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Covenant Theological Seminary

**Christ-Centered Preaching in the Context of Urban China to
the Post-1981 Generation**

By

David Park

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

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**Christ-Centered Preaching in the Context of Urban China to
the Post-1981 Generation**
Equipping City Churches in the Changing Urban Environment

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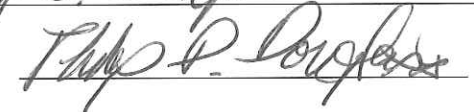
David J. Park

Graduation Date May 19, 2017

Dr. Russell St. John, Faculty Advisor

Dr. Philip D. Douglass, Second Reader

Dr. Philip D. Douglass, Director of DMin Program

Abstract

China is experiencing dramatic changes at every level of its identity. Rapid urbanization, unprecedented economic prosperity giving rise to a new middle-class, tied together with the adoption of the one-child policy in 1981 have created a new set of challenges to church leaders seeking to reach the new generation for Christ. The traditional house church, born in persecution from the government, with its emphasis on separation from the world and zealous personal piety, is no longer able to effectively reach the new generation with the gospel. Urban church leaders must now grapple with how to preach the unchanging message of Christ to this dramatically changing culture.

To my great friend, and faithful partner in the journey, Mimi, who encouraged me all the way to pursue my interests and studies. She has always stood by me in the toughest of times and been the most hidden source of the best of times. I am truly blessed with to go through life with her.

I am amazingly blessed to have the three most wonderful children in the world – Maddy, Sophia and Joshua. They have the best traits of my wife and I and even more.

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Chapter One

Introduction

One of the greatest needs for the ongoing spiritual renewal of the church in China today is Christ-centered preaching. In the last half-century, few places can compare to China when it comes to gospel power changing lives.¹ Just as the preaching of Christ has born tremendous spiritual fruit, the continued preaching of Christ will sustain the spiritual health of the church in the future.

China stands as not only the world's most populous nation, but also as one of the most rapidly growing Christian populations in the world. Some argue that no era of Christian history has seen such rapid growth in the church as China has in the last 60 years.² The preaching of Christ in this country has brought about one of the most extraordinary movements of the growth the church has ever witnessed.

This growth was largely unpredictable given its difficult beginnings. The efforts of early missionaries to bring the gospel to China were discouraging and ineffective and their lives were marked by severe hardships. Fifty missionaries in China in 1860 grew

¹ The word "gospel" occurs 133 times in the New Testament and is translated from the Greek word *euangelion*. In Roman times, *euangelion* was a public announcement of good news, which the church used to declare the good news of salvation found in Jesus Christ. It is the news that Jesus lived, died and rose again in order to save us from the coming wrath of God, and that through faith in Jesus, we can be restored in our relationship with God. This salvation comes completely by the grace of God; our role is to admit our need and receive His gracious gift with thanksgiving. As Tim Keller explains, "Though the gospel brings about change at the deepest level, the gospel is not good advice or a new ethical system proscribing what we do. It is news about what has been done for us through Christ in light of our alienation from God, one another and creation." See Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 29, Kindle.

² Luis Bush and Brent Fulton, *China's Next Generation: New China, New Church, New World* (Orange, CA: ChinaSource, 2014), Loc 33 of 589, Kindle.

quickly to 2,500 by 1900 (counting wives and children).³ Missionary efforts in the nineteenth century were marked by ineffectiveness and high attrition due to failing health, and the difficulty of language acquisition.⁴ It took about five years to acquire the language, but many missionaries either died or left the field before reaching the goal. Up to one half of all the missionaries either died or resigned before the ten-year point of service, mostly due to failing health.⁵ Adding to the sense of failure was the relatively small result of their efforts: the British missionary, Robert Morrison, who translated the Bible into Chinese, reported only twenty-five converts in twenty-seven years of service. Other missionaries reported similar results.⁶ Although eventually thousands of missionaries joined the cause of evangelizing China in the nineteenth century, there were only about 100,000 Christians out of the 350 million plus population by 1900.⁷ When the Communist Party took control in 1949, they expelled all the missionaries. Even up until 1949, the total number of Christians in China did not reach 700,000, which was far less than one percent of the total population.

In what can only be attributed to God's grace and timing, the number of Christians began to increase dramatically after the expulsion of foreign missionaries. The

³ Larry Clinton Thompson, *William Scott Ament and the Boxer Rebellion: Heroism, Hubris, and the Ideal Missionary* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing Company, 2009), 14.

⁴ Alvyn Austin, *China's Millions: The China Inland Mission and Late Qing Society, 1832-1905* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 136.

⁵ Jessie G. Lutz, "Attrition Among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1807-1890," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 36, no. 1 (January 2012): 22-27.

⁶ "Protestant Missions in China 1807-1953," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_missions_in_China_1807-1953#cite_note-13, accessed August 25, 2015.

⁷ Thompson, *William Scott Ament and the Boxer Rebellion*, 14.

church in China, however small at the time, was forced to lead themselves. The result was the rapid conversion of fellow Chinese.

Despite intense persecution, the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s marked the beginning of an especially powerful era of spiritual growth and renewal in China, compelling some to call this growth the greatest revival in history.⁸ The church was forced to go “underground,” yet Christ was preached with zeal by a multiplying number of evangelists who often encountered strong persecution and opposition. The result of such preaching was a spiritual harvest rarely seen in any other era of the church. Though exact figures are difficult to come by, but some estimate about 80 million Christians in China today, with believers permeating every socioeconomic category, including the arts, politics, the military, and academia.⁹ Paul Hattaway, who researches Christianity in China, estimates the number to be up to 105 million.¹⁰ A recent Pew Research study puts the number at 67 million and expects the figure to rise exponentially higher, with Christianity remaining the fastest growing religion in China.¹¹ Fenggang Yang, professor of sociology and director of the Study of Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, states, “If the growth continues at the rate of 7 percent, Christians could be 32.5 percent of the Chinese population by 2040 and 66.7 percent by 2050.”¹²

⁸ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 16 of 589.

⁹ David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 7.

¹⁰ Paul Hattaway, *Back to Jerusalem: Called to Complete the Great Commission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 13.

¹¹ Alanza Yzola, “New Religious Breakdown in China,” *Business Insider Australia* (website), August 24, 2015, accessed August 28, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/new-religious-breakdown-in-china-14-2015-8>.

¹² Fenggang Yang, “When Will China Become the World’s Largest Christian Country?” *Slate* (website), <http://www.slate.com/bigideas/what-is-the-future-of-religion/essays-and-opinions/fenggang-yang-opinion>.

The influence of Christianity in China became clear in early 2002, when China's then president and Communist Party leader, Jiang Zemin, was asked by a guest before the party's congressional meeting, "If, before leaving office, you could make one decree that you knew would be obeyed in China, what would it be?" Jiang reportedly smiled broadly and responded, "I would make Christianity the official religion of China."¹³

The strategic significance of Christianity's rise in China in world evangelization cannot be downplayed. Though America still sends the most missionaries to the rest of the world, Muslim countries in the 10/40 Window do not easily receive westerners, especially Americans.¹⁴ These same Muslim countries are much more apt to receive Chinese missionaries because of the friendly relations between China and the Middle Eastern countries. Moreover, already about half a million diaspora Chinese are living in the Middle East. This trend is only expected to grow.¹⁵ Coupled with a growing sense of zeal among Chinese Christians to take the gospel "back to Jerusalem," the church in China is poised to spread the gospel across the notoriously resistant Middle East.¹⁶ Most recently, a gathering of more than 900 house church pastors and leaders came together to form a unifying vision to plant thousands of churches in China and to send out 20,000

¹³ Hattaway, *Back to Jerusalem*, 17.

¹⁴ The 10/40 Window is a missiological term referring to a geographical region ten degrees to forty degrees north of the equator between North Africa and Japan. This region contains approximately 90 percent of the world's unreached people groups and is typically considered the most resistant and difficult region to spread the gospel.

¹⁵ Fulton, *China's Urban Christians*, Loc 479 of 589.

¹⁶ Miriam Adeney, *Kingdom Without Borders: The Untold Story of Global Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 56-57.

missionaries to the world by 2030.¹⁷ The preaching of Christ is bearing much fruit in and through China.

China's economic and political rise as one of the most powerful nations in the world today naturally means it will exert tremendous influence on the rest of the world, whether for good or ill. The gospel's influence in China will thus also influence the rest of the world. China is, indeed, one of the most exciting places to be involved in God's kingdom work; it is also one of the most challenging.

Chinese house church leaders face unique challenges that did not exist even twenty years ago in sustaining and growing the church. First is the almost overnight urbanization that has taken place in China. China has transitioned from mostly agrarian to an urban society within the past twenty years. In 1980, less than a quarter of China's population resided in the cities. Today, over half the population has migrated there.¹⁸ China now boasts five of the world's ten largest cities.¹⁹ This trend is expected to continue, with the urban population expected to exceed one billion by 2030.²⁰ While an urban setting provides many benefits for its residents, it also brings with it challenges and social ills inherently different from those of rural life. If the church hopes to thrive, it must learn the contours of gospel ministry in an urban context.

¹⁷ Kärin Butler Primuth, "Launching China's Biggest Missionary-Sending Initiative," *ChinaSource*, November 13, 2015, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/from-the-west-courtyard/launching-chinas-biggest-missionary-sending-initiative>.

¹⁸ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 33 of 589.

¹⁹ Wu, Annie, "An Introduction to China's Largest Cities," *China Highlights*, February 3, 2015, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/top-large-cities.htm>.

²⁰ Tom Miller, *China's Urban Billion: The Story Behind the Biggest Migration in Human History* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2012), 1.

Another major development regarding China's spiritual climate is the breakneck speed of economic growth over the past two decades. China has transformed itself from being "the world's factory floor" to a leader in the world market, increasingly providing information and service-oriented goods.²¹ The result is a burgeoning middle class with access to goods and services never before available except to the elite and wealthy. The economic and material boon has reinforced a materialistic worldview, leaving many searching for a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in their lives.²²

Urbanization, increased economic prosperity, and government regulations have also had profound ramifications on the traditional family structure. The older generation, up to the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), was marked by a pyramid-shaped family structure led by a patriarch followed by multiple children and grandchildren. Buoyed by fears of food shortages from overpopulation as well as the impetus to stimulate a lagging economy, the Central Committee and Communist Party adopted a one-child only policy in 1981.²³ The policy has flipped this pyramid structure upside down, reorienting the way family members relate to one another, as well as to society at large.²⁴

The government is now noting unforeseen and undesirable social consequences. Older Chinese complain of a young generation that is intensely narcissistic, caring only for itself. One man says it well, complaining, "These 'little emperors' live for

²¹ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 42 of 589.

²² Ibid.

²³ Barbara Demick, "Judging China's One-Child Policy," *The New Yorker* (website), October 30, 2015, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/chinas-new-two-child-policy>.

²⁴ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 164 of 589.

themselves.”²⁵ Whereas the primary role of children before was to be of service to the needs of the family and its survival, the adoption of the one-child policy has meant that the one child has become the “object of intense attentions and doting of two sets of grandparents, who often responded at their beck and call, acting as their ‘servants.’”²⁶

As of October 29, 2015, this thirty-five-year-old social experiment officially came to an end, paving the way for a two-child policy, which became active in early 2016. The effects of this two-child policy, both for society and the church, are speculative at this point. Regardless, the permanent restructuring of the family unit stemming from the one-child policy has already affected the way the church does ministry. In fact, early indications are that the two-child policy will have a relatively small effect on the size and subsequent social implications of the average family unit in the future. Due primarily to financial considerations, most couples at this point are not seeking to take advantage of this policy, opting to have only one child.²⁷ When the government began relaxing its one-child policy in 2013, they discovered that of the 11 million eligible citizens who were allowed to have another child, only one and a half million chose to do so.²⁸ This trend will be explored more in section two, but early analysis indicates that the current generation is caught up in perhaps the greatest cultural shift in China’s history and is intensely groping for a sense of identity in the midst of these changes.

²⁵ Peter Ford, “China’s Younger Generation: Lifestyle Counts as Much as Work,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (website), November 26, 2011, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2011/1126/China-s-younger-generation-lifestyle-counts-as-much-as-work>.

²⁶ Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religion Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 238.

²⁷ Demick, “Judging China’s One-Child Policy,” <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/chinas-new-two-child-policy>.

²⁸ Ibid.

Due in no small part to the influence of the West, the culture and value system of the younger generation of Chinese has changed significantly, and it now resembles a syncretistic mixture of Western ideals and the deeply Confucian thought that has undergirded Chinese culture for thousands of years. The result of this shift is something of a cultural identity clash between the generations that makes ministry among the young, urban generation vastly different from ministry to the older, traditional generation.

While the challenges facing the church in China are formidable, the growth of Christianity in China is reaching new heights. Many young people are searching for a deeper sense of identity, wondering if there is any meaning to their life beyond just material prosperity.²⁹ The church has a wonderful opportunity to share the hope of the gospel with this new generation in China.

Just as the preaching of the gospel in the past has grown the church numerically, many are discovering the need to keep preaching Christ for the ongoing spiritual renewal and sanctification of the church. Recently, a growing body of literature and a refreshing consciousness among Western evangelical churches is focusing on the power of the gospel to bring about spiritual renewal.³⁰ Gospel-centered ministry differs from a broadly evangelical theology in that it views the gospel as the primary strategy for sanctification in the Christian life, as opposed to relegating it to simply the initial entry point into the Christian life. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York city and popular author of several books, summarizes,

²⁹ Cathy Gibson, "China's Youth and Christianity," *ChinaSource*, June 12, 2010, accessed August 15, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-youth-and-christianity-an-interview>.

³⁰ The broader evangelical world has been strongly influenced by voices from the Reformed tradition through the likes of Tim Keller, Bryan Chapell, and Edmund Clowney. They have written extensively and preached on issues of the gospel, grace-based sanctification and spiritual renewal.

The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is inaccurate to think the gospel is what saves non-Christians, and then Christians mature by trying hard to live according to biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our minds, hearts, and lives by believing the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on (see Rom 12:1-2; Phil 1:6: 13:13-14).³¹

Keller goes on to say that Christians never “get beyond the gospel” to something more “advanced.”³²

This theological emphasis is vital for the work taking place in China because American evangelicalism has no small influence on the development of the church in China. America still currently tops the list as the most missionary-sending country in the world.³³ Today, more and more American and British theological resources, Christian literature and media are being translated into Chinese. One prominent urban pastor in Beijing, Pastor Ezra Jin, believes the American church model will continue to profoundly influence China’s churches for the next thirty years, especially in light of the fact that the largest concentration of Christian educational and church resources come from America.³⁴ The most influential theological training has come from American or British

³¹ Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 48, Kindle.

³² Tim Keller, “The Centrality of the Gospel,” Redeemer Presbyterian Church, accessed October 15, 2015, http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Centrality_of_the_Gospel-Keller.pdf.

³³ Melissa Steffan, “The Surprising Countries Most Missionaries are Sent From and Go To,” *Christianity Today* (website), July 25, 2013, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/july/missionaries-countries-sent-received-csgc-gordon-conwell.html>.

³⁴ Ezra Jin, “The Chinese Church and the Global Body of Christ,” *ChinaSource*, June 7, 2012, accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/the-chinese-church-and-the-global-body-of-christ>.

trained scholars, so much so that both foreigners and nationals are recognizing the need for China to develop its own theologians to address the narratives of its culture.³⁵

In China, a contingent of house church leaders is beginning to catch this vision of gospel renewal through Christ-centered preaching and is testifying to a newfound joy and energy stemming from a rediscovery of the gospel, mainly arising from Reformed influences.³⁶ They are discovering the gospel's infinitely rich implications and dimensions for personal spiritual renewal as well as for the culture at large.

Definition of Key Terms

Before proceeding further, it is important to clarify the key terms that will be used in this paper.

Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) – officially sanctioned churches controlled by the Religious Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party. Church personnel, facilities and messages must be approved by the government.

House church – unregistered churches that usually meet in private homes.

Cities – a human settlement, relatively dense and diverse (whether socioeconomically, ethnically or both) in its population.

Gospel renewal – a model of sanctification and spiritual renewal that is distinctly centered on the gospel as the primary strategy for sanctification as opposed to viewing the gospel as simply the minimal truth needed to become a Christian. Gospel renewal focuses on the gospel of grace as not only the truth needed to become a Christian, but as the only way to make all progress in the Christian life. This idea will be explained more thoroughly in the literature review section.

³⁵ Gary Waldron, "Developing the Next Generation of Christian Leaders in China," *ChinaSource*, February 14, 2007, accessed August 26, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/developing-the-next-generation-of-christian-leaders-in-china>. A survey of the credentials of professors at the leading seminaries in Asia, including Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, reveal the vast majority come from American and British schools.

³⁶ Paul Peng, "Reformed Theology: A Christian Thought Movement to a Church Movement," *ChinaSource*, June 26, 2016, accessed August 26, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/reformed-theology>.

Christ-centered preaching – synecdoche for applying the biblically central theme of God’s redeeming work through the person and work of Christ.

10/40 Window – a missiological term referring to the area ten degrees longitude east to forty degrees latitude north, spanning from North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia to Japan. Also known as the “Resistant Belt,” this region contains the approximately ninety percent of the world’s unreached people groups that are generally the most resistant to the gospel.

Problem and Purpose Statement

The influential house church leaders of the past forty years proved themselves to be faithful examples in the face of severe persecution.³⁷ They provided the church a strong and vital spiritual foundation for its perseverance and growth. The church’s general posture during this time could be characterized as highly pious, self-protective, yet bold in its gospel witness.³⁸ However, the persecuted church of the previous generation was not merely culturally unengaged, it was culturally withdrawn and even antagonistic. The traditional house church viewed the world as an enemy to the faith; the church was seen as “a refuge from a hostile world.”³⁹ The world was viewed as a hostile place to be converted through evangelism. The political and spiritual climate in China now, however, is changing.

House church leaders for the most part do not face the threat of imprisonment or being shut down. Persecution against the church is not the main challenge the church is facing; the issues stemming from rapid urbanization, changing cultural values and moral

³⁷ Werner Burklin, *Jesus Never Left China: The Rest of the Story: The Untold Story of the Church in China Now Exposed* (Enumclaw, WA: Pleasant Word, 2006), 191.

³⁸ Bush and Fulton, *China’s Next Generation*, Loc 218 of 589.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Loc 422 of 589.

societal decline loom larger.⁴⁰ Christianity has established itself as a viable presence in China. However, the pressing need among house church leaders now is to know how to raise a new generation of believers to engage a quickly changing culture that needs the church to “leverage their influence” and become “more involved in the life of the community as a whole.”⁴¹ As the church in China is now entering a new day of spiritual challenges, questions arise as to how house church leaders can effectively engage the rapidly growing urban church movement and its clash of Western and Confucian values with the gospel of God’s grace. What are the unique spiritual and cultural challenges house church leaders face in fostering spiritual renewal with their congregations in this environment? What are the barriers to the gospel in urban China? How can Christ-centered preaching confront the culture and bring about spiritual renewal both inside and outside the walls of the church?

