

# Church in the Wilderness:

A Message to the  
Global Church from  
a House Church Pastor

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Since persecution began three years ago,<sup>1</sup> our churches across China have had to face an external reality - we “keep losing.” The loss of our pastors, the loss of decent church buildings, the loss of libraries, the loss of classrooms, the loss of many tangible connections with other churches, the loss of tangible connections with brothers and sisters abroad, the loss of opportunities to be built up at conferences or forums. And one day, we may even lose the opportunity for online gatherings. In fact, we are now being called to reexamine the nature of the church, and the relationship between the church and the gospel in order to lay the foundation upon which we will reconstruct the church’s systems.

When all the church’s external support systems have gone or are diminished, we must ask: What resources does the church stand on? What resources do pastors themselves depend on? All churches facing similar challenges must respond from a theological-ecclesiological perspective. Union with Christ provides the answer.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2018, the Chinese government began enforcing new religious regulations. Since their introduction, all religions in China have experienced increased regulation, harassment, and persecution.

## Union with Christ Enables Us to Live by the Gospel

Over the past three years, my church and I have experienced hardship. Church members have been harassed. I have been followed by the police every day. During these events, I have constantly reflected on and researched what it was that the older generation of the house church stood on and depended on to survive their most difficult years of persecution during the middle of the 20th century, when Christians were jailed and sent to labor camps. When there were crises, they had no internet to spread their message, no attorneys to turn to, nor other church leaders to seek help from. Even people within their own congregations could report on them at any time. What exactly did they rely on to keep their faith, to continue serving, and to remain spiritually alive?

There was nothing that our Chinese forefathers could do except kneel down and look at the cross of Christ in front of them, and pray, “Lord, there is no righteousness within me, but you are my righteousness. I am afraid, but you are my peace. I want to flee, but you remain steadfast. I am small, but you are great. I am poor, but you are rich. I am weak, but you are strong.” Theologically, this way of clinging to the Lord in the inner room, relying on him, and drawing on his grace is called “union with Christ.” Perhaps many of our forefathers did not necessarily use this term, but their spiritual practice is exactly what it means to be united with Christ.

“Union with Christ” is referred to as the “great exchange” in theology.<sup>2</sup> How can the righteousness that God accomplished in Christ become my righteousness? How can all the riches of God hidden in Christ become the grace upon which I draw? How can the power of the gospel of Christ become mine? This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who grants faith to people, and it is accomplished through union with Christ. Union with Christ is the key to the Christian doctrine of salvation. Our righteousness becomes reality through union with Christ. Our sanctification is also achieved through union with Christ and we also enter our glory through union with Christ. What the forefathers of the house church practiced is precisely the theology of union with Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> In Luther’s commentary on the Psalms [Martin Luther, *Werke 5* (Weimar edition), 608] he describes the exchange of the believer’s sin for Christ’s righteousness as a “wonderful exchange.” Similarly, his 1535 commentary on Galatians [Martin Luther, *Werke 40.1* (Weimar edition), p. 443] refers to it as a “happy exchange.” Perhaps the most relevant quotation, as it occurs in the context of union with Christ, comes from Calvin’s *Institutes 4.17.2*, where he writes, “This is the wondrous exchange made by his boundless goodness.”



Today we often say that we not only *enter* by the gospel, but we also *live* by the gospel continually. This is achieved precisely through being united with Christ. Saints throughout the ages have had a wealth of reflection and practice in this regard. Let me share a few examples. John Calvin, the reformer, said that “we must understand that as long as Christ is outside of us and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for mankind is in vain and of no value to us at all. Therefore, he must become a part of us and abide in us.” Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan, said, “Being in Christ, and united to him, is the fundamental constitution of a Christian.” Jonathan Edwards, the forefather of evangelicalism, said, “By virtue of the believer's union with Christ, he does really possess all things.” J. I. Packer, the contemporary theologian, said that “communion between God and man is the end to which both creation and redemption are the means; it is the goal to which both theology and preaching must ever point; it is the essence of true religion; it is, indeed, the definition of Christianity.”<sup>3</sup>

What is the relationship between the house church forefathers' practice of being united with the Lord in the inner room and the orthodox Christian faith's theological term “union with Christ”? How do we inherit this spiritual tradition as we face the attempted dismantling of the church?

