North-West and about his work in this his native province. The English missionaries had recently left the city, but the Church continued to go ahead in this important commercial centre, and useful work was being done among the university students. My contact with Mr. P'eng had come about in the first place in connection with medical relief supplies in whose distribution he and some of the local Christian laymen took an active interest. The Church in Kienyang was typical of those I came across in other areas from which missionaries had been evacuated.

While I lived in Shensi, the "Church of Christ in China" had not seemed much more than a name to me. The Shensi Synod of the C.C.C. was co-terminous with the area for which the B.M.S. had long been responsible in that province, and there were no other co-operating missions there. But when I saw the diversity and yet the underlying unity of the various local congregations of the Church of Christ in China in Hunan, Kweichow, Szechuan and Yunnan, congregations made up of Christians from all parts of China who in their war-time homes felt they belonged to the one body, whatever their previous denominational

affiliations might have been, then the name Church of Christ in China came to have a new significance. There are, admittedly, many Protestant missions, both British and American, which do not co-operate in the Church of Christ in China, but broadly speaking, the C.C.C. may be said to have the function of uniting in one General Assembly representatives from the main Christian bodies in China who worship after the Reformed tradition.

One interesting example of the co-operation within the C.C.C. in war-time China, and it is to be hoped, in time of peace as well, is the Church at Kunming. At the time when I knew the Church there, during the spring of 1945, the pastor was a Chinese who had been associated with, and trained by the London Missionary Society in Fukien. There were three missionaries co-operating with him there, two of them English Presbyterians from Swatow, and the third a member of the American Reformed Church. Earlier in the war, one of our B.M.S. missionaries and his wife had served the C.C.C. in Kunming after leaving occupied China.

This example of co-operation within the Church of Christ in China was directly due to the war, but it is not only within the C.C.C.. itself that a spirit of unity among Christians has been developed during the past nine years. Christians dispersed to distant parts of China did not ask whether their fellow-worshippers were Baptists or Methodists—they were only aware of their brotherhood in Christ.

It has often been said that the mission fields are ahead of the home Churches in their progress towards Christian unity. Especially has this been true in the Churches of the dispersion in China. There must be many, both Chinese and British, whose dusty recollections of Ishan, a temporary halting-place in the withdrawal from the Japanese and for a few brief days the emergency capital of Kwangsi province, include memories of the Communion services conducted by the Bishop of Hongkong, to which he invited all Christian believers, regardless of denomination. Outside, in the crowded streets, refugees were selling family heirlooms to provide food for the immediate needs of themselves and their children, labouring for the meat that perisheth, before pressing on to yet another destination farther west. Inside the Church, we who had to live in that same world of transience, fellow believers of varying races and Christian traditions, were yet united in partaking of the Living Bread which came down out of heaven, and were during those moments conscious of our unity, in worship and in a common remembrance, with fellow-Christians in every land and of all ages, with the general assembly and Church of the first-born whose names are written in heaven.

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