While much has been written about the history of the missions movement in China and the development of Christianity and house churches in the last fifty years, few gospel resources address the younger generation in the context of urban China. Rapid developments in urbanization, westernization, and modernization, and the upheaval of the traditional family structure have resulted in a host of new, complex ministry challenges. Urban house church leaders are walking on new ground. Current research and resources are desperately needed to equip a new generation of urban church planters and house church leaders to reach out to the emerging urban generation.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Loc 422 of 589.

⁴¹ Ibid., Loc 422-439 of 589.

Past missionary efforts toward urban Chinese Christian leaders have focused on equipping them with up-to-date theological and biblical resources and training.⁴² While resources and theological training are still needed, today's house church leaders in the urban centers have unprecedented access to high quality theological and pastoral resources and training.⁴³ Many have been trained in expository preaching methods. An area of pastoral training that needs further development, however, is how the gospel brings about spiritual renewal and the subsequent need for not just expository preaching, but Christ-centered, gospel-renewing preaching in particular. Wang Jianguo, a house church pastor, has observed the growing trend and hunger among house church leaders for Christ-centered preaching, stating, "Today, ideas such as Christ-centered preaching and hermeneutical preaching are gradually influencing the pulpits of China's city house churches."⁴⁴ While this style of preaching is beginning to take hold, there is still a great need to train house church leaders in this kind of preaching.

What does it mean to preach Christ? Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church and co-founder of the Gospel Coalition, says, "We must preach Christ from every text, which is the same as saying we must preach the gospel every time."⁴⁵ Christ-centered preaching is a synonym for gospel-centered preaching. It is a kind of preaching

⁴² "Equipping Christian Leaders for Today's China," *ChinaSource*, May 19, 2015, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/blog/posts/equipping-christian-leaders-for-todays-china--2>.

⁴³ In addition to the many indigenous underground seminaries throughout China offering bachelors and masters degrees, ministries such as Third Millennium and Dallas Theological Seminary provide an entire curriculum of theological and pastoral ministry resources online.

⁴⁴ Wang, Jianguo, "Living Out Theology To The Utmost, Part 3: A Church That Preaches The Gospel Every Sunday Morning," *China Partnership*, March 18, 2015, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.chinapartnership.org/2015/03/to-live-out-theology-to-the-utmost-part-3-a-church-that-preaches-the-gospel-every-sunday-morning>.

⁴⁵ Tim Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking Press, 2015), Loc 581 of 4183, Kindle.

that highlights and applies the biblically unifying theme of God's redeeming work through the person and work of Christ as the motivation and power for Christian living. Keller continues, "Preaching the gospel means preaching Christ and his saving work and his grace."⁴⁶ Bryan Chapell, senior pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church and former president of Covenant Theological Seminary agrees, saying, "The term 'Christ-centered' is a synecdoche for the matrix of ways in which God discloses his redeeming nature and work."⁴⁷ Christ-centered preaching means to preach the gospel from every part of the Bible. Chapell writes, "Christ is the subject of all the Scriptures, his provision the proper motivation of all our obedience."⁴⁸ He adds, "Christ's grace always anchors our message."⁴⁹

The purpose of this paper is to explore how Chinese house church leaders can preach Christ to foster genuine spiritual renewal to the post-1981 generation in the context of urban China. The paper will explore four main issues related to this question: 1) a brief history and unique characteristics of the house movement in China; 2) issues of urbanization in general, and urbanization in China in particular; 3) the worldview and value system of the younger generation in China in contrast to the previous generation; and 4) a theology of Christ-centered preaching. To examine this issue, several research questions will be explored.

⁴⁶ Ibid., Loc 800 of 4183.

⁴⁷ Bryan Chapell, "The Future of Expository Preaching," *Presbyterian* XXX, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 73.

⁴⁸ Bryan Chapell, "Insights from the Westminster Standards," *Presbyterian* XXXI, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Research Questions

1. How do the values of traditional Chinese house churches differ from those of the younger urban house churches?
2. What are the unique challenges to ministry house churches face as a result of living in the city?
3. What are the unique issues the younger generation in China is dealing with?
4. How do Chinese city house leaders preach Christ in order to encourage spiritual renewal in their churches?

Significance of the Study

As has already been mentioned, the need for higher quality pastoral ministry training in the urban Chinese house context is matched only by its current rapid growth as one of the fastest growing Christian movements in history. The initial wave of growth under the Cultural Revolution as a highly persecuted but spiritually vibrant underground church is now giving rise to an increasingly urbanized house church facing the new challenges of a city environment. A new generation of younger Christian people, who were not raised in the defensive posture of the older generation, has a different attitude toward society, and is open to engaging the culture around them.

The church in China must adapt to these new realities and learn how to preach Christ to a new generation of primarily urban Chinese. What will Christ-centered preaching look like with this new generation? Shedding the strong overtones of pietism from the older generation and the Confucian-type moralism buried deeply within the Chinese culture will not be easy. House church leaders will need to learn how to distinguish these from the gospel, which is the very power of God for salvation.⁵⁰ If the

⁵⁰ Romans 1:16-17.

gospel is the power not just for our justification, but for our continued sanctification, then house church leaders will have to be deeply rooted in the gospel themselves to experience its power in their own lives, and then preach Christ from the Word of God so that the church will sustain spiritual vibrancy. This study hopes to break new ground in this vital area of need, and to become the basis for training house church leaders in Christ-centered preaching so that Chinese Christians might experience greater spiritual renewal and zeal to carry the gospel to the world.

Chapter Two

Review of Relevant Literature

The section will summarize the available literature pertaining to Christ-centered preaching in the context of urban China to the post-1981 generation. Additionally, this section will demonstrate the need for more specific and in-depth research to help urban house church leaders. Although a growing body of literature records the ever-changing nature of the house church in China, much less literature focuses specifically on the rapidly changing cultural values and worldview of the post-1981 generation in China. A small but increasing body of literature teaches the dynamics of Christ-centered preaching; however, no literature this researcher is aware of applies Christ-centered preaching to the context of the younger generation of urban Chinese.

This section will provide a summary of key observations found in some of the best literature published by pastors, seminary professors, and cultural anthropologists in four key areas. The first area will explore the ever-changing nature of today's generation in China and contrast the differences with the older generation. The younger generation of Chinese in their twenties and mid-thirties represents a cultural mindset significantly different from the middle-aged generation of Chinese now in their forties and fifties. Further still, the older generation of Chinese in their sixties and up grew up under the dictatorship of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). The literature will show that the younger generation of Chinese more resemble the youth in America than the older generation of their own country. The second area of research will focus on the implications of China's rapid urbanization and examine ways urbanization has affected

the socio-economic dynamics of the culture. Arguably, no modern-day country in the world has experienced as rapid a pace of urbanization as China, and this has resulted in large-scale challenges to the very fabric and dynamics of familial relations. The third area will explore the nature of the urban house church movement. The urban house church movement is a relatively recent development within the broader stream of the house church movement. Finally, the last section will present a theology of Christ-centered preaching that is distinct from the broader nature of evangelical preaching. In the end, this section will show that the best literature available still does not offer a satisfactory amount of information related to the specialized, much-needed topic of preaching Christ in the context of urban China to the post-1981 generation. The new generation of urban house church leaders needs to know how to effectively preach Christ so they may know how to foster spiritual renewal and reach a new generation of believers for Christ.

Post-1981 China: A Generation Caught Up in Massive Changes

It is safe to say that there has not been a more seismic shift in the cultural landscape and value system in the history of China than the one seen today, especially after 1981. The changes could hardly be more dramatic: increased modernization, westernization, the shift from a primarily agrarian to a primarily urban culture; the transition from a generation that sprang out of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square to a generation that is thoroughly materialistic, does not know the struggles of fighting for basic human rights, and is awash in confusion over identity issues.

The collective identity of the previous generation of Chinese (1949-1979) could be described in terms of politics, ideology, collectivism and idealism.⁵¹ Inspired by a charismatic leader who used socialist ideology to promise a “new China” in which the world would eventually become theirs, the older generation found no difficulty in “plunging [their] limited life into the unlimited cause of serving the people.”⁵² The youth of that generation quickly joined the swelling ranks of the Red Guard to fight against capitalist ideals and overthrow the feudal system and its greedy landlords. Teachers were often the initial victims of their fury, cast as the purveyors of the old ideology.⁵³ Mao Zedong succeeded in mobilizing the massive peasant class of China to overthrow the corrupt, greedy landlords who had exploited them for centuries. He shrewdly tapped into the internal frustration and rage of the peasants to form a revolution of unstoppable force.⁵⁴ A revealing monologue shows the sentiment and extent of their loyalty to Mao Zedong’s revolutionary ideology:

What did we enjoy? Well, we didn't think in terms of “joy.” We didn't even try to “feel.” Yet, we lived by the great revolutionary will and communist ideal. We only knew that no matter how difficult reality seemed to be, we could overcome it. We would prevail, because we could always find inspiration from the founding fathers and the revolutionary martyrs. We sincerely believed that “the roads twist and turn, yet the future is bright.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Jonathan Li, “After Thirty Years,” *ChinaSource*, June 12, 2010, accessed August 15, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/after-thirty-years>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Harrison Salisbury, *The New Emperors: China the Era of Mao and Deng* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), 392.

⁵⁵ Li, “After Thirty Years,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/after-thirty-years>.

The Marxism-Leninism on which the Communist Party was originally founded was virtually wiped out by Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966-76).⁵⁶

Materialism the Dominant Worldview

If the pre-1981 generation fought against the poverty and oppression imposed by the elite tribal lords over the masses, the post-1981 generation has become decidedly materialistic and relatively safe and secure.⁵⁷ They enjoy a level of material privilege unprecedented in the history of China. Globalization, capitalism, and rising incomes have ushered in an influx of luxury items that are now consumed by a burgeoning middle class; symbols of affluence like iPhones and iPads are ubiquitous; luxury cars like Audis, Mercedes, BMWs and even Ferraris are all on the rise. Broader symbols of globalization have come in the form of McDonald's and KFC. The post-1981 generation has grown up as digital natives, using text messaging, social networks like QQ or WeChat, online video gaming, iPods, iPhones, and iPads.⁵⁸

Today's generation is not driven by the political ideology of the previous generation. Almost no one today, including those within the Communist Party itself, truly believes in the veracity of the Communist ideology.⁵⁹ This generation has not been born into the great political turmoil or conflict that marked the previous generation. Rather, they have enjoyed a life of growing material ease. Individualism, materialism and capitalism are the main drivers of this generation. When Deng Xiaoping became the

⁵⁶ Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 15.

⁵⁷ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 48 of 589.

⁵⁸ QQ is the most popular host site for micro-blogs in China; Wechat is a popular form of text messaging and social networking in China.

⁵⁹ Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 15.

leader of China after the Cultural Revolution, he became the “chief architect” of China’s new economic reform policies successfully opening the country up to the world market.⁶⁰

Whereas Mao consolidated all the land and money under the Communist Party, Deng introduced a capitalist system and gave back freedom to the people to earn and spend money as they chose.⁶¹ Deng urged the new generation to be “free from old ideas and unite together to move forward,” paving the way for an open door policy towards globalization and foreign trade.⁶²

A new wave of optimism swept over the younger generation of China as they experienced the fruit of this new opening up policy. Pop music from Taiwan and Hong Kong, television and stereo from Japan, and the freedom to wear t-shirts in place of the old drab green revolution party garb of the previous generation fueled their sense of progress as a nation.⁶³ There was a taste of freedom that no other generation in China had ever experienced, in which the young and educated could explore Western ideas and think critically about their own culture and system.⁶⁴ However, there was a limit. This lesson was tragically learned at the now famous Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, in which the Communist Party military mowed down student protestors. Since then, distrust and cynicism toward the Party system has grown. Instead of a greater cause to fight for, today’s generation is simply fixed on personal and material fulfillment.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Li, “After Thirty Years,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/after-thirty-years>.

⁶¹ Salisbury, *The New Emperors*, 392-99.

⁶² Gregory Bracken, ed, *Aspects of Urbanization: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Guangzhou* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 62.

⁶³ Li, “After Thirty Years,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/after-thirty-years>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Yet, despite predictions from the outside of a massive collapse, the Party maintained power and control more than two decades after the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations. Deng's policies ushered China into the global market and new heights of economic progress. While many in China are enjoying a level of economic prosperity unimaginable before, many are asking whether this capitalism is only a means to make money or whether it comes "with concrete ethical and philosophical foundations."⁶⁶

The Shrinking Family Unit

The adoption of the one-child policy in 1981 ushered in dramatic changes to the family structure and value system. The one-child generation grew up without the kinship of blood brothers, sisters, or an extended network of cousins. The one-child policy brought about a torrent of psychological, social, familial, and societal changes that have reshaped the cultural and moral landscape of China, probably much more than the government could have realized.

The result is a shift away from values drawn primarily by the community and a communal-based society to more of an individualistic society. Previous generations of Chinese were ingrained with a deep sense of familial, communal and national identity. The needs of the family and the community took priority over all other needs. Before, children helped their parents sustain the family livelihood, and in general everyone conformed to the mores of the community. Mao Zedong united a previously fractured country to bring about an even stronger sense of collective identity, precisely because of the already strong sense of communal identity inherent in the culture. The impetus of

⁶⁶ Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 16.

loyalty to country over self was to sacrifice for the sake of the common good and to build China into a great nation. This was a real cause to fight for: overthrow the greedy landlords who ruled the vast countryside of China for the sake of greater equality. This generation of Chinese was marked by deep self-sacrifice and loyalty to the nation.

The younger generation of China has no experience of such national struggles. No great cultural cause is pulling this generation together. People growing up in China today face the stresses of personal success and advancement: getting into good schools and colleges with the eventual goal of obtaining a stable, high paying job. The underlying cultural value system is shifting from self-sacrifice for the common good to pursuing self-interests for individual good. Parents have put increasing academic pressure on their child to succeed while overlooking moral values:

This generation of Chinese youth has no shared struggle, no defining life and death experience. In spite of the attention and material prosperity these youth enjoy ... today's youth describe themselves as increasingly distanced from their parents and teachers. Browbeaten by unrealistic pressures to succeed in a highly competitive society, many retreat to the security of Internet chat rooms or spend hours playing online games with friends.⁶⁷

The combination of tremendous internal pressure for success and a lack of a clear moral ethics or corporate identity has left much of today's youth feeling desperate and missing a clear sense of purpose and meaning in life outside of themselves. Research conducted by One Hope, a ministry that reaches out to youth and children worldwide, shows that China is one of the top two countries among the forty-four countries they serve in the world where youth are desperate. Surveys of youth between thirteen- and eighteen-years-old reveal that almost half had suicidal thoughts in the previous three months and more than

⁶⁷ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 183 of 589.

one-third had attempted suicide at some point.⁶⁸ Four researchers from Australia also concluded that the results of the one-child policy “produced significantly less trusting, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic, and less conscientious individuals.”⁶⁹

Though the number of children has decreased, the relational intimacy between parents and their child ironically is more difficult than ever. Today’s youth describe themselves as increasingly distanced from their parents and teachers.⁷⁰ While family is still very important to them, both parents and youth recognize a vast disconnect between them.⁷¹ Parents often feel out of touch with their children and their generation. One report reveals that over 50 percent of youth do not see their parents regularly.⁷² Children from the countryside in particular suffer most in this way because many of their parents move into the cities in search of work, leaving them in the care of their grandparents. While parents have tried hard to provide educational advantages and material needs for their children, they have not been good in being able to listen to their ideas and connect with them emotionally.⁷³ This vacuum has led today’s youth to ask themselves, “Why did my

⁶⁸ Ibid., Loc 187 of 589.

⁶⁹ Lisa Cameron, Nisval Erkal, Lata Gangadharan, and Xing Meng, “Little Emperors: Behavioral Impacts of China’s One-Child Policy,” *Science* 22, no. 6122 (February 2013): 953-957.

⁷⁰ Brent Fulton, “China’s Youth in Perspective,” *ChinaSource*, June 12, 2010, accessed August 14, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-youth-in-perspective>.

⁷¹ Allen Reesor, “Youth in China,” *ChinaSource*, June 12, 2010, accessed August 14, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/youth-in-china-a-look-at-one-city>.

⁷² Gibson, “China’s Youth and Christianity,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-youth-and-christianity-an-interview>.

⁷³ Reesor, “Youth in China,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/youth-in-china-a-look-at-one-city>.

parents give birth to me since they don't care for me? Why do I need to work hard and study hard?" and "Why is money so powerful?"⁷⁴

Technology has also played a key part in contributing to the gap between youth and their parents. Today's generation is heavily influenced by the media arts and the Internet. Parents underestimate the power of these influences because they do not understand them. Children often construe this lack of knowledge as apathy towards their interests.⁷⁵ Adding to the strain, parents resort to the only means of shaping their children they understand: simply proscribing behavioral advice. The primary concern of parents for their children is not their personal and emotional wellbeing but rather their academic and career success. This performance-oriented goal only furthers the sense that parents do not understand or care about their children personally.⁷⁶ Faced with enormous pressure to succeed academically and in their careers, many seek solace and relief in chat rooms to play online games or chat with friends.⁷⁷

Growing up without any siblings, this generation often resorts to the cyber community to find relational connection. They are glued to their computers, going online to search for people with whom they can connect and chat with.⁷⁸ Allen Reesor captures the tendency of youth to isolate themselves within the home:

There is an unhealthy combination of being overly absorbed with school, a sense of insecurity, a competitive nature of relationships with peers and the ease of

⁷⁴ Gibson, "China's Youth and Christianity," <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-youth-and-christianity-an-interview>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Fulton, "China's Youth in Perspective," <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-youth-in-perspective>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

staying in and playing video games, going on line or watching television. This combination means that the safest way to cope is to opt out.⁷⁹

At 384 million users, China has more online users than the entire population of the United States. The vast majority of users are in their teens and twenties.⁸⁰ This generation's obsession with the Internet has led China to become one of the first countries in the world to recognize the reality of Internet addiction. Internet treatment centers have sprung out throughout China with over 400 locations, drawing in over one billion yuan.⁸¹ Though personal freedom has never been greater, there has never been a lesser sense of collective and communal identity.⁸²

Looking for a source to blame for the widening gap, the older generation explains it away as a problem arising from outside influences. With the world of the Internet opened up, this generation has access to new ways of thinking and seeing the world that has permanently changed the value system of China. Unfamiliar with the ways their children think, parents are quick to blame influences from Japan or Korea and the West for the massive shift they see in their children.⁸³

⁷⁹ Reesor, "Youth in China," <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/youth-in-china-a-look-at-one-city>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Fulton, "China's Youth in Perspective," <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-youth-in-perspective>.