## The Spiritual Tradition of the House Church

Over the past several decades, the house church has formed many traditions of its own. How do we ensure this tradition lives on? A clear distinction between two concepts will help us: the norm and the example. The so-called norm is a standard that cannot be changed and requires all to follow it. The so-called example is a prototype, a work raised by God's gracious acts in church history, within which lies a spirit to be learned and inherited.

Obviously, the house church is not the norm, since only the Bible and biblical truth are our norm. When someone says that “our church has always done this, so we must do it,” they place their church in a normative position, which instead brings stagnation and hinders us

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<sup>3</sup> These quotations are drawn from Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (David C Cook, 2018).

from inheriting it as a living tradition. When we admit that the house church is an example, not the norm, we humbly acknowledge that the house church is a work raised by God's gracious action, an orthodox faith poured out in history. Therefore, we do not simplify it, stiffly proclaiming that whatever the house church did in the past, we will continue to do. Instead, noticing what God has done in the house church, how God's grace has moved, and how the truth has been passed on, we can then draw upon its essence and continue to carry on a living tradition of faith and life.

The essence of the house church can be summarized as follows. First, its heritage is doctrinally conservative. The house church holds on to the ancient gospel truth and exalts the authority of the Bible. We might even say that the Chinese house church is the largest church community in the world that upholds the authority of the Bible; this is God's special grace and mercy. Second, its heritage is of godly devotion and piety. The house church places great emphasis on drawing near to God in the inner room, praying, dealing with sin and the old self, memorizing the scriptures, and so on, all of which are valuable spiritual exercises. Third, its heritage is to maintain the separation of church and state. The house church affirms that Christians have a responsibility to be good citizens, but that the doctrine and governance of the church are subject only to the truth of the Bible and the Christian conscience, without interference by any external force. Fourth, its heritage emphasizes the way of the cross. The house church emphasizes that the way of faith is the self-sacrificing way of the cross.

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Today the church in China (and indeed, any church in the world that is under attack by political or cultural forces) needs to continue cherishing this heritage, highlighting that the church, families, and individuals should be set apart for God. The heritage of the Chinese house church not only helps us face persecution today, but also helps the church to resist the influence of secularization.

Before the Communist victory in 1949, the Holy Spirit had already prepared the Chinese house church. What the house church forefathers held on to and what they maintained in their spiritual lives during the great persecutions of the mid to late 20th century was not borne out of nowhere. The distinctives of the house church were not new inventions, but rather applications of the grace provided by God.

God prepared the Chinese house church in two important ways prior to 1949. The first preparation was doctrinal. Conservative Presbyterian, Baptist, and independent missionaries and domestic Chinese evangelists and pastors established the fundamentalist doctrinal foundation of the Chinese church.<sup>4</sup> The landmark event that signaled the beginning of the house church movement was the publication of the article “We—For the Sake of the Faith” by Wang Mingdao in 1958.<sup>5</sup> This eloquent essay precisely represented the movement’s fundamentalist doctrinal assertions. By contrast, the state church in China was influenced by the Modernism and liberalism of Western seminaries and mainline churches. To this day churches that bow to state-sanctioned doctrine, which does away with the authority of scripture, the reality of the supernatural and the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, enjoy freedom from persecution and seamless integration with society. The church in every country faces this choice between Christian orthodoxy and cultural appeasement.

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<sup>4</sup> The original version of this paper, forthcoming at [housechurchtheology.com](http://housechurchtheology.com), contains a lengthy discussion of the influence of both fundamentalist and liberal doctrine on early 20th century Chinese Christianity. Under the influence of Western missionaries and educational institutions, both theological streams deeply influenced China’s rising pastors, denominationally and non-denominationally affiliated churches, and indigenous movements prior to the Communist revolution.

<sup>5</sup> The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) was formed as a state-sanctioned Protestant church after the Communist revolution. The TSPM’s official principles are self-governance, self-funding, and self-propagation, and it ultimately exists under the leadership of the Chinese Community Party (CCP). In the years surrounding the formation of the TSPM, roughly half of all Chinese Christians signed the “The Christian Manifesto,” a document pledging allegiance and submission to the new government. In response, Wang Mingdao wrote a series of articles criticizing the TSPM and those who submitted to it as false Christians. His most famous article was “We—For the Sake of Faith,” which is considered by many house church pastors as the beginning of the house church movement.