⁸² Jonathan Hwang, "Interconnected: China's Youth and the Internet," *ChinaSource*, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/interconnected-chinas-youth-and-the-internet>, accessed August 14, 2015.

⁸³ Reesor, "Youth in China," <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/youth-in-china-a-look-at-one-city>.

The Most Well-Educated Generation

Today's generation is also the most well educated generation China has ever known. Whereas in many rural areas college or even high school used to be considered a luxury reserved for the wealthy and elites of society, today there are more college graduates than there are jobs available for them to fill.⁸⁴ Many complete post-graduate studies to enhance their prospects of finding a good paying job.

Parents put unrelenting pressure on their children to succeed at school with the eventual goal of obtaining a high paying job.⁸⁵ Having only one child means parents leverage their resources into their lone child to try to ensure as much academic success as possible. Children are often put under pressure to succeed in school, even beginning from kindergarten. The pressure continues all the way through high school, culminating in the extremely high-pressured (高考 *gaokao*) college entrance exam.⁸⁶

This generation's general attitude toward education is less than hopeful. They are generally cynical about the value of higher education. They do not believe what they are learning is helpful for the realities of life: learning how to live successfully and raise a good family.⁸⁷ Schooling and obtaining higher degrees are simply the pragmatic means of filling out the requirement to procure a good paying job, but otherwise is not very useful for the everyday realities of life.

⁸⁴ Lucy Hornby, "China's Young Generation Hampered by Lack of Jobs," *Reuters*, June 4, 2008, accessed August 23, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/06/05/us-china-generation-graduates-idUSPEK26174320080605>.

⁸⁵ Gibson, "China's Youth and Christianity," <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-youth-and-christianity-an-interview>.

⁸⁶ Brent Fulton, "A Generation of One," *ChinaSource*, May 19, 2014, accessed May 28, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinasource-blog/a-generation-of-one>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Spiritual and Relational Vacuum

Though materialism is on the rise, this generation is also discovering that materialism does not satisfy. They are increasingly lonely and searching for a spiritual reality. Caught in between the world of the Internet and constant studying, today's youth often lack the relational and life skills needed to negotiate the real world. Thus they feel disconnected and lonely. It is not difficult to understand why today's children in China have been described as the "most alienated" generation.⁸⁸

Spiritually and religiously, this current generation in China is the first without any official creed, religious identity, or strong ideology to follow. Pre-Mao China had a history of varied religious beliefs including Chinese folk religions, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.⁸⁹ The Mao Zedong years wiped out religious belief in China, following the thinking of Marx, who considered religion an opiate of the people.⁹⁰ Mao established his own communist ideology as the sole belief system in China, marking the beginning of an intense persecution of Christian pastors and church leaders. The pinnacle of Mao's efforts to eradicate religion from China came during the Cultural Revolution when all churches, Christian schools, seminaries, orphanages, and hospitals were shut down.⁹¹ After Mao's death, China was left without any spiritual belief, instead following the path of economic success as the chief goal of the country. Deng Xiaoping's statement in 1979 summarized the main belief system, "To get rich is glorious."⁹²

⁸⁸ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 178 of 589.

⁸⁹ Burklin, *Jesus Never Left China*, 183-85.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 191.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 419 of 589.

Atheism and materialism, however, have left an enormous spiritual vacuum in the souls of the modern Chinese person. Journalist Evan Osnos writes, “As communism fades into today’s free-market reality, many Chinese describe a ‘crisis of faith’ and seek solace everywhere from mystical Taoist sects to Bahai temples and Christian mega churches.”⁹³ Paul Liu, professor in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, notes that up until that time, “The Chinese people had belief but did not have anything to eat. Now, thirty years later, most Chinese people have enough to eat, but nothing to believe.”⁹⁴ Though China’s 1982 Constitution recognizes the freedom of religion, heavy persecution against house churches persisted into the end of the 20th century.⁹⁵ Communism and materialism have created a spiritual void, leaving the Chinese people restless and hungry for the pursuit of truth and a deeper meaning to life. Osnos describes how Christianity is reaching all sectors of society, noting that “Disillusioned intellectuals are placing their loyalty in faith, not politics, tycoons fed up with corruption are seeking an ethical code; and Communist Party members are daring to argue their faith does not put them at odds with the government.”⁹⁶ The church has a uniquely God-given opportunity to share the truth during this critical time of moral and spiritual crises.

⁹³ Evan Osnos, “Jesus in China,” *Chicago Tribune* (website), June 22, 2008, accessed July 7, 2015, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-06-22/news/0806210659_1_house-churches-christianity-fact-party-members.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Bush and Fulton, *China’s Next Generation*, Loc 417 of 589.

⁹⁵ Burklin, *Jesus Never Left China*, 195.

⁹⁶ Osnos, “Jesus in China,” http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-06-22/news/0806210659_1_house-churches-christianity-fact-party-members.

Break-Down of Traditional Marriage and Sexual Mores

China is also experiencing a breakdown of traditional marital and sexual mores. Divorce rates are skyrocketing. In some metropolitan areas, “It is common, even fashionable, for young women to have been married more than once.”⁹⁷ Though romance is a popular and continual topic of discussion among the youth, they are simultaneously more pessimistic about the outlook on the future of their own family life. Nearly 40 percent of the youth surveyed said they believe anyone who gets married should be prepared to divorce, and 53 percent disagreed with the statement they will be happy in marriage.⁹⁸ The boundaries of their sexual ethics are unclear. It is commonly assumed by college students that everyone involved in a relationship is sexually active.⁹⁹ In a country that offers no formal sex education in its school systems, pornography is rampant. Despite the government’s efforts to censor pornography from the Internet, pornography can be easily accessed online or through the black market.¹⁰⁰ Never before have traditional ideas of marriage, family and sexuality broken down as pervasively as they have today.

Religious Attitudes

Religion plays a vital, if not explicitly obvious role in modern Chinese society. Though Marxist ideology does not recognize the role of religion in society, religious

⁹⁷ Bush and Fulton, *China’s Next Generation*, Loc 170 of 589.

⁹⁸ Ibid., Loc 70 of 589.

⁹⁹ Reesor, “Youth in China,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/youth-in-china-a-look-at-one-city>.

¹⁰⁰ Brendon Hong, “China is Hooked on Japanese Porn—and That’s a Good Thing,” *The Daily Beast*, February 24, 2015, accessed August 28, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/24/china-has-a-japanese-porn-addiction-and-that-s-a-good-thing.html>.

traditions are flourishing, posing a steep challenge to the authority of the Communist Party.¹⁰¹ Kevin Yao, professor of World Christianity and Asian Studies at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, remarks that the popular religions of the pre-Mao era have made a comeback since the 1980s. “One of the most significant consequences of China's remarkable reform and liberalization of social life since the 1980s is a massive revival of religion.”¹⁰²

Today, there are five government approved religions: Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Protestant Christianity.¹⁰³ Buddhism arrived in China by way of India and Central in the first century CE and has continued to play a vital part of Chinese religion and culture.¹⁰⁴ There are an estimated seven million Muslims in China, found mostly among the minority ethnic groups in Western China. Islam has been found in China for the past 1400 years.¹⁰⁵ There are approximately 12 million Catholics in China, prompting one to say there are “more Catholics than in Ireland”!¹⁰⁶ Given the resurgence of religious belief in China, it is not unusual to find a Buddhist dad, Christian mother and Taoist grandfather within one household.¹⁰⁷ Though technically not considered a religion,

¹⁰¹ Daniel Overmyer, *Religion in China Today* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁰² Kevin Yao, “Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Intersections with Christianity in China,” *ChinaSource*, March 14, 2014, accessed August 24, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/contemporary-confucian-revival-and-its-interactions-with-christianity-in-china>.

¹⁰³ Overmyer, *Religion in China Today*, 2.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Liao Yiwu, *God is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 214, Kindle.

Confucianism is also powerfully shaping the culture and thought of modern day China more so than any other religion besides Christianity.¹⁰⁸

Though most youth would be considered unreligious, they are quite open to religious belief, particularly to Christianity. The youth are reluctant to claim belief in Christianity (only 3.6 percent explicitly acknowledged belief). However, a survey done of college students at the elite Renmin University in Beijing reveals that 61.5 percent expressed an “interest” in the religion and over 70 percent felt that Christianity would “enrich social culture, help Chinese people to understand the West, and increase Sino-Western cultural exchange.”¹⁰⁹ Another survey done in 1998 among high school and college students in Beijing revealed that only 8 percent believed Christianity to be a foreign religion that is harmful to Chinese tradition or socialism.¹¹⁰ Nearly all of them felt Christianity was a positive source of “mutual love and support, of social stability in the West, and of a cultural spirit that should be absorbed to benefit Chinese development.”¹¹¹ These findings are consistent with the rise of Christianity today as the fastest growing religion in China.¹¹² Buddhism is often perceived the religion of their parents and

¹⁰⁸ Yao, “Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Intersections with Christianity in China,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/contemporary-confucian-revival-and-its-interactions-with-christianity-in-china>.

¹⁰⁹ Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religion Question in Modern China*, 302.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Yao, “Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Intersections with Christianity in China,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/contemporary-confucian-revival-and-its-interactions-with-christianity-in-china>.

ancestors but generally holds little appeal to the youth.¹¹³ Christianity is decidedly in; Buddhism and other traditional Chinese religions are out.

The reality remains, however, that many of the youth have never heard of Jesus. Lacking a clear understanding of the Christian faith, they simply categorize it as another religion.¹¹⁴ When youth do convert to Christ, there is a challenge to ministering to them in their understanding of the Christian life. Reesor points out the difficulty:

Most young people do not have a clear idea of God. They are told that God is like a father, but their parents, especially fathers, are generally perceived as harsh, critical, and unsupportive. Parents are often not good role models of prayer and scripture reading. Generally, youth do not have relevant evidence or experience of God helping them, and those who want to be independent think it is not good to rely on God. Most young people in the study do not see how Christian practice is connected to the reality of everyday life.¹¹⁵

The youth often lack even fundamental understandings of the gospel and how the gospel shapes the core of their reality.

Confucianism and Today's Youth

Even as the younger generation of China is experiencing massive cultural shifts and influx of Western thought, the deeply ingrained Chinese cultural identity cannot be simply erased from its millennia-old history. Confucianism, which has undergirded East Asian culture for thousands of years, is very much at the center of today's thought.

What was once considered the backbone and foundation of Chinese culture and thought for thousands of years, Confucianism underwent aggressive attack under the

¹¹³ Liao, *God is Red*, 215.

¹¹⁴ Gibson, "China's Youth and Christianity," <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-youth-and-christianity-an-interview>.

¹¹⁵ Reesor, "Youth in China," <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/youth-in-china-a-look-at-one-city>.

Communist regime for half a century.¹¹⁶ Westernization, modernization and secularization also contributed to its decline.¹¹⁷ Ironically, the party system that once tried to suppress its influence has in recent decades advocated for its resurgence in an effort to promote traditional values.¹¹⁸ A telling example of this reversal in attitude came when current strongman president Xi Jinping touted the Chinese Communist Party “as a defender of ancient virtues, epitomized by Confucius and his collected teachings, *The Analects*.”¹¹⁹ In so doing, however, the Party is careful not to campaign for its values at the expense of its own Marxist ideology, walking a fine line.¹²⁰

Confucianism has a long and deeply entrenched history in the religious and worldview beliefs of the Chinese. Confucius is the Latinized name given by the Jesuits to its founder, *Kongzi*, Master Kong.¹²¹ Though he only claimed to be a “transmitter” of the wisdom of past Chinese sages, Confucius became an object of deification for many after his death.¹²² Born in 551 B.C. in the feudal province of Lu (modern-day Shandong), Confucius became a scholar who sought to fight against the wanton corruption, greed and violence of his times. Though he acknowledged the existence of the Divine, his

¹¹⁶ Yao, “Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Intersections with Christianity in China,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/contemporary-confucian-revival-and-its-interactions-with-christianity-in-china>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Chris Buckley, “Xi Touts Communist Party as Defender of Confucius's Virtues,” *The New York Times* (website), February 13, 2014, accessed August 24, 2015, https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/13/xi-touts-communist-party-as-defender-of-confucius-virtues/?_r=0.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ G. Wright Doyle, “Perspectives on Confucianism,” *ChinaSource*, March 13, 2014, accessed August 24, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/perspectives-on-confucianism>.

¹²² Margaret Lynn Condron, *Redemptive Analogies in the Chinese Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1993), 30.

philosophical teachings centered on social principles for the achievement of harmony in society.¹²³ Confucius focused on “the person and human relationships in this world,” and thus “personal wellbeing, family harmony, social solidarity, political unity, and universal peace.”¹²⁴ His teachings emphasized the proper ordering of relationships and authority in the world, beginning with the family at the center of relationships, extending to obedience to the state.¹²⁵ Confucius taught there are five relationships that are essential to the proper ordering of society:

1. Kindness of the father is reciprocated with filial piety of the son.
2. Favors of the ruler are reciprocated with loyalty of the subjects.
3. Dutiful behavior of the husband is reciprocated with obedience of the wife.
4. Graciousness of the oldest son is reciprocated with respect of the younger siblings.
5. Between friends, a gift from one is reciprocated with a gift from the other.¹²⁶

Confucius’ teachings were thoroughly humanistic, believing in the “autonomous realization of the human nature that is intrinsically good.”¹²⁷ He died in relative obscurity and with a sense of personal failure, as he claimed, “Alas! There is no one that knows

¹²³ Ibid., 32.

¹²⁴ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 44.

¹²⁵ Doyle, “Perspectives on Confucianism,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/perspectives-on-confucianism>.

¹²⁶ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 78.

¹²⁷ Zhao Dunhua, *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, eds. Mikka Ruokanen and Paulos Huang (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 9.

me! But there is Heaven; it knows me.”¹²⁸ His teachings gained greater traction after his death, eventually becoming a “type of state orthodoxy” in the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.).¹²⁹

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a powerful revitalization of Confucianism in mainland China.¹³⁰ With China’s rise as a global superpower, China’s national self-consciousness has been pivoting away from dependence on the West to forging its own cultural and national identity.¹³¹ One result has been a renaissance of Confucianism. This is taking shape in the form of a renewed study on the Confucius classics and other ancient writings. Many parents, out of a deep sense of moral responsibility, are beginning to enroll their children in moral education classes or courses for learning the Confucian classics.¹³² Indeed, it is common to find young people willingly giving up their seats on the public bus or subway for the elderly. Even though this is purely an anecdotal example based on this author’s experience, it empirically confirms what the data reveals.

Young intellectuals educated in the post-revolution period have rediscovered the Confucian classics, forming a group called the “New Confucius Movement.”¹³³ Their aim as “missionaries of a Confucian cause” is to ignite a grassroots movement to restore

¹²⁸ James Legge, *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1880), 140.

¹²⁹ Condrón, *Redemptive Analogies in the Chinese Culture*, 31-32.

¹³⁰ Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 295.

¹³¹ Yao, “Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Intersections with Christianity in China,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/contemporary-confucian-revival-and-its-interactions-with-christianity-in-china>.

¹³² Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religion Question in Modern China*, 238.

¹³³ Yao, “Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Intersections with Christianity in China,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/contemporary-confucian-revival-and-its-interactions-with-christianity-in-china>.

Confucian thought to the center of the culture.¹³⁴ The result is that thousands of private academics have sprouted across China for the purpose of disseminating Confucian teachings. The Confucius Foundation of China announced plans to open up 10,000 new Confucian schools for this very purpose in the fall of 2015.¹³⁵ There are formal and informal courses, training programs for entrepreneurs seeking “cultural capital and spiritual purpose,” children’s moral education classes, and even summer camps for youth.¹³⁶ The new champions of Confucianism passionately believe that China’s only hope for the future lies in his teachings. They are organizationally nimble, critical of the Marxist ideology underlying the Communist Party, and single-minded in their mission to restore Confucianism back to mainstream status.¹³⁷ While they accept some of the values of Christianity, they perceive it as a Western philosophy that threatens to displace Confucianism as the centerpiece of Chinese religion and thought.¹³⁸

Incidentally, Confucianism has made its way into the Christian church in China. Simon Chan, professor of systematic theology at Trinity Theological College in Singapore and a leading expert on Asian theology, notes how similar the teachings of Confucius are to New Testament principles of relationships. The primary difference is that the New Testament orders these under Christ.¹³⁹ A proper understanding of one’s

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Xinhua News Agency, “China to Open 10,000 Confucius Schools,” *Chinadaily.com.cn*, accessed October 24, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-10/10/content_22151389.

¹³⁶ Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 295.

¹³⁷ Yao, “Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Intersections with Christianity in China,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/contemporary-confucian-revival-and-its-interactions-with-christianity-in-china>.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 79.

rank within the family and larger social scheme is foundational to the proper working of a society. Indeed, some observers have pointed out one of the frequent unwitting purveyors of Confucianism has been the Christian church. Some Christian leaders who uncritically mistake Christianity as a set of ethics comparable to Confucian ethics have syncretized the two together to form an “unconscious penetration of Confucian modes of thinking ... in the Chinese Protestant pulpit.”¹⁴⁰ Doyle observes an obvious way this syncretism shows up: Chinese Christians focus upon "success" and "wellbeing" in this life in their prayers rather than on forgiveness of sin or the promise of eternal life.¹⁴¹

Julia Ching, deceased chairman of the East Asian studies department at the University of Toronto, observed that whereas Christianity is essentially a religion of grace, Confucianism is essentially a humanistic philosophy emphasizing human striving and achievement.¹⁴² It is a philosophy that aims for some level of perfectionism. Doyle points out the fundamental soteriological difference between Christianity and Confucianism: “Chinese Christian discourse hardly ever strays from a man-centered, moralistic and performance-oriented heritage that stresses what we must do for God rather than what he has done for us in Christ.”¹⁴³ Some Chinese theologians have likened Confucianism to the law of the Old Testament. Both hold up an ideal standard of ethics and virtues, but in themselves, are lacking in power. Both cause a longing for grace.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Doyle, “Perspectives on Confucianism,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/perspectives-on-confucianism>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 75-77.

¹⁴³ Doyle, “Perspectives on Confucianism,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/perspectives-on-confucianism>.

¹⁴⁴ Adeney, *Kingdom Without Borders*, 58.

One is fundamentally a declaration of good news of what Christ has done for us, whereas the other is nothing more than a system of good moral advice, akin to Aesop's fables.

Shame Versus Guilt

Shame is a pervasive concept in the Asian culture and merits attention, whether dealing with the older or younger generation in China. To be called “shameless” is the worst possible insult in many Asian countries.¹⁴⁵ To be shameless is to be without any sense of honor, but to be able to feel shame is to “become acutely aware of the loss or diminishment of honor.”¹⁴⁶ Bruce Malina, professor of New Testament at Creighton University, defines honor as “basically a claim to worth that is socially acknowledged.”¹⁴⁷ Shame, on the other hand, in the ancient Mediterranean world is a “publicly rejected claim to worth.”¹⁴⁸ Brené Brown, research professor at the Houston Graduate College of Social Work, defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”¹⁴⁹ Lewis Smedes, author and professor in the graduate school of psychology at Fuller Seminary, writes, “Shame is a very heavy feeling. It is a feeling that we do not measure up and maybe never will measure up to the sorts of persons we are meant to be.”¹⁵⁰ Malina notes the difference between guilt and shame: “We feel guilty for what we

¹⁴⁵ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 82.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁴⁷ Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 29-30.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁴⁹ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 69.

¹⁵⁰ Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 5.

do. We feel shame for what we *are*. A person feels shame because he *is* something wrong. We may feel guilty because we lied to our mother. We may feel shame because we are not the persons our mother wanted us to be. In reality feelings of guilt and shame overlap.”¹⁵¹

In honor and shame-based cultures, honor is largely determined by one’s place in the broader social strata. Malina notes that in the world of the New Testament, a “good name and family reputation are the most valuable of assets.”¹⁵² Family association and name were paramount to one’s honor. There is a striking similarity between the New Testament concept of honor and Chinese culture, which places a high premium on giving honor based on one’s family name and geographical location of origin. Robin Stockitt, a minister in the Anglican church, writes: “Shame can be understood, therefore, as arising from the external pressure of a group, where the use of shame as a social sanction is particularly effective. Shame is closely related to whether or not one feels approval and strikes at the core of who a person is. Shame and anxiety thus become inseparable companions. The fear of being shamed leads to a state of anxious anticipation, which in turn leads to establishing a whole range of coping mechanisms..”¹⁵³ In developed and westernized countries, honor is defined more in terms of economic power and personal success. But in ancient honor-shame cultures, honor was characterized more by “the value of a person in his or her own eyes ... plus that person’s value in the eyes of his or

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵² Malina, *The New Testament World*, 37.

¹⁵³ Robin Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 41.

her social group. Honor is a claim to worth along with the social acknowledgment of worth.”¹⁵⁴ As Malina explains,

A person constantly thinks about what he or she ought to do, about what is ideally acknowledged in the society as meaningful and valuable, and then examines his or her actions in the light of those societal norms and oughts. When a person perceives that his or her actions do in fact reproduce the ideals of society, he or she expects others in the group to acknowledge this fact, and what results is a grant of honor, a grant of reputation.”¹⁵⁵

Social scientist Halvor Moxnes explains that one of the main characteristics of an honor and shame society is that the group is more important than the individual. He states:

The individual received status from the group. Therefore, recognition and approval from others were important. Interaction between people was characterized by the competition for recognition and the defense of one’s own status and honor. To refuse a person’s claim for honor was to put the person to shame. The basic notion in all studies of honor and shame is that they represent the value of a person in her or his own eyes but also in the eyes of his or her society.”¹⁵⁶

Honor is a currency that can only be given to someone by the larger community.

The implications for understanding honor and shame in the Chinese church are significant. Joe Hellerman observes that honor was preeminently a public commodity. He states, “In the collectivist culture of antiquity, one’s honor was almost exclusively dependent upon the affirmation of the claim to honor by the larger social group to which the individual belonged.”¹⁵⁷ In such cultures, sin has two major components: shaming others and moral pollution. Sin is offending the honor of another person or the

¹⁵⁴ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 29-30.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵⁶ Halvor Moxnes, “Honor, Shame, and the Outside World in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism*, eds. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, Peder Borgen, and Richard Horsley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 208.

¹⁵⁷ Joe Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35.

community at large by not rendering the honor due to them.¹⁵⁸ Chan points out that the Bible that speaks of honor and shame much more than of guilt and innocence.¹⁵⁹ Guilt is mentioned 145 times in the Old Testament and ten times in the New Testament, while shame is mentioned 300 times in the Old Testament and forty-five times in the New Testament.¹⁶⁰

One of the common first century Roman practices of the day was something called the court of reputation. David deSilva, professor of biblical studies at Ashland Seminary specializes in the Greco-Roman world. He defines the court of reputation as “that body of significant others whose ‘opinion’ about what is honorable and shameful, and whose evaluation of the individual, really matters.”¹⁶¹ This group functioned as the “eyes” that needed to “be directed toward one another, toward their leaders, and, frequently, toward beings beyond the visible sphere (for example, God or the honored members of the group who have moved to another realm after death) as they look for approval.”¹⁶²

Healthy, Biblical Honor and Shame

Surprisingly, the New Testament mentions the term “guilt” (*eonchos*) only eight times.¹⁶³ Robert Jewett applied the honor-shame motif to the book of Romans and

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Timothy C. Tennant, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 92.

¹⁶¹ David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 40.

¹⁶² Ibid., 40.

¹⁶³ Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed*, 44.

concluded that the oft-used term righteousness, is “virtually synonymous” with honor and glory. Jewett suggests justification is less an act of forensic acquittal than the removal of shame and bestowal of a new status of honor in Christ.¹⁶⁴ In this case, sin is the loss of honor and righteousness is its restoration. Accordingly, falling short of God’s glory is failing to uphold the standard of honor human beings were meant to bear when Adam disobeyed God and lost the divine glory he had before he sinned.¹⁶⁵ Understanding the nature of sin through the lens of honor and shame is more about bringing shame to God’s name and his family, the church, than it is about breaking personal rules. Sin is more communal than personal and “Sinning against God and against community are virtually indistinguishable.”¹⁶⁶ Moxnes makes an observation similar to Jewett’s in applying the concept of honor and shame to the book of Romans.¹⁶⁷

The literature speaks of a healthy kind of shame. Stockitt speaks of a healthy shame as an “an early warning system signaling [that] one’s own worth, or that of another, may be placed in danger, leading possibly to a diminution of self-respect.”¹⁶⁸ Smedes describes shame as a “call from our true selves” and the “surest sign of our divine origin and human dignity.”¹⁶⁹ This shame issues from a deviation from what people were meant to be in God’s original design.

¹⁶⁴ Robert Jewett, “Honor and Shame in the Argument of Romans,” in *Putting Body and Soul Together: Essays in Honor of Robin Scroggs*, eds. A. Brown, G.F. Snyder and V. Wiles (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 270-72.

¹⁶⁵ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 85.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁶⁷ Moxnes, *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism*, 209-10.

¹⁶⁸ Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed*, 56.

¹⁶⁹ Smedes, *Shame and Grace*, 32.

The New Testament takes the honor and shame ethics of the first century Mediterranean world and redefines them according to one's relation to God, her community and the church.¹⁷⁰ DeSilva points out the “most prominent within this court of reputation is God, whose central place is assured because of God's power to enforce his estimation of who deserves honor and who merits censure.”¹⁷¹ Instead of deriving honor from the community and culture at large, Christians have a new identity base from which to draw their sense of honor—God Himself. God alone bestows true honor. Healthy shame arises from deviating from God's original design for humanity. This shame calls people back to living their true identity in Christ.

The literature describing the current generation in China gives a picture of a generation that has reached unprecedented levels of material prosperity and yet is in the midst of deep moral and spiritual confusion. Some of the literature deals with the spiritual condition of China's current generation, but this researcher could not find specific literature that shows how church leaders are reaching this generation with the gospel, much less how Christ-centered preaching is making a difference. The literature discusses the rise of Confucianism, the relative openness of the younger generation to spirituality, and how atheism has made material gain and social success the ultimate pursuit. But what aspects of the gospel must be emphasized to reach this generation? What are some examples of how house church leaders are using the gospel to bring about effective spiritual renewal? These are questions that have yet to be clearly discussed in the

¹⁷⁰ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 84.

¹⁷¹ deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 55.

literature. In this next section, this study will review current literature that discusses how urbanization is radically reshaping the cultural fabric of China.

The New Urban Reality of China

China is sprinting toward urbanization. The urban population in China grew 18 percent in 1970, 26 percent in 1990, and a staggering 44 percent in 2007.¹⁷² In 2011, for the first time in China's long history, more than half the population migrated to urban areas.¹⁷³ In sheer numbers, China saw about 205 million people migrate to the cities within a decade, surpassing India's rate two times over.¹⁷⁴ Beijing's population alone grew from 9 million in 1995 to 21 million by 2013.¹⁷⁵ This trend is expected to continue well into the future. Hu Angang, a professor at China's famed Qinghua University, predicts, "China's population also is expected to become more urban in the next 50 years. Eighty percent of the population will move to urban areas ... changing their lives, changing culture, changing values."¹⁷⁶ The urbanization of China is an irreversible reality that is here to stay. Such massive urbanization in a condensed period of time has had many profound social and economic ramifications.

¹⁷² Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 57 of 589.

¹⁷³ Ben Hillman and Jonathan Unger, "Editorial," *China Perspectives* 2013, no. 3 (September 2013): 3, accessed May 24, 2017, https://crawford.anu.edu.au/files/uploads/crawford01_cap_anu_edu_au/2013-09/cp2013-3_special_feature.pdf.

¹⁷⁴ Wendell Cox, "China: Urbanizing and Moving East: 2010 Census," *Newgeography*, May 4, 2011, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.newgeography.com/content/002218-china-urbanizing-and-moving-east-2010-census>.

¹⁷⁵ Ian Johnson, "The Rat Tribe of Beijing," *Aljazeera America*, January 24, 2015, accessed April 29, 2015, <http://projects.aljazeera.com/2015/01/underground-beijing/>.

¹⁷⁶ "China at 2050," CNN.com, accessed April 14, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/china.50/50.beyond/china.at.2050>.

Once primarily an agrarian society whose people led a simple rural lifestyle, now 60 percent of Chinese people work outside of the agrarian sector.¹⁷⁷ As expected, this urbanization comes with the transformational effects of technology and its accessibility. China has seemingly skipped several stages typifying modernization, going from a low-tech country to one that has instantly become one of the world's most wired and connected. Only the very privileged could dream of having a cellphone just a generation ago, whereas today virtually everyone owns a mobile phone, including young children and old people in the countryside. Nearly half of all smartphones manufactured in 2012 were shipped to China.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, China "is home to the largest population of Internet users on the planet, topping a half billion in 2012."¹⁷⁹

Social Problems Associated with Urbanization in China

The overwhelming pace of urbanization has created a host of unanticipated economic and social problems. Behind the economic progress and modernization of China's burgeoning urban centers lies the dark reality of the hundreds of millions who live in poverty, greater social stratification, and environmental pollution. A throng of migrant workers receives what is essentially slave wages. China's rapid urbanization has also meant greater social stratification. The *hukou* system treats people migrating into the cities from another region as foreign aliens, deprived of benefits given to natural citizens.¹⁸⁰ The myopic view of urban growth has also resulted in the rapid destruction of

¹⁷⁷ Bush and5, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 57 of 589.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., Loc 144 of 589.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ The *hukou* is a form of regional ID required of every resident, identifying which city or town you were born in. Without a proper *hukou* identifying you as a citizen of that city or town, you are essentially treated as a foreign alien, rendering you ineligible for any social services.

China's past and culture in favor of achieving the fastest path to economic success. Also, common Western social ills have arisen from the underbelly of urbanization: crime, poverty, prostitution, lack of affordable housing, congestion, inadequate infrastructures for transportation, and pollution.¹⁸¹ Quality of living and beauty have been replaced by a pragmatic drive to grow cities as quickly as possible.

China's propensity to create dense urban centers has limited the availability of residential land, artificially driving up real estate prices. For many would-be first-time home buyers and low-income citizens, there is no possibility of buying a home.¹⁸²

Another fallout from the overwhelming pace of urbanization has been severe environmental and air pollution problems.¹⁸³ Massive coal-burning factories are damaging the natural environment and filling the air with toxins exceedingly beyond the healthy limits of pollution. Infrastructure cannot keep pace with the population and there is an increasing glut of car owners and people who rely on public transportation.¹⁸⁴ China's notoriously toxic air quality levels have become legendary. Beijing's air quality is so harmful that some days it cannot even be measured.¹⁸⁵ As of 2013, less than one percent of China's largest 500 cities met World Health Organization criteria for clean air.¹⁸⁶ Each year, an estimated 1.2 million people in China die prematurely as the result

¹⁸¹ Miller, *China's Urban Billion*, 18.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 93-95.

¹⁸³ Asian Development Bank, *Strategic Options for Urbanization in the People's Republic of China: Key Findings* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2013), 14.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸⁵ Brent Fulton, *China's Urban Christians: A Light That Cannot Be Hidden* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), Loc 340 of 3362, Kindle.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

of air pollution.¹⁸⁷ In 2013, government sources also reported that the groundwater of 90 percent of cities was polluted, with 60 percent of those being severely polluted.¹⁸⁸ Brent Fulton, researcher and sociological expert on Christianity and China, notes:

China's environmental crisis is the result of decades of prioritizing economic growth, and the acquisition of energy resources to feed that growth, over concerns about the long-term health of its citizens. As both the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases and the leading consumer of energy resources, China's response to its own ecological calamity has global implications.¹⁸⁹

China's fast climb on the world economic ladder has not come without severe costs to the environmental and physical health of its people.

Basic social services are also lacking in many municipal districts because they lack the means to generate long-term self-sustaining revenues. Under the current administration, municipalities do not have the authority to issue bonds, borrow money from banks or levy property taxes. The primary way to generate revenue is to develop and lease as much industrial land as possible in the periphery, forcing cities to expand horizontally rather than centrally at its urban center. Such growth policies create short-term but not long-term profits or sustainability, thus impeding the ability offer residents many social services.¹⁹⁰

China's cities serve as a picture of stark economic contrasts. On the one hand, economic development has meant the rise of an increasing number of people into the ranks of the wealthy and middle class. On the other hand, cities are rife with throngs of migrant workers who have left families behind in the countryside in search of work, and

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Fulton, *China's Urban Christians*, Loc 355 of 589.

¹⁹⁰ Asian Development Bank, *Strategic Options for Urbanization in the People's Republic of China*, 14.

who sweat away in labor intensive jobs under poor working conditions while living in urban slums.¹⁹¹ The migrant working population accounts for up to 34 percent of Beijing's population.¹⁹² They are also known as the "floating population" because they are very mobile and willing to move to whichever city offers them the opportunity to work.¹⁹³

The migrant population faces all kinds of challenges in the city. Because they earn little, they cannot afford to send their children to private schools in the cities. Additionally, the *hukou* system in China does not allow the children of migrant workers to attend the local public schools. Children of migrant workers are sent back to the rural villages they came from when they reach school age, and they perform notably worse than their peers.¹⁹⁴ Migrants are also denied basic workers' compensation or medical insurance.¹⁹⁵ They are usually relegated to squalid living conditions as they cannot afford housing with a private bathroom and kitchen.

How will urban churches adapt to the fast-changing realities brought about by urbanization? No longer defined by a homogenous culture of poor peasant life, the China of today is marked by increased complexity in all aspects, from an increasingly fractured family unit to greater economic stratification. The literature in the following section will explore how urbanization has changed the way churches are reaching out to the current generation.

¹⁹¹ Miller, *China's Urban Billion*, 4-5.

¹⁹² Ibid., 16.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 17-24.

¹⁹⁵ Asian Development Bank, *Strategic Options for Urbanization in the People's Republic of China*, 16.

The Urban House Church Movement

Urbanization has had a dramatic influence on the nature of the Chinese house church. Previously, evangelism and church planting happened literally through biological family structures of extended networks of relatives, thus the term house church came into being. The migration of people into cities has destabilized the traditional family structure, changing the nature of evangelism and church planting.¹⁹⁶ Today's urban house churches are not composed primarily and exclusively of biological family networks, but rather social networks.

Transition from Persecuted Underground Church to City Church

The recent history of the Chinese church movement is complex and generally divided into three major streams, each with its distinct characteristics: the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), the traditional rural house church and the unregistered urban church. During the Cultural Revolution, the government banned religious freedom, forcing Christians to meet in “underground” churches that met in regular homes for worship. While the government sought to persecute and stop any religious worship, the house churches experienced major growth and revival.¹⁹⁷ The vast majority of Christians remained in house churches. Thus was born the house movement in the rural countryside of China.

The traditional house church movement grew out of suffering and persecution from the government.¹⁹⁸ On the other hand, the TSPM was established by the government as a way to monitor and control the growth of Christianity. There is often a sharp and

¹⁹⁶ Fulton, *China's Urban Christians*, Loc 222 of 589.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., Loc 210 of 589.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., Loc 218 of 589.

bitter divide between house church and TSPM leaders. TSPM churches are government established and controlled churches whose leaders were appointed by the government on condition of compliance with its regulations. On the other hand, house church leaders faced intense persecution during the Cultural Revolution for their refusal to comply with government regulations and control. They refused to compromise their message and ministry, taking direction only from God.¹⁹⁹ Traditional house church leaders were known for their deep piety, powerful prayer life, a simple but powerful reliance on God, and signs and wonders performed by the Holy Spirit.²⁰⁰ They tended to be aggressively evangelistic. Many of the most effective evangelists were women in their teens, who were often sent out two by two to plant churches across China.²⁰¹ House churches were mobile, light in infrastructure, flexible, and highly cautious of allowing new members into their churches for fear of government spies and persecution.²⁰² The leadership structure was highly hierarchical with one key “uncle” (叔叔, *shushu*) at the top who set the theological and spiritual tone of the group.²⁰³ Many of the house church leaders died while in prison. Some famous house church network leaders faced twenty and even up to almost forty years in prison.²⁰⁴ Thus, these “uncles” are greatly revered for their endurance in the face of intense suffering at the peak of persecution during the Cultural Revolution.

¹⁹⁹ Liao, *God is Red*, 157-80.

²⁰⁰ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 218 of 589.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 73-89.

Up until 1999, the major house church networks viewed migration into the cities with much skepticism and contempt. They believed that that a move into the city meant that person “loved the world (based on 2 Tim 4:10).”²⁰⁵ This attitude began to shift in 2000 as China began its massive urbanization. House church leaders eventually conceded that migration into the cities was an inevitable reality.²⁰⁶ In 2002, a major shift in attitude toward urbanization occurred when one of the five major house church network leaders moved with his family to Beijing.²⁰⁷ One famous pastor in China, known simply as “Uncle Zheng,” noted that just as God used uneducated fishermen like Peter to spread the gospel and then educated people like Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles, so God used illiterate villagers to spread the gospel in the countryside, and now is using university graduates to take the gospel to the cities.²⁰⁸ Instead of resisting the change, house church leaders began to recognize a new pattern of the advancement of Christianity.