The second preparation of the Chinese church was in its spiritual life and the emphasis on inner experience. Liberalism claims that God is some sort of a concept—a concept of love, righteousness, and other things. In doing so, it replaces the true and living God revealed in the Bible with mere concepts. But the response of the spiritual community is to disregard what others say, because we have experienced God and the reality of living in Christ. This is not an ideological response; it is a response to modern nihilism through life experience. This second preparation came from the Holiness Revival Movement of the 1910's-1920's, which affirmed the holy life, pursued the filling of the Holy Spirit, focused on fervent prayer, stressed fasting and prayer, prioritized the inner experience with God, and lived for God completely.

Together, conservative biblical doctrine and the emphasis on a holy inner life helped the early forefathers of the Chinese house church through her most difficult times. In *The Key to the Mountain: Imitating Christ Fully and the Way Inside*, credited to a pastor who was put in labor camp four times and served in prison for twenty years, the writer talks about the inner and outer man.<sup>6</sup> The outward man lives by satisfaction of his desires in favorable circumstances, while the inward man lives by his continuous communion with God. Man's most basic need can only be satisfied through Christ's restoration of communion with God. Through such fellowship, man no longer see things in material terms but tastes God's love and truly knows and experiences him. In his biography, *One Hundred Years of Pilgrimage*, Li Tian'en (or Li Musheng) recounts the story of being sent to work outside on a rainy day at a labor camp. He fell as soon as he stepped outside and complained in his heart, "Lord, I am your child, so I cannot lie, but you allowed such difficulty to come upon me." As he complained, he put down his tools, knelt on the ground, and prayed, and the fullness of the Holy Spirit filled him with tremendous joy, peace, and power, as if the heavens had opened. It was still raining, but he had incredible joy, singing hymns, and working in the field. This describes precisely the experience of union with Christ.

Aunt Yang Xinfei was imprisoned for the Lord for many years. She shared that she used to be a very timid child, afraid even to cross a great hall in her family's house at night. Later, when

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<sup>6</sup> Most of the testimonies and accounts of the experiences of house church Christians during the 20th century have yet to be translated into English and published.



she was in labor camp, she was assigned to work the night shift, patrolling 600 acres of land – a woman walking around in the mountains all alone in the dark, sometimes in the rain with only a cape made of straw. She remembered the Lord Jesus praying to God all night long, so she began imitating him and sang every single hymn she had learned since she was a child. Gradually, the pitch-dark night became a wonderful time for praise and worship when more and more joy filled her heart.

I cannot help but pray that our brothers currently in prison can also experience such grace of union with the Lord and I long for all of us to experience grace like this on the more difficult roads through the wilderness lying ahead of us. Prioritizing prayer, drawing near to the Lord in the inner chamber, paying attention to meditation on God’s word, affirming examination of sin, and living in holiness—such a spiritual tradition can be observed in the testimony and life of almost every house church forefather.

## Evaluation and Carrying on the Legacy

The spiritual tradition of the house church bears further study and more collection of our forefathers’ written masterpieces from China’s different regions. However, we also need to put all of this in the context of global Christianity and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. Otherwise, these experiences can only be observed from a distance and we will not be able to enter the reality of those experiences, let alone to carry on the legacy. This is a grand work, and I can only begin to explore the ways all of us can carry on this legacy.

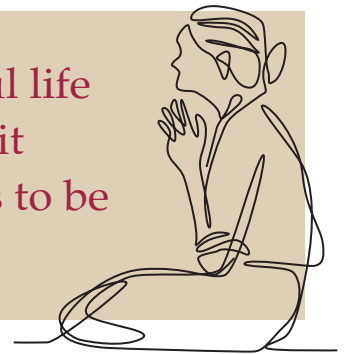
**1. The spiritual tradition of the house church focuses on dealing with sin and living a holy life, which is very precious. However, there is inadequate attention given to experiencing spiritual rest, the joy of the gospel, and the hope of glory. It was not balanced in this regard.**

Why do I make such a claim? As with any culture where Christianity is under attack, we often see in the house churches that many second-generation believers drift away, believing that the journey is too difficult. Even younger pastors think that the requirements of the older generation are too strict. This usually happens because the first generation tasted the preciousness of the Lord and his grace in the face of great suffering, so they willingly



confronted their sin daily and lived a holy life. However, if dealing with sin and living a holy and prayerful life becomes the focus within the second generation, it turns into legalism. The focus of the gospel needs to be on what God has accomplished for us in Christ. We need to help the next generation know and experience the gospel, so they can generate true motivation from within to deal with sin and pursue a holy life.