Christianity Becomes More Mainstream

As urbanization began to take place, Christianity simultaneously spread to the cultural elite. What began as a movement mainly among the elderly, poor, and uneducated in rural China started taking hold among educated urbanites and the affluent class by the 1990s.²⁰⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, the momentum of Christianity began to shift from the rural countryside of China into the cities. The economic revamping ushered in by Deng Xiaoping meant jobs and money began to flow into the coastal urban centers.

²⁰⁵ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 218 of 589.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., Loc 218 of 589.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., Loc 226 of 589.

²⁰⁸ Robert Menzies, “Urban Churches in China: A Pentecostal Case Study,” *ChinaSource*, June 26, 2015, accessed August 17, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/urban-churches-in-china>.

²⁰⁹ Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religion Question in Modern China*, 301-02.

Believing urbanization was the key to economic growth, the government sought to purposely migrate as many people as possible from the rural countryside into urban dwellings.²¹⁰ Thus, many of the migrants from the countryside, who were already Christians, began pouring into the cities.²¹¹ The rise of Christianity in the cities coincided with a shift already taking place among the cultural elite and intellectuals of China who no longer derided religion as the “opiate of the people,” but as a source of significant contribution to the development of Chinese culture and society.²¹² What was once dismissed as a backwards type of folk superstition under Marxist-Leninist ideology now became a serious source of discussion and interest among the cultural elite. The 1990s witnessed many intellectuals engaging the truth claims of Christianity as a viable model of cultural ethics.²¹³ God was clearly at work in the cities of China.

It was equally clear that the locus of growth of the house church movement pivoted toward the cities, marking not only a geographical but also a social-cultural shift in Christianity. While the rural house church was born out of persecution, believers in city house churches tend to be first generation Christians with no previous connections with either the government-sponsored TSPM or rural house churches.²¹⁴ Christians in the cities also tended to be more global-minded and cosmopolitan in their outlook, as many had either gone on overseas visits, participated in international conferences or at least

²¹⁰ Miller, *China's Urban Billion*, 2.

²¹¹ Daniel Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 199-200.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 200.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 210 of 589.

have access to the global picture via the Internet.²¹⁵ Whereas the traditional house church retreated from the surrounding culture, viewing themselves as a fortress of uncompromising witness in the midst of a hostile world, the younger generation of believers in the city now feel a “sense of calling to engage their society with the Gospel [as] seen in their work in areas such as education, outreach to the poor, publishing, media, and cultural events.”²¹⁶

Even the attitude of the government toward these unregistered groups of Christians is changing. While persecution still exists in certain parts of China, the government is passively permitting more and more of the house churches to meet for worship.²¹⁷ Though an unregistered house church is illegal, the government generally leaves house churches alone so long as they do not grow too big and public or threaten the agenda of the Party. The government’s opposition to the church now is not so much ideological as it is practical: the preservation of its own existence as the primary influence and center of control in the country.²¹⁸ The government’s main fear is not the ideology of Christianity itself so much as the loss of power and control. If the government perceives any political threat, they will seek to shut down the movement. Thus, the size and scope of unofficial Christian activity makes the government nervous. Recently, several crosses were forcibly torn down from unregistered house church

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid., Loc 231 of 589.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid., Loc 239 of 589.

buildings in Wenzhou, considered the Jerusalem of China, amid strong public protests.²¹⁹

The fact that the crosses were removed from the most influential base of Christian activity in China served strong notice that the new Party administration under President Xi Jinping will not hesitate to exert control and power whenever it deems another movement could rival its own influence. Still, house churches can generally meet with a limit of 30-40 people. If a church grows larger, then they will often spin off to another place of worship under the same house network. Overall, the government has moved from a state of active persecution to passive permission of unregistered house churches.

A More Highly Educated and Professionalized Church

The demographics of congregants in city churches have changed dramatically. People in city churches are more highly educated, possess a broad range of work experience, and seek to find more meaningful involvement in church ministry.²²⁰ The shift is especially true for those who have gone abroad to work or study. The result has been an increasing number of lay leaders who see themselves as stakeholders and expect more involvement in the decision-making process of the church.²²¹ They are more apt to initiate new ministries that meet needs in the church rather than to wait for leaders to launch programs and be directed.²²²

A more well-educated and professionalized laity means the nature of church leadership has shifted from a hierarchical paradigm to a pastor and lay-driven ministry.

²¹⁹ Hermoine Macura, "1,200 Crosses Taken Down From Churches in China," *The Christian Post*, August 5, 2015, accessed August 22, 2015, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/1200-crosses-taken-down-from-churches-in-china-christian-leaders-denounce-action-as-evil-142210>.

²²⁰ Fulton, *China's Urban Christians*, Loc 605.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

During the time of the rural house church movement, singular leaders emerged based on the results of their evangelistic preaching efforts. The respect and authority of these leaders grew in proportion to the size of their networks. Within this hierarchical structure, unquestioned obedience was the norm.²²³ Leadership was viewed with the strongly Confucian ethic of top-down authoritarianism.²²⁴ Urban church leaders are increasingly critical of the authoritarian model of leadership and its effects on the church. The urban church view of leadership is shifting from a hierarchical and autocratic model to one that involves a more democratic, team-oriented process.²²⁵

This shift, however, has been gradual and not without its challenges. Power struggles, the conflicts inherent in team dynamics, and the temptation to resort to tradition make this shift painful and difficult.²²⁶ Other challenges to the modern urban church are self-appointed leaders, leaders who come out of college fellowships with no real church background, different philosophical and theological emphases, a lack of genuine spiritual authority, and a lack of the “spiritual wisdom and penetrating power that comes out of persecution.”²²⁷ In the absence of the larger-than-life leaders who unified rural house church networks, urban leaders are grappling with appropriate leadership structures to suit an increasingly educated and professionalized laity.²²⁸

²²³ Ibid., Loc 626.

²²⁴ Ibid., Loc 637.

²²⁵ Ibid., Loc 648.

²²⁶ Ibid., Loc 659.

²²⁷ Ibid., Loc 561.

²²⁸ Ibid., Loc 615.

The urban culture has led to more professional and formalized theological training for church leaders. Most unregistered church leaders have traditionally been bi-vocational and lacked formal theological training. This is beginning to change.

In the early 2000s, several Western theological institutions provided Internet-based courses. Since then, many Chinese have gone abroad to study throughout Asia (including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines) and North America in informal Bible schools designed specifically for Mainland Chinese students. These days, leaders are seeking training that will offer them an accredited degree.²²⁹ Some larger city churches have even set up their own formal training programs and seminaries staffed by instructors from overseas, and are thus able to offer degrees.²³⁰

At the same time, there are increasing numbers of full-time pastors working among the unregistered urban churches. In the eyes of their congregations, their credibility grows with their full-time status. Urban churches tend to view full-time pastors as professionals who fulfill a legitimate role in society as do other vocations such as civil servants, media professionals, academics, etc.²³¹ The result is higher expectations for the pastor as well as for the congregation to provide support for the pastor.

Not everyone is embracing these changes. Some have warned of the danger of the professionalization of ministry leadership with its tendency towards academic achievement over spiritual depth or character.²³² One observer noted that the leaders in the past were recognized on the basis of their natural gifting, spiritual authority and

²²⁹ Ibid., Loc 743.

²³⁰ Ibid., Loc 753.

²³¹ Ibid., Loc 773.

²³² Ibid.

fruitfulness in ministry.²³³ They warn of an overemphasis on academic achievement, fearing the new urban church may “promote those who are gifted intellectually but who are not necessarily prepared to serve.”²³⁴ Some see the danger of leaders obtaining degrees to “get the title” and warn that “seminary training does not help you become a good pastor.”²³⁵ Still another warns of the temptation to pride with the professionalization of the leadership where the church may execute programs well but lose its basically spiritual character.²³⁶

Denominationalism and the Formalization of Church Networks

Denominationalism traditionally has played no part in the structures of traditional house churches. Today’s urban churches, however, are increasingly seeking out denominational structures outside China for formal ordination, membership and church management. Many urban churches are attracted to the Reformed church tradition with its emphasis on a strong internal church structure and Presbyterian governance with a plurality of elders who share responsibility for the ministry.²³⁷

Greater Engagement with the Culture

Younger urban Christians increasingly want to engage the culture and make a positive impact on society. The sentiment among the younger generation of believers is

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid., Loc 783.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid., Loc 792.

shifting from a Christ-against-culture to Christ-transforming culture.²³⁸ The prevailing thought is that government and cultures are not enemies to be resisted but to be obeyed and transformed by the gospel. Seeing the limited ability of the government to address rampant societal problems, younger urban Christians feel a responsibility to lead the way for change.²³⁹ They are interested in a more holistic gospel ministry approach that deals not just with the spiritual issues but also makes a difference to the real social and economic issues of their country. Frank Peterson, researcher and China missions mobilizer, notes:

Urban professionals in China today need to see and hear the whole gospel, which includes both the hope of eternal life and the hope of transformed lives and communities right here, right now. They need to see and be encouraged to develop models of ministry that demonstrate the integration of Christian faith with the whole of life.²⁴⁰

Key events in recent history have also sparked a deep sense that the church should serve the culture. Many of the student leaders of the famed 1989 Tiananmen Square conflict fled to the west and converted to Christianity. With their newfound faith, some of them produced a widely disseminated video that asserted that government leaders had usurped God's reign and role. Putting their lives and careers at great risk, many lawyers in the mainland were emboldened by their faith to defend the rights of farmers and workers who have traditionally been exploited by corrupt government officials.²⁴¹ The new Christian consciousness of modern day China has resulted in an active engagement

²³⁸ Tim Keller offers an excellent summary of the three primary models of cultural engagement being debated in the wider church today in his book *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 180-250.

²³⁹ Frank Peterson, "Reaching Urban Professionals," *ChinaSource*, October 5, 2004, accessed August 17, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/reaching-urban-professionals>.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religion Question in Modern China*, 308.

with the culture, whether in defending the rights of the powerless or in economic development. Recent initiatives by believers include helping the marginalized get integrated into city life, setting up community centers for migrants, and finding ways to help upgrade medical services provided by lower-grade hospitals.²⁴²

The devastating 2007 earthquake in Sichuan, which killed an estimated 70,000 people, galvanized otherwise disengaged and disparate Christian groups towards a unified goal of bringing relief. Out of this tragedy arose the formation of many nonprofit organizations and partnerships with civil organizations to more effectively deploy resources.²⁴³ Though the heart for cultural engagement is there, the maturity and skills to effectively to pursue these efforts are not. As one leader put it, “Passion is present, but often skills are lacking.”²⁴⁴ Nevertheless, there is a definitive shift among urban churches from a survival mentality to developing a social mandate to meet the needs of society around them.²⁴⁵

In the course of this research, this writer has discovered that while some literature chronicles the birth and development of the rural house church movement in China, comparatively little is published on the nature of the modern urban house church movement. Only a handful of experts have written on this topic. While their information and conclusion are very insightful, there is still much to be explored, especially considering how dynamic and nuanced the urban environment is in China. Furthermore,

²⁴² Tiger Lily, “The Church, Its Impact on Society and Partnership with the International Christian Community,” *ChinaSource*, October 29, 2011, accessed August 14, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/the-church-its-impact-on-society-and-partnership-with-the-international-christian-community>.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Fulton, *China's Urban Christians*, Loc 519.

curiously absent is research on the spiritual struggles faced by urban dwellers. Other than the fact that materialism has left a spiritual void, not much if anything has been written to this writer's knowledge concerning the particulars their struggle. What are the spiritual obstacles to the gospel? What are the questions they are asking? What challenges do urban Chinese church leaders face in bringing about spiritual renewal to their congregations? These questions remain. Having surveyed some of the most current literature on the nature of the house church movement, the changing values of the younger generation, and the effect of urbanization on China, this study will look at what contemporary pastors and theologians have written about Christ-centered preaching and ask where the current literature falls short in the context of modern day urban China.

Christ-Centered Preaching

Though a growing body of literature is devoted to Christ-centered preaching, it is relatively small, and the church needs to more clearly understand the distinctions between Christ-centered preaching in particular and broadly evangelical preaching in general. Only one book on the topic of Christ-centered preaching has been translated into the Chinese language.²⁴⁶ If this topic is only recently gaining increased traction in the West through periodicals and books written by Bryan Chapell and Tim Keller, it has only reached the tip of the iceberg in China. Moreover, no published resources deal specifically with Christ-centered preaching in the context of urban China, let alone to the post-1981 generation.

The final section of the literature review will explore works that deal with Christ-centered preaching and raise questions, yet to be answered, in the urban Chinese context.

²⁴⁶ Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching* is the only known available resource for house church leaders dealing with this subject.

First, what is meant by Christ-centered preaching? Then, what are the areas where current literature has not looked or done a sufficient job of exploring?

Christ-centered preaching is distinguished from broadly evangelical preaching by its emphasis on the gospel as the ongoing source of spiritual power and renewal in the Christian life, as opposed to being only just the initial entry level of truth needed to become a Christian. As previously mentioned, Tim Keller describes the gospel as “not just the ABCs but the A to Z of the Christian life” and the need to believe “the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on.”²⁴⁷ Thus, “Preaching the gospel means preaching Christ and his saving work and his grace.”²⁴⁸ No evangelical Christian would deny the truth of the gospel as the means of conversion to Christ. Only relatively recently has the broader evangelical community in the United States recognized the gospel as not only the basis for justification but also continued sanctification in the Christian life. Through influential modern day voices such as Tim Keller, D.A. Carson, Bryan Chapell, Graeme Goldsworthy, Edmund Clowney and others, the broader evangelical community seems to be awakening to the idea of the gospel as the basis for all true Christian living and ministry.

How the Gospel Produces Genuine Transformation from the Heart

Because the West has no small influence on theological and ministry trends in China, church leaders need to understand modern day theological and ecclesiastical trends in America. Spiritual vitality and participation in the Christian church is declining in America. While the actual number of Protestants has increased since 1972, the

²⁴⁷ Keller, *Center Church*, 48.

²⁴⁸ Tim Keller, *Preaching*, Loc 800 of 4183.

percentage of Protestants in relation to the general population has declined from 62 to 51 percent, a figure which holds for mainline denominations.²⁴⁹ One particular critique of the fruits of modern day American evangelicalism has been summed up in Christian Smith's now well-popularized phrase, "moralistic therapeutic deism."²⁵⁰ Smith and his fellow researchers interviewed more than 3,000 American youths raised in churches to find out their basic religious views. Also dubbed the new "American religion," moralistic therapeutic deism essentially boils Christianity down to the belief that 1) "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth;" 2) "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions;" 3) "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself;" 4) "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem;" 5) "Good people go to heaven when they die."²⁵¹ Startlingly absent, according to this research, is the language of sin and repentance, substitutionary atonement, grace and forgiveness, judgment and salvation, justification and sanctification. In its stead is a watered down version of Christianity that renders the faith nothing more than "inculcating a moralistic approach to life ... that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person."²⁵² Christianity is nothing more than

²⁴⁹ Joe Carter, "Are All Christian Denominations in Decline?" *The Gospel Coalition*, March 17, 2015, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-are-all-christian-denominations-in-decline>.

²⁵⁰ Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 154.

²⁵¹ Mohler, "Therapeutic Moralistic Deism—The New American Religion," *Albert Mohler*, April 11, 2005, accessed on April 29, 2015, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2/>.

²⁵² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 154.

simply trying to be “nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one’s health, and doing one’s best to succeed at life.”²⁵³

Some researchers have noticed similar trends in China. This kind of moralistic, Aesop’s fables-type of preaching is unfortunately all too prevalent in China. One observer noted the absence of the gospel in a typical sermon preached in China. In one example, a pastor opened the text on Genesis 32:1-4 by examining the many ways Jacob put himself first above others. She proceeded to admonish the congregation to follow Jacob’s example by putting themselves out first to obtain God’s blessings. Only then will the temptation to judge others be put to rest since others will be behind them. She then added the significance of being the first born in the family and learning to honor one’s parents.²⁵⁴ The underlying theology tells the audience that the primary goal of Christianity is worldly success and finding honor within the biological family structure.

Even if churches grasp the meaning of the gospel, many, if not most, preach the gospel as if it is simply the minimum truth needed to become a Christian. A common misconception of sanctification is that Christians are justified by grace through faith in Christ but then sanctified through their own self-effort and works. Walter Marshall, a seventeenth century Puritan pastor who was burdened for the struggles of personal holiness in his church, observed the same problem when he wrote, "The key error of the Christian life is that people think that even though they have been justified by a righteousness produced totally by Christ, they must be sanctified by a holiness produced

²⁵³ Mohler, “Therapeutic Moralistic Deism—The New American Religion,” <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2/>.

²⁵⁴ Swells in the Middle Kingdom (alias), “Learning from a Bad Sermon,” *ChinaSource*, August 24, 2015, accessed August 28, 2015, <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/from-the-west-courtyard/learning-from-a-bad-sermon>.

totally by themselves.”²⁵⁵ Tim Keller speaks of the danger of churches leaders preaching the gospel as simply an evangelistic truth relevant only for unbelievers,

There is always a danger that church leaders and ministers will conceive of the gospel as merely the minimum standard of doctrinal content for being a Christian believer. As a result, many preachers and leaders are energized by thoughts of teaching more advanced doctrine, or of deeper forms of spirituality, or of intentional community and the sacraments, or of “deeper discipleship,” or of psychological healing, or of social justice and cultural engagement. One of the reasons is the natural emergence of specialization as a church grows and ages. People naturally want to go deeper into various topics and ministry disciplines. But this tendency can cause us to lose sight of the whole. Though we may have an area or a ministry that we tend to focus on, the gospel is what brings unity to all that we do. Every form of ministry is empowered by the gospel, based on the gospel, and is a result of the gospel.²⁵⁶

Besides Keller, other modern day influential voices such as D.A. Carson are highlighting the truth of the gospel as the means of continued sanctification in the Christian life,

The gospel is regularly presented not only as truth to be received and believed, but the very power of God to transform (see 1 Cor. 2; 1 Thess. 2:4; Rom. 1:16-17). One of the most urgently needed things today is a careful treatment of how the gospel, biblically and richly understood, ought to shape everything we do in the local church, all of our ethics, all of our priorities.

Richard Lovelace, deceased professor of church history at Gordon Conwell Seminary and expert on the spiritual dynamics of church revivals, writes, “Most people’s problems are just a failure to be oriented to the gospel—a failure to grasp and believe it through and through.”²⁵⁷

There is perhaps no clearer passage in the Bible that speaks of the centrality of the gospel in the entirety of the Christian life than Galatians 2:11-21. In Galatians chapter one, Paul established that the gospel is a message that comes from God, and not from

²⁵⁵ Walter Marshall, *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 10.

²⁵⁶ Tim Keller, *Center Church*, 36.

²⁵⁷ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 211.

man, and therefore he must be faithful to preach the gospel accurately (1:6-11). Not even an angel may change the gospel message (1:6). Paul's life demonstrates that the gospel is not something he or another person made up. Paul used to persecute Christians until Christ found him and saved him (1:13-16). Paul further mentions he was taught directly by Christ for three years in the desert of Arabia, confirming that the gospel message is not a man-made truth (1:7-18).

In chapter two of Galatians, Paul shares his willingness to submit his understanding of the gospel message to Peter, James and John, the recognized leaders of the church, to make sure his gospel message was in fact accurate. In a swift turnaround in Galatians 2:11-21, Paul finds himself confronting the most prominent apostle, Peter, because his actions were "not in step with the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:14). The implication of this verse is that the gospel is not simply a minimum entry point into the Christian life, but the essential truth by which even the most seasoned believers must live. While the gospel can be understood intellectually, it can be lost sight of spiritually. Peter's sin was withdrawing fellowship from Gentile believers (2:12). This act of withdrawal contradicted the gospel message of pure acceptance through Christ, apart from the keeping of the law. The root sins of the fear of man and nationalistic pride motivated Peter's act of withdrawal of fellowship from Gentile believers (2:12-14). What is remarkable about Paul's rebuke of Peter is not simply that Paul pointed out how wrong Peter's sin and actions were, but that Paul addresses Peter's sin as a gospel issue, using the language of justification to deal with his sin (Gal 2:15-19). Just as Peter's actions were out of step with the gospel, Paul expounds on the gospel doctrine of justification to correct it. Martin Luther, in his commentary on Galatians 2:14, says, "The truth of the

Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine ... Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.”²⁵⁸

Elsewhere in I Corinthians 2:1-5, Paul teaches that the person and work of Christ were central and dominant messages of the Old Testament.

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Keller notes that the “testimony of God” here refers to the Old Testament scriptures.²⁵⁹

Even though Jesus does not appear in the Old Testament by name, Paul “understood that all Scripture ultimately pointed to Jesus and his salvation” and Christ is the “main theme and substance of the Bible’s message.”²⁶⁰

Christ Himself testifies that the Old Testament scriptures all point to His person and His work of death and resurrection (Luke 24:25-27, 44). The Jewish scriptures were comprised mainly of three parts: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. In Luke, Jesus uses two of the three main parts of the Jewish Old Testament scriptures, the books of Moses and the Prophets, to explain all that the scriptures said “concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Later, Jesus refers to all three parts of the Old Testament when he mentions the Psalms. Christ explains that all three parts were fulfilled in Himself (Lk 24:44).

²⁵⁸ Martin Luther, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co. 1860), 206.

²⁵⁹ Tim Keller, *Preaching*, Loc 213 of 4183.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

The Bible itself supports the truth that the gospel, the person and work of Christ, is the central and dominant message and truth of the Christian life. Therefore, to simply preach the ethics of the Bible without undergirding those ethics in the gospel would be to commit a serious biblical fallacy. Edmund Clowney, now deceased former president and professor at Westminster Seminary, points out that if preachers tell a particular Bible story or preach a passage without putting it into the overall biblical story of Christ, they are actually changing the meaning of the Bible. They make it a moralistic exhortation to simply “try harder” rather than living by faith in the work of Christ.²⁶¹ In other words, true faithful biblical preaching must always be proclaimed within the Bible’s overarching gospel narrative.

Avoiding Moralism and Antinomianism

Both legalism and license pose threats to the gospel and must be avoided in preaching. According to Tim Keller, “Legalism says that we have to live a holy, good life in order to be saved. Antinomianism says that because we are saved, we don’t have to live a holy, good life.”²⁶² Tony Merida, professor of preaching at Southeastern Baptist Seminary, explains that “Moralism” (legalism) is “giving demands apart from God’s grace” while “antinomianism” (license) is “treating God’s commands lightly because of grace.”²⁶³ In the parable of the prodigal son, both the sinners and religious leaders erred along these two spectrums. The younger son sought to live his life as he pleased, while

²⁶¹ Quoted in Keller, *Preaching*, Loc 728 of 4183.

²⁶² Keller, *Center Church*, 31.

²⁶³ Tony Merida, “Christ-Centered Preaching (Part 3): Practical Application in Christ-Centered Expository Preaching,” *Tony Merida*, May 30, 2013, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://tonymerida.net/2013/christ-centered-preaching-part-3-practical-application-in-christ-centered-expository-preaching>.

the older son sought to save his life through his goodness. Neither extreme is consistent with the truth of the gospel.²⁶⁴

Jay Adams, professor at Westminster Seminary, warns against what he calls a “synagogue sermon.” He says, “If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the member of a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it.”²⁶⁵ Albert Mohler puts it more bluntly,

Hell will be filled with people who were avidly committed to Christian values. Christian values cannot save anyone and never will. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a Christian value, and a comfortability with Christian values can blind sinners to their need for the gospel.²⁶⁶

Bryan Chapell states, “Exhortations for moral behavior apart from the work of the Savior degenerate into mere Pharisaism, even if preachers advocate the actions with selected biblical evidence and good intent.”²⁶⁷ In other words, Christ is not simply preached as an example to follow, but as a savior.

On the other hand, true Christ-centered preaching must also avoid the error of antinomianism. This error communicates that it does not matter how a Christian lives. Scripture makes it clear that the grace of God does not lead to sin.²⁶⁸ The Bible clearly commands God’s people to pursue holiness.²⁶⁹ Though believers are not justified by the

²⁶⁴ Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 76-78.

²⁶⁵ Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose: A Comprehensive Textbook on Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 147.

²⁶⁶ Albert Mohler, “Christian Values Cannot Save Anyone,” *Albert Mohler*, September 11, 2012, accessed September 9, 2015, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2012/09/11/christian-values-cannot-save-anyone>.

²⁶⁷ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 274.

²⁶⁸ Romans 6:1-2; Jude 5.

²⁶⁹ 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 1 Peter 1:16-17.

law, the scriptures make it clear that believers are obligated to keep the law with a new motive of pleasing God.²⁷⁰

Sinclair Ferguson, professor of systematic theology at Redeemer Seminary, argues that antinomianism and legalism are both “non-identical twins that emerge from the same womb.”²⁷¹ Ferguson goes on to argue that the root of antinomianism is legalism, which he defines as “separating the law of God from the person of God.”²⁷² Legalism is the fundamental nature embedded deep in the human heart from the day of creation, controlling one’s instincts toward God.²⁷³ The reason why people rebel against God’s moral law and the reason why people obsessively obey it stems from a failure to trust the loving and gracious heart of the God who issues the law. They both arise from a distorted view of God. Since both legalism and antinomianism constrict the gracious character of God, the “gospel remedy for them is one and the same.”²⁷⁴ Thus, Ferguson suggests, contrary to natural human instincts, the cure for an antinomian spirit is not simply to preach the law more forcefully, but to offer the gospel:

For the deepest response to antinomianism is not “You are under the law” but rather You are despising the gospel and failing to understand how the grace of God in the gospel works! There is no condemnation for you under the law because of your faith-union with Christ. But that same faith-union with Christ leads to the requirements of the law being fulfilled in you through the Spirit. Your real problem is not that you do not understand the law. It is that you do not understand the gospel.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁰ Romans 3:31; James 2:8-13.

²⁷¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), Loc 1519 of 5616. Kindle.

²⁷² Ibid., Loc 1496 of 5616.

²⁷³ Ibidl, Loc 1536 of 5616.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., Loc 2817 of 5616.

The implications for personal spiritual renewal and pastoral ministry are enormous. As Richard Lovelace would say, most people's spiritual problems stem from a failure to grasp the gospel through and through.²⁷⁶ Christ-centered preaching seeks to incorporate "the redemptive elements of the text in one's exposition" enabling the preacher to "both explain the specific commands of God that must be obeyed (against antinomianism) and remind the hearers about the enabling grace of God that empowers obedience (against moralism)."²⁷⁷

Justification and Sanctification Are Distinct Yet Inseparably Connected

It bears repeating that the gospel is good news, not good advice. It is the good news of what God has accomplished on a Christian's behalf through the person and work of Jesus Christ.²⁷⁸ It is news about what has been done for us through Christ in light of humanity's alienation from God, one another and creation.²⁷⁹ Richard Lovelace states, "Substitutionary atonement is the heart of the gospel."²⁸⁰ This gospel is freely given and unconditional to all who believe. To add any requirement or to teach anything that "diminishes or distorts the generous love of God and the full freeness of his grace" would be to fall into legalism.²⁸¹ The subjective work of the Spirit in the life of the believer must not be confused with the objective work of Christ. The offer of the gospel with its free

²⁷⁶ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 211.

²⁷⁷ Tony Merida, "Christ-Centered Preaching (Part 3)," <http://tonymerida.net/2013/christ-centered-preaching-part-3-practical-application-in-christ-centered-expository-preaching>.

²⁷⁸ Darrell Bock, "10 Things I Wish Everyone Knew About the Gospel," *Onfaith*, November 10, 2014, accessed September 16, 2015, <https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2014/11/10/10-things-i-wish-everyone-knew-about-the-gospel/34925>.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 97.

²⁸¹ Ferguson, *The Whole of Christ*, Loc 1678 of 5616.

forgiveness in Christ must not be preconditioned on a sufficient forsaking of sin.²⁸²

Because of the natural legalism found in human nature, the believer cannot rest too much on the free justification that is found in Christ.

Lovelace points out that in the Bible “justification and sanctification are often closely intertwined, as if these two concepts were identical.”²⁸³ Lovelace continues to say that “cheap grace, the attempt to be justified in Christ without commitment to sanctification, is illegitimate and impossible.”²⁸⁴ Ferguson likewise observes that “Divine indicatives always give rise to divine imperatives” and that “grace always gives rise to obligation, duty, and law.”²⁸⁵

The connection between justification and sanctification are inseparable. This inseparable relationship is found in a believer’s union with Christ. Through union with Christ, the bonds of both legalism and antinomianism are broken because of the Spirit who writes the law of God on a Christian’s heart.²⁸⁶ In other words, “Christ and his benefits are inseparable.”²⁸⁷ Though the gospel is a free offer to all who would believe, it is also true that the gospel does not allow the believer to remain the way they are. Christ comes not only to deliver us from the penalty of sin, but its very power as well.²⁸⁸

²⁸² Ibid., Loc 1039 of 5616.

²⁸³ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 98.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 102.

²⁸⁵ Ferguson, *The Whole of Christ*, Loc 3166 of 5616.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., Loc 3005 of 5616.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., Loc 731 of 5616.

²⁸⁸ Romans 6:1-4.

Preaching to the Heart

The aim of Christ-centered preaching is not simply to change behavior, but to change the heart at the deepest motivational level. The literature has argued thus far that moralism is not only contrary to the gospel, but is also powerless to change the human heart. Ferguson emphasizes that correct doctrine of the gospel is not enough. The only way Christians will change is if the heart changes:

Legalism and antinomianism seem to be simple opposites—all that is needed, it seems is right doctrine. But the more basic issue is: How do I think about God, and what instincts and dispositions and affections toward him does this evoke in me? At that level legalism and antinomianism share a common root that has invaded not only mind but heart, affections, and will—how we feel toward God as well as the doctrine of God we profess.²⁸⁹

True living out of the gospel involves not only our minds, but a change in the fundamental beliefs and instincts embedded deeply in the heart.

Keller also says preaching the Bible accurately is not enough. While faithful preaching of the textual meaning is critical, preaching must do more. He goes on, “It must capture the listeners’ interest and imaginations; it must be compelling and penetrate to their hearts.”²⁹⁰ The heart is more than just emotions. It is the very seat of a person’s desires, allegiance and deepest desires.²⁹¹ The Bible speaks of the heart in terms of worship.²⁹² Unless the heart is changed, its core allegiance and object of worship will not be changed. Keller speaks of this change in terms of idolatry. Gospel renewal involves helping people to identify idols that compete with belief in the gospel. As Keller notes,

²⁸⁹ Ibid., Loc 1523 of 5616.

²⁹⁰ Keller, *Preaching*, Loc 1924 of 4183.

²⁹¹ Ibid., Loc 1937 of 4183.

²⁹² Romans 1:18-21.

“One of the most important biblical and practical ways to help people come to see how they fail to believe the gospel is by instructing them on the nature of idolatry.”²⁹³

Both the Scriptures and church history affirm this. Augustine, the fourth century theologian, spoke of reordering humanity’s disordered loves.²⁹⁴ He put it simply, “I Am What I Love.”²⁹⁵ Sin and unbelief renders people’s heart loves disordered. All were made to love God supremely, but the impact of sin in our hearts has distorted all of humanity’s loves so that they take ascendancy over God.

How is the heart thus transformed at the deepest level? The Puritan pastor Thomas Chalmers said, “The most effective way of withdrawing the heart from one object is not by turning it away upon desolate and unpeopled vacancy, but by presenting to its regard another object more alluring still.”²⁹⁶ Chalmers goes on to say that only the gospel can dislodge the heart of its old loves and replace them with a new love:

The object of the gospel is both to pacify the sinner’s conscience and to purify the heart, and it is of importance to observe that what mars one of these objects mars the other also. The best way of casting out an impure affection is to admit a pure one Thus it is that the freer the Gospel, the more sanctifying the Gospel, the more it is received as a doctrine of grace, the more it will be felt as a doctrine leading to godliness.²⁹⁷

Chalmers warns against merely pointing out sins. The heart must be captured by seeing the Redeemer’s love:

²⁹³ Keller, *Center Church*, 70.

²⁹⁴ Quoted in Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton 2014), 193.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁹⁶ Thomas Chalmers, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection,” in *The Select Works of Thomas Chalmers* (New York: Robert Carter, 1848) 2:271.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Thus ... it is not enough ... to hold out to the world the mirror of its own imperfections. It is not enough to come forth with a demonstration of the evanescent character of your enjoyments ... to speak to the conscience ... of its follies.... Rather, try every legitimate method of finding access to your hearts for the love of Him who is greater than the world.²⁹⁸

This kind of Christ-centered preaching has significant implications for the urban Chinese context for two reasons. First, as pointed out earlier, the natural tendency of the human heart is to default towards moralism, especially in a deeply moralistic, Confucius-based culture like China where people seek to save face by fulfilling the social and familial expectations placed on them. The Chinese culture promotes a worldview of acceptance and honor based on achievement and status. As seen in the earlier example, even sermons in Chinese churches encourage their hearers to “put themselves first” above others. So unless there is a strong grasp of the distinction between moralism and the gospel, China will experience spiritual decline and disease.

So the question becomes what is the gospel and how is this counter to the moralistic and traditional preaching found in many house churches in China today? How do Chinese house leaders typically preach the Christian faith? What is their understanding of the gospel? Is the gospel simply the means for conversion and then Christians grow by their own self-effort? Or does the gospel empower house church leaders’ view of Christian discipleship and sanctification? While there is a significantly increasing body of literature discussing Christ-centered preaching, there remains a need to see how Christ-centered preaching relates specifically to the context of modern day urban China. Some of the literature discussed above includes a section on Christ-centered

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

preaching in the context of Western culture, but this researcher did not find any literature on Christ-centered preaching in the context of a Confucian, East Asian culture.

The second area of research that requires further exploration is how the gospel challenges the thinking of the younger urban generation in China. Aside from some general online articles about the influence of Reformed theology in China, this researcher was not able to find any literature focused on how the gospel speaks to the issues of the younger generation of urban China today. What are the baseline narratives of the younger generation? This generation is decidedly materialistic and lacks the kind of meta-purpose that drove the older generation toward great sacrifices during the Cultural Revolution. The data reveals that the younger generation lacks a clear sense of identity or goals in life other than getting rich. It would be helpful to know this generation's attitude towards Christianity and how the gospel speaks to their struggles. More focused research needs to be done on how small urban church leaders are using the gospel to reach the younger urban generation and how the gospel speaks to their deepest longings. Because the culture in China is undergoing such rapid changes with the recent mass urbanization, there is a profound need to study the issue of Christ-centered preaching to the urban generation in China.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how house church leaders preach Christ in the context of urban China to the post-1981 generation. The previous chapter examined literature pertaining to the growing urbanization of China, the nature and history of the house movement, the shifts in values of the post-1981 generation in China, and the nature of Christ-centered preaching. Building on the data from the literature review, the researcher designed a qualitative research project to gather new data from experienced urban church preachers who have had significant experience preaching Christ to this generation. This study assumed that house church leaders themselves have discovered the ongoing influence of the gospel in their own lives to bring about powerful spiritual renewal and are learning how to apply it effectively, preaching the gospel in the context of the urban environment to the younger generation. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methodology of the research project that was conducted, while also identifying the limitations of the project and the position of the researcher.

To examine these areas more closely, the following questions served as the intended focus of the qualitative research:

1. How do the values of traditional Chinese house churches differ from those of the younger urban house churches?
2. What are the unique challenges to ministry house churches face as a result of living in the city?
3. What are the unique issues the younger generation in China is dealing with?

4. How do Chinese city house leaders preach Christ in order to encourage spiritual renewal in their churches?

Design of the Study

The research design of this study followed a qualitative approach. Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, defines a qualitative case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit.”²⁹⁹ Merriam identifies four key characteristics of qualitative research. First, the key concern is “understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s.”³⁰⁰ Second, the researcher is “the primary instrument of data collection and analysis.”³⁰¹ Third, “another important characteristic of qualitative research is that the process is inductive; that is, researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses.”³⁰² Last, “the product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive. Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon.”³⁰³ Through qualitative research methods, one is able “to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or products) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience.”³⁰⁴

²⁹⁹ Sharan B Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 27.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 14.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid., 16.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 17.

This study employed a basic qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. Quantitative research may be able to identify overall trends but often cannot capture the rich and nuanced context and stories behind the trends. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is designed to “gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved.”³⁰⁵ This qualitative method enabled the discovery of comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives.

The study method minimized variables for this in-depth research because all of the participants are either full-time Chinese urban church pastors with a substantially younger population in their churches, or they train pastors who preach in such contexts. Because the variables involved in the data analysis were more focused, the study provided avenues for enhanced exploration of the intricacies of Christ-centered preaching in the urban Chinese church context. Qualitative analysis provided a fuller understanding of the challenges and issues of how Chinese house church leaders in the city preach Christ in an ever-changing cultural context. Thus, the researcher was able to gain a more complete emic perspective of how pastors apply Christ-centered preaching in the urban Chinese house church context.

Participant Sample Selection

Participants for this research met stringent criteria for the interview. The purposeful study sample consisted of six city church pastors and two high-level Chinese movement leaders who have demonstrated a robust understanding of Christ-centered

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 19.

preaching as well as the nature of urban church ministry to the younger generation.³⁰⁶

These house church leaders have undergone extensive two-year training in gospel-centered ministry renewal from the Grace to City China movement, or they are trainers in the movement. This training involves sixteen intensive modules. The participants have also graduated with at least a Master of Divinity from an accredited seminary and often train other leaders. They are well respected amongst the other church leaders in their city. They have a natural understanding of the cultural context as indigenous Chinese or have grown up in China, giving them a nuanced understanding of the challenges to preaching in their culture. Additionally, they all preach at least once a month. Finally, they are all full-time house church leaders whose sole vocational focus is church ministry or training house church leaders.