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## **2. We need to clarify that union with God is achieved through union with Christ.**

While the Bible does talk about being one with God, it teaches that we become one with God through Christ, the Mediator. In other words, the crucifixion of our sin is accomplished through union with Christ, and God's richness in Christ is also available for us through our union with Christ. If I slightly analyze the narrative of the Chinese house church experience, I would say that Christ-centeredness still needs to be emphasized more; otherwise, union with God can easily be derailed toward the danger of mysticism. The house church insists that before serving others, we are served by God first. This is true. However, the idea that we can be served by God can easily become empty or deviated if it is not centered on Christ.

When the Puritans talk about union with God, they stress that being one with God can be achieved precisely through union with Christ. John Owen said that union with Christ is "the greatest, most honorable, and glorious of all graces that we are made partakers of."<sup>7</sup> The Dutch Reformation stressed that Christ operates in our experience of sorrow, salvation, and sanctification through his three offices of prophet, priest, and king. This is the focus of the operation of God's grace, which moves our souls toward abundance and glory.

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Wilbourne, 29.



### **3. We need to unify the experience of the inner room with the motivation for mission.**

In the Chinese house church, and perhaps the global church, much profound covenant theology and kingdom vision are still needed in order to sort out the relationship between the inner room and the field. The groups who actively seek the inner life experience pit human effort against God's work, saying things such as, "Let go and let God." They criticize those who seek legal assistance for the church as relying on human effort. They claim that those promoting religious freedom are engaging in political matters. They talk down to those who make plans for evangelism, saying to do so is merely human work; we should stop and wait on God.

I once met an elder who was deeply influenced by the inner life teachings of Andrew Murray, Brother Lawrence, and Madame Guyon. Whenever the pastor promoted a plan for evangelism, she would argue that human plans were meaningless. As long as we live in Christ and diffuse the aroma of Christ, we will naturally attract all nations to the Lord. I was unconvinced, so I went and studied the works of these writers, especially Andrew Murray. There is a saying in South Africa—behind Mandela is the prayer of Archbishop Tutu, and behind Archbishop Tutu are Andrew Murray's spiritual resources. When Andrew Murray wrote *The Inner Life*, he was serving in a very difficult place and drawing near to God in the inner chamber was the source of his motivation. Apart from the grace of union with the Lord in the inner room, it would have been impossible for him to continue. But Andrew Murray later actively promoted sending missionaries to native Africans and establishing schools and mission stations. It was Andrew Murray who made the often quoted statement, "Missions are not one of the activities of the church, but the only object for which it exists."<sup>8</sup>

God is not only the Lord of our inner life, he is also the Lord of our body, the Lord of culture and of the environment, and the Lord of history. We need to enter the veil of the inner room with this vision, so that it motivates us to go out into the mission field.

### **4. Not just individuals, but the church, must be united with Christ for times of persecution and hardship.**

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<sup>8</sup> This apocryphal quote is often attributed to Andrew Murray, a 19th century Dutch Reformed Church missionary sent from Scotland to South Africa.



The difficulties our generation faces today are not just about how individuals can adhere to their faith, but how the church as a community can keep the faith. In other words, what is the relationship between individuals being united with Christ and the doctrine of the church? In the wilderness, in lack, in persecution, and in hardship, the call is not just to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love (Eph. 3:18) as an individual, but as a people together.

Let us examine three visions that describe the church in Revelation. First, Revelation 7:4 says, **"I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel."** This number represents a well-arranged battle formation. Before marching into battle, the people are counted. This symbolically perfect number also indicates God's perfect protection of his people. From an earthly perspective, the people are scattered, even living in hiding, as if defeated and disbanded soldiers. Yet from the heavenly perspective, God knows them all and views them as members of a well-arranged heavenly army. Among all who belong to God, no matter where they are, not even one will be lost. Even if they lose their lives on earth, God will preserve their lives in eternity.