Participants were chosen for a purposeful nonprobability sample to provide specialized understanding in the data collected.³⁰⁷ Participants were specifically chosen to provide similarity in cultural settings. They live in various cities and provinces of China but all minister in the city, providing a more focused spectrum of variables for the study. Some of these leaders were recommended by the two high level trainers. Others were selected because this researcher knew them and the quality of their ministry personally. Each person was invited to participate via an introductory email. They expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. In order to accommodate participant schedules, this researcher offered a range of dates and times that would best suit their schedules.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 60-61.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 61.

Before the interview, the participants were asked to sign a Research Participant Consent Form in compliance with the research guidelines of Covenant Theological Seminary. They were told their identities would be kept confidential and the details of their ministry and settings would be minimized for their protection.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of the interview questions facilitates the ability to build upon participant responses in order to explore complex issues more thoroughly.³⁰⁸ This method points the interview toward the research questions, while giving the researcher flexibility to adapt follow-up questions.³⁰⁹ Ultimately, this method enabled research that explored common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the range of participants.³¹⁰

The leaders were each interviewed for about 90 minutes. Prior to the interview, the leaders each received an email, inviting them to discuss the topic of Christ-centered preaching in their church. Some of the participants were interviewed in person, but where distance and travel costs prohibited, some interviews were conducted online technology such as Skype and Zoom. If conducted online, the researcher video recorded the interviews with permission from the subject. During each interview, field notes with descriptive and reflective observations were recorded, including emotions, body

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 74.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 90.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 74.

language, tone, and other non-verbal communication cues that would help the researcher understand the nuances of the interviewee's answers.

Data Analysis

The researcher personally transcribed each interview using computer software to play back the digital recording on a computer and typing out each transcript word-for-word. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. As Merriam states, "The constant comparative method [of data analysis] involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences."³¹¹ When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were color-coded and highlighted. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and responses across the variation of participants; and (2) congruence or discrepancy between the house church leaders and trainers.

Researcher Position

In qualitative studies, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.³¹² This role assignment means that all observations and analyses in the study are filtered through the researcher's experience, perspective and values. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to employ critical self-reflection to identify and disclose potential sources of bias, assumptions, worldviews, theoretical orientation, and other connections to this study that may impact the investigation and the conclusions drawn from the data.

³¹¹ Ibid., 30.

³¹² Ibid., 15.

The researcher is a second-generation Korean-American who served in ordained pastoral ministry for twelve years before becoming a missionary to China for nine years. While three of those years were spent ministering as a United States Air Force chaplain, most of this researcher's ministry experience has been in the context of American Christianity where clergy are trained in a mostly professional way and the church atmosphere and structure can resemble more of a religious institutional organization than a family. Clergy are expected to perform their duties at a fairly high level of competence and skill, especially the preacher.

This personal background has two immediate implications that may influence the interpretation of the data. First, the researcher may find an inordinate bias in favor of the Chinese house church structure, finding it inherently more spiritual and vibrant than the American context he comes from. Having been raised as a Korean-American with strong Asian values, and having ministered extensively in an Asian-American ministry environment in the States, this researcher can make hasty personal conclusions about the things that drive the younger generation in China, believing their motivations and experiences are similar. It would be easy to make comparisons to the challenges of urban youth in the States as an Asian-American and transfer this bias toward China. However, while it is true that there are some underlying Confucius influences that this researcher and the subjects share in common, life in China and the nature of ministry here are very different from Asian-American life and ministry. City pastors in China face financial and cultural pressures that the average American pastor may not face. This researcher can find himself making subjective value judgments on the methods Chinese city pastors employ in pastoring their churches.

Secondly, linguistic and cultural barriers must be overcome to have an effective ministry with nationals. The deep and rich history of the Chinese culture along with the difficulty of learning the language often presents a formidable barrier for this researcher to feel like he is fully able to minister the gospel in this context.

Furthermore, as one who is moderately Reformed in his theological orientation, and places a high value on the gospel, this researcher is more inclined to prioritize the gospel as the fundamental means of sanctification rather than other models of sanctification.

Study Limitations

While there are underlying factors that can reasonably characterize the challenges of urban life in China, significant differences exist throughout the cultural milieu of cities within China. It is not unlike the differences between life in a major city like New York versus life in a mid-tiered city like Atlanta. Some general characteristics of youth and urban life can be rightly ascribed to both cities, but there are also many differences. Tier one cities in China such as Beijing or Shanghai, versus a tier two city like Qingdao, also have such similarities and differences. The nuances and challenges of city life in China can vary quite a bit from city to city, and yet, this paper can only address the urban life in China on the most general level. The research in this section focused particularly on leaders serving in tier one cities, with some attention given to leaders serving in tier two cities.

Further, the social, spiritual, and theological dynamics between the major streams of Christian movements in China can be even more dauntingly disparate. The development of Christianity in China includes rural churches, TSPM churches, the

Catholic church, traditional style house churches in the city, etc. The scope of this study was purposefully limited to the Protestant, unregistered city house church movement.

Even more specifically, the research was limited to understanding the dynamics of the younger urban generation in China. Within the city, the population encompasses a myriad of people from the floating migrant population to the cultural intellectuals and elite. Even among the post-1981 generation, differences of education level, vocational trade, and place of origin can vary considerably. Most of the people attending churches in these studies came from a college educated, professional trade background.

Despite these limitations, some of the study's findings may be generalized to other urban contexts within East Asia or to other parts of the world that share strong East Asian values. Tim Keller has noted that cities all over the world have more in common with each other than even their own country of origin.³¹³ Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions on the broader East Asian or international urban context should test those aspects in their particular context. As with all qualitative studies, readers determine what can be appropriately applied to their context. The results of this study may also have implications for leaders in other church ministry or parachurch ministry contexts.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has disclosed the qualitative methodology of the research. The selection criteria identified the best subjects for the research. The interview approach was explained as a semi-structured interview, and the method of data analysis made use of transcripts of interview mined for data relevant to the research questions.

³¹³ Tim Keller, "The Work of God in the Cities of Man," *Redeemer Rise*, accessed December 30, 2016, <http://rise.redeemer.com/movement-series-3>.

The researcher's understanding of the limitations of this study was laid out, along with his position as a researcher. In the next chapter, the data from the research interviews will be presented, after being organized according to the research questions.

Chapter Four

Interview Data

The purpose of this study was to explore how house church leaders preach Christ in the context of urban China to the post-1981 generation. Section two examined literature pertaining to the nature and history of the house movement, the growing urbanization of China, the shifts in values of the post-1981 generation in China, and the nature of Christ-centered preaching. Building on this data from the literature review, the researcher designed a qualitative research interview to gather new data from experienced urban church preachers who have had significant experience preaching Christ to this generation. The following research questions served as the intended focus for interviews:

1. How do the values of traditional Chinese house churches differ from those of the younger urban house churches?
2. What are the unique challenges of ministry house churches face as a result of living in the city?
3. What are the unique issues the younger generation in China is dealing with?
4. How do Chinese city house leaders preach Christ in order to encourage spiritual renewal in their churches?

Introduction of Participants

Participants for this research met stringent criteria for the interview. The study sample consisted of six city church pastors and two prominent Chinese movement leaders who have demonstrated a robust understanding of Christ-centered preaching as well as the nature of urban church ministry to the younger generation. These house church leaders have had extensive training over two years in the area of gospel-centered ministry

renewal from the Grace to City China movement (with sixteen training modules), or are trainers in the movement. They are all highly trained and well respected by their colleagues. Since they were all raised in China, they have a natural understanding of the cultural context, giving them a nuanced understanding of the challenges to preaching in their culture. Additionally, they all preach on a regular basis, meaning at least once a month. Finally, they are all full-time house church leaders whose sole vocational focus is on church ministry or in training house church leaders. The identity of these pastors and leaders has been disguised in this paper for their protection. The ministries and churches they lead are all unregistered and technically illegal, though the government often permits these kind of house churches to operate anyway.

Most of these pastors lead relatively small churches because of the threat of government intervention should they grow too large. Four of the pastors interviewed live in one of the largest Chinese cities, categorized as a tier-one city according to the government. Two of the pastors interviewed come from a tier-two city with a population of about nine million people. Tier-two cities do not have the political capital or cultural diversity of tier-one cities, but nevertheless represent a significant urban population in China. The inclusion of both tier-one and tier-two city interviews presents a more balanced view of the different urban dynamics in China.

Pastor A is thirty-seven years old. Planted in Shanghai in 2011, his church has an average attendance of sixty to seventy people. Before becoming a pastor, he was a small group leader in another church.

Pastor B is thirty-eight years old and pastors a branch of a large, famous church in Beijing that has close to 1,000 members. He is a full-time pastor who has been preaching

since 2003, and attended seminary in 2006. His church members are mostly urban professionals with a college-level education and are, on average, about thirty-five years old. There are approximately 150 people under his care.

Pastor C is forty-seven years old and also leads a church in Beijing. He became a believer in 1996 and has been full-time pastor since 2006. His church has about 200 people in attendance. He adopted an intentionally Christ-centered preaching style in 2010.

Pastor D is thirty-two years old and also pastors in Beijing. His parishioners are younger, an average of twenty-eight years old. They are highly educated, with most having a college degree, and some having earned masters and doctoral degrees. The congregation represents a wide array of vocational backgrounds including the arts, business, and finance. A quarter of the church is college students. There is an equal distribution of marrieds, students and singles.

Pastor E is thirty-years old and has been a Christian since the age of seven. He graduated from seminary in 2011 and began his full-time pastorate the same year. He has been preaching regularly since 2008. He planted his church with six or seven people and has grown the church to about eighty members. About half the congregation is in their late thirties, while the other half is in their twenties and early thirties. Pastor E lives in a tier-two city.

Pastor F is forty-two years old. He grew up in southern China but immigrated to the United States after college to pursue graduate studies. He has both seminary training and professional training in information technology. He started preaching in 2001 in the States. He moved to a tier-two Chinese city in 2015 with the intention of joining a newly

formed church plant that has the vision to plant other churches and send out missionaries. The church started with a handful of believers meeting in someone's home for Bible study and now has forty to fifty people in attendance on Sundays. He caught a vision of Christ-centered preaching at the end of his seminary training in 2013 and serves as the primary preacher for his church.

Pastor G is forty-five years old and serves as a pastor and a prominent trainer in the Grace to City movement in China. Over the past eleven years, he planted and grew a Chinese-American church in the southern part of the United States. It is the only Chinese church in his small town. As one of three key leaders of the Grace to City movement, he frequently travels to China to train other trainers and senior house church leaders. He is transitioning to move back to China so he can focus on training city leaders full-time.

Mr. H serves as a high profile trainer for the Grace to City movement in China. He frequently travels throughout China training trainers and senior house church leaders in the principles of gospel-centered ministry. Though he does not pastor or serve as the primary preacher for any particular church, his influence among the house church leaders in the Christ-centered preaching network is very strong. His insights are invaluable to understanding how city pastors preach Christ to the younger generation.

The Nature of the Urban Church Versus the Traditional, Rural Church

The first part of the interview focused on the contrasts between traditional house churches and emerging city churches. Subjects were asked how the values of traditional Chinese house churches differ from those of the younger urban house church movement. Several common themes emerged from the interviews.

All of the interviewees agreed that differences between the traditional house churches and the urban churches are substantial. Pastor G described the differences by remarking that urban house churches are “totally another world ... one is heaven and the one is hell.” It was as if the interviewees were contrasting churches from two different countries.

Almost all of the participants mentioned that traditional house churches adopted a very separatist approach to the world while city churches sought to actively engage the culture around them. Pastor B said traditional churches emphasized “repentance and dealing with sin and separation from this world.” He described their spirituality as emphasizing “suffering and carrying the cross.” Pastor D elaborated on how traditional churches “make a pretty strong separation between faith and this world.” He gave specific examples of how traditional house churches forbid their members to “watch movies” or “spend money going to the sauna,” and characterized their approach as “very bad.” He did not hide his attitude toward them, saying they were “very close-minded ... [and their] faith is very conservative and protective.” He theorized that “Before the 1980s, they faced severe persecution. So they are very skeptical of the culture and this world.” Pastor E described traditional house churches as “disconnected from life.” Pastor G said traditional house churches stress that believers must take up their crosses, “suffer

for Christ, bear Christ, follow Christ, and deny themselves.” He summed up, “The older church are sometimes very critical or not open to change.”

Almost all the pastors described this aspect of the traditional house churches in negative tones. The piety of the traditional house churches can be summed up as being as different and separated from the pollution and corrupting forces of this world as much as possible. Persecution was stated as a strong reason why traditional house churches viewed any relationship with the world as antagonistic. There seemed to be strong pressure to abstain from many lifestyle practices the church leadership deemed worldly and sinful.

Teaching in the traditional churches was described as legalistic. Pastor C said bluntly, “Most countryside churches method of preaching is moralism and legalism [but] ... they won’t use this term.” He felt that most of them view the Bible as a moralistic requirement they must attain and a guide for “what we have to do,” rather than what “God has done for them.”

These subjects described the younger urban churches as much more in sync with the culture and eager to engage with the gospel. Pastor B described city churches as desiring to be a force for societal good and stability, and explained, “They talk about how to deal with issues so there is peace and stability.” He said city churches try to help their people see faith as “a means of dealing with their lives” and encourage believers to “use the gospel to influence everything.” Pastor D said city churches are “pretty engaged with the culture. They focus on society and culture.” He also noted that “City churches evangelize ... they go into the city ... and go to college campuses.” He spoke of the need to “think about how to engage [non-Christians] and to reach rich people.” Pastor G

summed up the general consensus among the younger pastors that city churches are “very influential in China now.”

Terms these pastors used to describe the urban church movement included progressive, open to change, and programmatic. Churches are offering more activities and programs open for their members. Pastor G said city churches are “more dynamic, more outgoing, and more welcoming to younger people and society.” Pastor D contrasted the hierarchical nature of the traditional churches with the progressive view of leadership by city churches, which “proactively try to build up a more systematic leadership structure,” meaning leadership which involves more of the laity and is less authoritarian. Pastor G also shared a deep concern that the younger churches may lose the fundamentals of the Christian faith because “the younger churches—only a few, not many—really focus on the fundamental faith, the gospel and the cross.” He warned, “We have to continually focus on the gospel. If we don’t focus on the gospel, we somehow lose the gospel.”

A few of the younger city church pastors expressed admiration for the deep piety and experiences of the older house church pastors, even if they were somewhat critical of the inability of house churches pastors to clearly articulate biblical theology. Pastor G described the house church pastors’ preaching as “much more testimony” and sharing about “many miracles.” Pastor G even described much of their theology as Pentecostal because they say, “God told this me and God told me that.” He further stated, “Their piety is very hard to pass on or to even communicate to the next generation because it’s based more on experience.” Furthermore, he said, their experiences are not something

they “clearly articulate in a theological way.” Pastor F expressed a similar criticism, and asserted, “Biblical teaching is lacking.”

The demographic makeup of traditional churches versus city churches reflects the stark contrasts of their theology and piety. Pastor C observed that city churches attract a younger and more educated population while “traditional churches have more elderly people and less education.” Pastor G also talked about the city church’s ability to reach younger people by describing them as a “younger church” that is “more dynamic.”

Challenges of City Life in China

The second interview topic focused on the unique challenges people face in urbanized China. The literature review revealed some of the darker aspects of the rapid urbanization occurring in China. In this section, participants were asked what some of those challenges look like for the people in their churches as well as for the pastors who are ministering in urban contexts.

One interviewee spoke of the increasing social stratification among different groups of people living in the city. Pastor A, who ministers in Shanghai, delineated the differences between those who were actually born in Shanghai versus those who simply went to college in Shanghai and have stayed to work. It is not uncommon to make such distinctions in the bigger cities in China. Those who are from the outside “want to prove themselves at work” and “really work hard at earning their identity, to give them face, and prove their worth.” He spoke of this attitude in terms of “pride in their hearts.” This sense of gaining face was a dominant theme in his interview, as he described the subtle competitiveness among classmates who graduated from the same school. “If a classmate asks you what your work is, and your work is not very [impressive], you will lose face.”

Pastor G described the temptation common in the urban environment as a “lot of pressure to achieve and earn [an impressive] reputation.”

Almost all of the interviewees spoke of the rapid pace of urban life and the intense workload people face just to make ends meet. Pastor B said his people typically work from nine a.m. to nine p.m., six days a week, and are often “pressured into drinking and smoking.” He lamented that his people “don’t have too much space for spiritual things.” Pastor F felt “Preachers have more challenges to preach about the busyness of life. That’s very different from rural areas.” He said the “pace of life in the city is much faster than in rural areas ... and the workload is heavy.” He described the pressures of each major stage of life: “Young people have their busy schedules. Middle-aged people have heavy work schedules in addition to their family responsibilities. Before retirement, busyness is their life routine.”

Workload and workplace pressure emerged as a major theme in this section. Pastor D spoke of people experiencing “lots of pressure at work and lots of pressure in life ... The two [primary issues] are lots of pressure in life and secularization.” Pastor A said, “They cannot control their working time.” Pastor B talked about the additional pressure in the workplace to compromise their Christian values when he spoke of a game designer whose “boss makes him exaggerate his work.” Pastor E spoke in a similar vein of the need to provide “biblical teaching to handle situations in the workplace.” He gave an example of accountants falsifying the books. “After converting to Christ, they know it’s wrong so they struggle with whether to leave the job or not,” he said.

Related to workplace pressure is the financial pressure of living in the city. Pastor F mused,

If young people want to settle in the city, they have some real hurdles to overcome. They have to find a job with decent pay ... buy a house, raise a family, and then have kids. The cost of education is very high for raising a kid here ... [because they] send their kids to after school programs. Many parents want to send their kids to study abroad. So, many parents have been saving money [for their children's education] from a very early stage of their lives.

He noted that the cost of housing is “ridiculously high.” Pastor B also mentioned that whether buying or renting a home, the cost of living in the city is “very high.”

It is not only church members themselves who deal with the financial pressures of living in the city. Pastor D spoke of the challenges of church leaders who minister in the city. Specifically, he talked about the challenge of ministering without a proper *hukou*.³¹⁴ “If you work, the company provides a *hukou*. But preachers tend to have a low salaries and must often live far away from the city for financial reasons.” Pastor D said city ministers “face all kinds of problems.” He explained that education expenses for their children, housing costs, and other living expenses are often unaffordable in the city on a pastor's salary.