How incredible this vision is, and how unbelievable its message. It reminds people who are in the midst of persecution that no matter how pathetic we may look outwardly, we should not forget that we are members of God's army and should carry out God's mission and purpose. We should not be caught up in self-pity and low self-esteem. We should not believe that we are alone. We are called to be soldiers in the army, and we have been sealed by God.

This perspective changes our view of other denominations and churches. All true churches that belong to Christ, regardless of their denomination, whether they are Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, or independent, are all lined up in order before Christ the King. They are all loved by the Lord and preserved by the Lord.

This perspective also changes how we understand failure. Failure is not defined by the world, but by God. Christians and churches that are under persecution and in suffering are seen as the refuse of the earth, but they are the treasures of God's heart. They are being polished by the sufferings of the earth; they are becoming the workmanship of God's hand. They look like



losers, but they are warriors in God's eyes. They are torn to pieces in the sufferings of the earth, but they are woven by God's own hand into a tapestry.

**Second, there is a vision of the "the beloved city" in Revelation 20:9.** The church is surrounded by enemies, yet the church is beloved by the Lord, and he pours his love out upon it through his truth and the Holy Spirit. The Chinese church has faced persecution in the past three years, and it has endured the pandemic in the past year. When persecution and suffering come, there are those who drift further and further away from the church. In fact, they end up drifting further and further away from God and his love, being consumed by the devil and the pattern of the world. However, those who hold on to the church in hardship and persecution receive an increasingly deeper experience of the abundant grace bestowed by the Lord through the church.

When Paul wrote the book of Ephesians from prison, he missed the brothers and sisters in the church dearly, but by praying for them, he experienced the love of Christ for the church that is beyond all measure. By adhering to the faith, remaining in the church, and experiencing God's added grace for the beloved city, we comprehend together with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ.

**Third, in contrast to the tempting feast of Babylon on earth, there is the vision of the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19. This vision speaks of union with Christ.**

Earthly Babylon constantly whispers to God's children, "You have all sorts of dissatisfaction, don't you? Your satisfaction can only be fulfilled through me, and you should treat yourself." However, you can respond to this temptation with the marriage supper of the Lamb, "My Lord died for me. In order to give me the supper that can truly satisfy me, he laid down his life for me. His salvation and love satisfy me."

Earthly Babylon will press you and say, "If you do not love me or obey me, I will make you suffer." However, you can respond, "My Lord did not leave me as an orphan. He has promised that as my days are, so will my strength be. His grace is sufficient for me."

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Earthly Babylon threatens, "If you do not participate in evil with me, I will make it impossible for you to live." Yet, you can respond, "My Lord went on the cross for this very sin—I used to live in my own way, by the way of the world, and not by relying on God. He died for me so that I would no longer live in sin nor by sin, but that I would live by God's faithfulness."

Earthly Babylon tempts you and says, "How does your God love you? You can only live a good life by following me. How pitiful you are." Then you can counter, "Christ's love has never left me. God gave up his own son for me. Will he not give me the grace that I need daily?"

Earthly Babylon tempts you and says, "Come, attend my feast. It is fantastic here in this world." Still, you can generously answer, "No. I will save some room in my stomach for the best supper and eat the food that is imperishable and lasts forever. I am waiting for a more glorious wedding feast to be fully satisfied." Delaying enjoyment, for Christians, is an expression of confidence in what is yet to come.

Do you see it? These visions are all about comprehending with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ.

Our forefathers of the Chinese house church finished the race and fought the good fight. Yet we, in our generation, have accounts we need to give before the Lord. Where does our motivation come from? It does not come from outside of the gospel, from outside of Christ, but rather from constant union with Christ. Not only do we live before God as separate individuals, but we also live as the church, committing to the Lord's church, loving and serving the Lord's church, advancing Christ's kingdom, and comprehending with all the saints how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Looking to him, we live.

For us, hardship has arrived. For many, hardship is coming. May we be dispersed in various places, as grains of wheat buried in the ground, so that when the grain dies, it produces abundantly. May we be like dandelions, which seem to be blown with the wind, but when



the next spring comes and the flowers bloom, they show their splendor on the mountains and in the plains. May the grace of the triune God sustain my fellow workers in all the places across China and around the world. May God be glorified in Christ and in the church throughout all ages, forever and ever. Amen.

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