People living in the cities in China also must deal with loneliness and more complicated relationships. Pastor A spoke of the strong sense of competition of those living in the city, even among their own peers and friends. He said, “In Shanghai, relationships are complicated. At work, many people are your competitors.” As a result, “They have a lot of loneliness.” Many of them resort to using “the internet to meet people,” he said. Pastor B mentioned the same problem and explained that many “go online to find comfort” and “fall into sexual temptation.” In short, people in the cities often struggle to find authentic community and meaningful relationships.

³¹⁴ As mentioned previously, the *hukou* is a personal ID that identifies your city of origin. Without a proper *hukou*, one is ineligible to receive many city benefits including free education for children and certain medical benefits.

Marital problems also seem to be on the rise in the cities. Divorces and marital breakdowns in the rural countryside of China are rare. However, urbanization in China has brought about unprecedented levels of marital breakdown. Pastor E spoke of the need for “a biblical understanding” of marriage in contrast to the “the secular view.” He talked about how his people import a secular cultural view of submission to husbands into their faith, but emphasized that the biblical concepts of submitting to your husband and loving your wife are different from secular perspectives.

Urbanization in China has made life much more complicated on every level. The cost of living, loneliness, marital breakdown, the complexities of urban life, and the challenges of ministering in the city have contributed to a heavy sense of pressure.

The Values of the Post-1981 Generation in China

The third area the interviews honed in on is the changing values of the younger generation of China. The generation that grew up under the regime of the Cultural Revolution is vastly different from a modern day China that is experiencing new levels of financial prosperity. The subjects shared their observations of how different this generation is compared to previous generations in China.

The dominant theme used to describe the post-1981 generation was materialism. Pastor E noted that this generation is “much more materialistic and wants more tangible things instead of promises and commitment.” He insisted, “They value the visible things like money and houses.” He said the generation prior to the eighties was “more idealistic; they had dreams.” But the post-eighties generation, Pastor E says, is “far more materialistic. They want something more tangible.” Pastor F, who grew up at the end of the Cultural Revolution period, noted the same things. He said “We received ideology ...

communistic ideology was still very strong and dominant during our school years.” However, he went on to say, the “post-eighties generation was not so ideologically indoctrinated.” The previous generation was content just to survive. “We still know what it means to be needy. We lived a significant number of years materially not very well off,” he explained. The younger post-nineties generation “basically grew up after China opened up, after the economy took off.” His tone conveyed a sense in which the younger generation feels more entitled and even spoiled. Pastor D echoed the others when he said, “The young people in Beijing have a strong temptation to really chase after the materialistic things in life—a good house, a good salary, and a good car. This is very common.” Materialistic was the overwhelming word the pastors used to describe the younger generation.

Pastor G spoke of the temptation toward instant wealth in the cities, noting that “Urbanization created a lot of opportunities.” Because of the quickly rising value of land, “If you lived in Beijing 20 years ago, you might make \$300 a year. But after urbanization, you could become billionaire.” The promise of instant riches lured many young people to the city.

Materialism has influenced the church as well. Pastor E spoke of how “Years ago, believers were not as secular as today. They distanced themselves from the world ... but these days, the young people are more secularized.”

With basic survival being a non-issue, the younger generation seems more intent on personal distinction. Pastor E felt the younger people are interested in “making themselves different from other people.” Pastor E highlighted a specific example of how the previous generation “wanted to be soldiers. That was respectable.” But this younger

generation “pursues fashion, food, and clothes. Brands are very important.” Pastor F remarked how this generation did not grow up with siblings, “so they’re even more individualistic.” Even though Pastor F grew up in China, he spoke bewilderingly about how the language of the younger generation is very unique. He talked about how young people these days come up with unique social networking IDs. “They don’t use their ordinary names. They make up another name,” he explained. “Sometimes, I don’t understand the language they use,” he added.

This sense of defining one’s individual identity was also shared by Pastor A, who observed that social status is determined by salary. “Even when you meet with your friends, your salary determines your level of respect,” he said. He shared an interesting phenomenon of the “car club” whereby people gauge others’ worth and form relationships and social communities based on owning the same class of cars. Even marital partnerships are formed on the basis of material and physical criteria. Pastor E said, “In China, it’s very important whether you have a house.” Women are seeking financial stability. Both men and women are pursuing some material or physical benefit from each other. He noted that “Men are always looking at the face. Women are looking for money.”

Pastor A observed that many young people derive their sense of worth based on the city they live in. He noted that “Their value isn’t in being respected for being [native] to Shanghai, but it’s being respected for living in Shanghai.” Living in Shanghai becomes a source of pride. “If they go somewhere else, they can tell other people they live in Shanghai ... and they gain face,” he explained. The sense of personal value and identity

derived from financial status and where they live makes this generation unique from any other generation in China.

Even as this younger generation has been labeled as materialistic and spoiled, they have also been described as more spiritual than the previous generation. As Pastor F noted, they are “more open to spiritual matters, but they are also more spiritually pluralistic than our generation.” He said, “Many in our generation embraced atheism, believing that all religions are superstitious. Therefore, we reject all of them.” He felt the younger generation has shown more openness, having been exposed to Buddhism and some New Age ideas and observed, “There’s a lot of choice for them.” The younger generation, he said, seeks a paradoxical mixture of both spiritual and material pursuits. “They’re more spiritual. On the other hand, they’re also very materialistic. To make a living is very important. Probably the most important.” He thinks this generation holds a unique blend of materialistic and spiritual worldviews.

The pastors described the older generation as much more committed and stable, as compared to the more flighty younger people. Pastor F noted, “For the older generation, when you quit a job, you think about the next job.” The younger generation does not plan as much. For example, “When the younger generation quits a job, they don’t think about what they will do next. They just quit.”

While the younger generation has experienced unprecedented levels of material prosperity, some of the subjects also spoke of their deep loneliness. Pastor F emphasized their positions in the family as only children. Though they “receive a lot of attention from their parents,” he also felt they are lonelier and “more individualistic.” Genuine relationships and acceptance is hard to come by for this generation. They have no

siblings, fewer cousins, and a shrinking family network, which is the very core and foundation for loving relationships. Pastor A also observed this generation has “a lot of loneliness.”

It is clear the post-1981 generation is unlike any other in the history of China. The subjects consistently spoke about how differently this generation thinks and feels in comparison with the generation just before it. The overall picture they painted was one of the culture shifting from a communal to an individualistic mindset, from being ideologically driven to materially driven, and from being relationally satisfied to isolated and lonely. They portrayed a younger generation that often seems confused about its identity and is groping for answers to spiritual longings. They perceive this generation as flighty, seeking to fill an interior void through relationships, work and religion. On the other hand, there are new spiritual possibilities with this generation because they are more open to spiritual realities than ever. They are jaded and tired from the pressures of society and from demands they cannot fill. These pressures are crushing them, making them even more open to the reality of the gospel. The next section will explore how city church pastors seek to preach Christ to this spiritually eager younger generation, which is ready to find hope for their empty hearts.

Christ-Centered Preaching

The final area of interview questions focused on how Chinese city house leaders preach Christ in order to encourage spiritual renewal in their churches. This section will explore some of the major barriers to the gospel the subjects perceived as well as how they sought to preach Christ in a way that addresses those barriers. Further, the subjects

shared their experiences of how the gospel has brought about powerful changes in people, including themselves.

Performance-Oriented Culture

Perhaps the biggest barrier to the gospel the participants discussed during the interviews was the strong moralistic fiber that is deeply embedded in the Chinese culture. A strong moralism runs deeply in both the secular and church culture. Pastor H spoke of the moralistic motivations of his own church members when speaking of the temptations they face to do dishonest work. He explained that “Young people may do the right thing only out of a moralistic sense of right or wrong rather than because of Christ.” He said “They know it’s wrong even if they are not Christians.” Pastor H recounted,

Even if they don’t know the gospel that well, they usually approach it from a moralistic perspective. Muslims and Buddhists know right and wrong. They do it out of moralistic and religious obligation, not based on a clear understanding of the holiness of God.

Pastor G shared a similar observation when talking about the deep moralism found in most evangelical churches in China:

Most evangelical churches will tell you that receiving salvation is very easy. If you want it, you can have it. Pretty much, they want people to believe the first time they hear the gospel. There is nothing wrong with that, but after that they say, “You should do this or do that.” They give you lots of things you must do if you are a Christian. So it’s easy to join but very hard to live out.

Pastor G likened this struggle to the existential struggles of slaves who have been legally freed, but struggle to live as free people. For example, he said, “After documents have been signed to emancipate slaves, they are legally free, but they may still perform from a slave mindset. That is pretty much the way many Chinese Christians struggle. The whole culture is performance and earning.” He said the church faces a tremendous challenge to fight against the moralistic, performance-oriented narrative of the culture. “Imagine, six

days a week the whole world preaches you must earn everything. There's no grace. And one day a week in church, we live by grace. One to six—the enemy is stronger.” Unlike moralism, Pastor G stressed, “Christ-centered preaching is really focused on Jesus from beginning to the end, because He is so loving.”

Pastor D also lamented, “Much of evangelical preaching is pretty moralistic. And also very pragmatic.” He contrasted this with Christ-centered preaching, which “exalts Christ and focuses on helping people worship Christ.” Pastor C used the same words to describe urban churches and how they focus on “the law or moralism.” He gave an example of how pastors typically preach the story of Abraham:

For example, when preaching about Abraham, they focus on what kind of faith Abraham displayed. They preach we should have the same kind of faith as Abraham. Then God will bless us. Or like Uriah, we should love our army, love our country.

Pastor C noted how the church regrettably mirrors the values of society, “because the whole Chinese culture is very moralistic and pragmatic, so this is a very fundamental mentality.” The church proclaims the same message of the world. “And even when believers come to church, they receive moralistic preaching. So it's very difficult. It's like learning to swim on dry land,” he said.

Pastor B spoke of the typical emphasis of evangelical preaching, which “talks more about doctrine and morality than about how to live wisely.” Dr. E shared that younger churches are in danger of losing sight of the gospel. He said, “I do think in the younger churches—only a few, not many—really focus on the fundamental faith, the gospel and the cross.” He issued a solemn warning: “We have to continually focus on the gospel. If we don't focus on the gospel, we somehow lose the gospel.” All of these pastors agreed that moralism poses a formidable threat to the gospel of grace in urban Chinese churches.

Church members are getting bombarded with the same performance-oriented messages they are receiving from the culture around them.

Emphasis on Idols of the Heart versus External Moralism

When countering the strong moralism in the culture and preaching the gospel, several of the pastors emphasized the need to get to the root of the problem—the human heart. When asked what Christ-centered preaching to the post-1981 generation looked like, Pastor F emphasized the need to talk about sin as the universal human condition:

So I think in that sense things have not changed because the sin issue is always a constant with all people, all over the world. So in that sense, for the post-eighties generation, they still have to deal with this sin in their lives, their sinful nature, and the different expressions of it in their lives. So when I share the gospel, I never deemphasize the problem of sin. I always make it very clear to them we are very sinful.

Pastor F pointed out that sin has many different expressions, but the root issue always comes back to the fallen human condition. Pastor F remarked, “So, I never feel ashamed to point out the gospel to the post-eighties generation.” For Pastor F, Christ-centered preaching does not mean just trying to psychologically better the hearers or come up with another moralistic set of requirements. He knows the core issue goes much deeper than outward behavior.

Pastor D always echoes the core issue of the fallen human condition. He spoke of it in terms of idolatry. “Christ-centered preaching is meant to deal with the heart, not the emotions,” he said. For him, the gospel tries “to deal with the heart ... to look at their own heart’s idols.” Pastor D quickly and vulnerably shared his own revelation of the reality of idolatry. “Before, I didn’t know I had idols in my heart. After I heard about this, I realized I had an idol of comfort. Fleshly comfort. After studying Christ-centered preaching, I had to deal with this idol. This was a very big change,” he testified. He

described the struggles he had in his marriage and how he tried to just simply deal with his problems from a moralistic standpoint. “The problem was not sacrifice. The Bible tells me to sacrificially love my wife. But before, I thought I’m just not good enough. I can’t sacrifice well,” he explained. The knowledge of his heart’s deep idolatry led him to genuine repentance and change. “But then I realized the problem was idolatry. I idolized my comfort. Because the idol of comfort is the pursuit of freedom and rest.” He recognized that the root idol in the heart had to be dealt with because, “When I was worshiping this idol, I did not have genuine freedom from this ... so until I really worshiped Christ, I did not find genuine rest and freedom.” Dr. E shared the story of a pastor in Beijing whose heart changed from the depths as he repented of his coldness toward his neighbors. Dr. E kept emphasizing the need for the heart of the pastor himself to change, to “turn the pastor’s heart, and then the congregation’s heart toward other people, and to share the gospel with them.”

Performance-Oriented Culture

Several of the interviewees shared how performance oriented the Chinese culture is. People are judged on the merits of their performance and ability to get ahead. Pastor G ascribes the performance orientation to the underlying Confucian influence on the culture:

If you live in Chinese culture, you’re influenced by the culture. In China the big influence is Confucianism. So everything is according to your performance. If you live in that culture, you believe that whatever I have, I earned. I have a better life because I earned it. So deep inside, there is legalism there.

Pastor B mentioned the very same thing: “So in Chinese culture, another thing is working hard. Confucius says, ‘The universe is continually in its proper order and a man should work hard to find his place to strengthen himself in that.’” Pastor B continued, “Their

hearts not are secure, but they still want to know; they want us to tell them what to do.”

Pastor B seeks to help them find their rest in Christ, but still finds that “they panic” and ask him to tell them “more about what we have to do instead of telling us to rest.”

Pastor F made an observation of how the culture tends to be critical and task-driven. Pastor F remarked, “It’s the way kids were educated at home and school. It’s not an affirming culture. People get criticized all the time.” He added, “This society is very task-driven. So in that sense, it’s very performance driven. If you are not the top you are considered a failure.” Pastor F spoke about how many people live with a deep sense of failure and shame because there can only be one person at the top. He said, “That’s my sense for a lot of people.” He finds people thinking, “I’m not complete. I’m not a competent guy. I’m a failure in that sense.”

Dr. E highlighted a unique aspect of the performance orientation in the spiritual lives of believer. He learned through the gospel to “doubt my usual reaction to so-called spiritual success or spiritual failure.” He emphasized that “Spiritual success is ... depending upon the cross way, saying there is nothing from me, everything is by Christ.” He also said that spiritual failure is an avenue to look to Christ because, “In my weakness, in my failure, that’s the time I need God, that’s the time I need Christ.” Dr. E exhorted, “Don’t care too much about your spiritual success or failure. Yeah, sometimes we can spend a lot of time on that. It’s important but not that important.” Dr. E clearly saw the performance orientation of the culture influencing the church: “The culture’s understanding of what is success influences the church. So the peer pressure...I think the more challenging barrier is something you don’t see and you think is good, but it’s anti-gospel. That’s the barrier.”

Related to the moralistic, performance-oriented culture, some of the subjects talked about shame. Because Chinese culture is shame-based, genuine repentance and the admission of wrong and weakness is difficult. Pastor G made the point, “When we talk about repentance, when we say we’re sorry, it’s so easy. In a Chinese context, people try to be perfect. Public repentance is never in our culture.” Pastor G described Chinese culture as a “dragon culture” in which the admission of wrong means “You erase people’s glory. We call it a shame-based culture. We never say sorry. We need to cover up.” Pastor G mentioned how only the gospel can lead to genuine repentance because it enables people to finally admit their wrongs and need for forgiveness: “You are sinner, so you do bad things. When they understand that, they really understand the gospel, it’s so easy to have true repentance. That’s wonderful part. They feel big relief.” The shame-based culture means people try to hide as much of their guilt and wrong as possible and “cover up so many things.” As Pastor G pointed out, “Gospel repentance is renewal.” Dr. E also spoke of the need for repentance. “In your weak spot, that’s the time of repentance. When you start to embrace love or start to accept or even befriend your weakness, you can know that through your weakness, God shows His strength.” He spoke of how repentance really leads to a renewed heart. “Through your failure, God shows His strength. So that’s the way really, I think, to transform my life,” he explained.

Pastor C also stressed the freedom to admit his personal weakness. He used the analogy of Abraham in the Bible. “We see that Abraham had many weaknesses. But God’s calling is not based on Abraham’s strength but on God’s ability to fulfill that call. God’s grace leads Abraham.” He further spoke about the time God called Abraham to offer up Isaac, but in the end, provided the sacrifice for him.

In the end, several of the things that were brought up in the interviews seemed to have a common theme. The highly moralistic, performance-based culture stemming from a Confucian influence led many of these pastors to talk about the challenge of ministering the gospel to the younger generation.

How the Gospel Counters the Performance Culture

The subjects were able to give insightful examples of how the gospel brings new freedom for the performance-based, moralistic culture of China. Pastor G summed up the problem and the solution well, explaining, “In an urban environment there is lots of pressure to achieve, to earn a reputation. But the gospel brings freedom.” With regards to the success culture that drives the lives of his people, Pastor D sought to “help them find true rest in Christ in the midst of their fast-paced lifestyle and work.” He shared that he wanted “to deal with their inner idols.” He related success to the idol of acceptance, “One very big idol is success. Another is finding acceptance from people in this world. Success. These are big idols.” He often tries to help “people to see they’re accepted in Christ. He died for me. This can bring renewal.”

One particular example Pastor D shared was of a brother fighting anxiety disorder. It was not until he heard Christ preached that he discovered his root problem was finding acceptance before others: “He was in a very moralistic church. So he kept struggling with not being good enough. I cannot reach God. So his anxiety increased.” After coming to Beijing to work, he heard Christ-centered preaching and began to change. “He began to see his idol. His idol was acceptance from others and their opinions of him. But the more he heard the gospel, the more he came to feel accepted,” Pastor D recounted. This man’s values “were in Christ, not others.” Pastor D noticed this brother

“started having true security. He was afraid of others before. So this was a big change.”

Pastor D shared how, “In the gospel, he gained assurance of salvation. His assurance was found not in his performance, good or bad, but in Christ.”

Pastor D shared another testimony of a brother who was driven to succeed at work and as a result, his marriage suffered. He and his wife were on the brink of divorce. According to Pastor D, as this man thought about the resurrection of Christ and God’s kingdom, he realized he should not be pursuing the success of this world. If Christ really did rise from the dead, then his hope and purpose are not in this world but in God’s kingdom. Pastor D said, “Then he really changed. He was really was humbled. Real success is Christ’s success.” While this man is still growing, “his relationship with his wife has been reconciled.” The root idol of success and acceptance by others was the source of this man’s marital problems and drivenness. It was a reorientation to Christ that began to free this man from his idols.

Pastor F also shared a similar observation about one of his congregation members as he was preaching through the book of James. Though the passage was on the second chapter of in James, where it talks about not favoring the rich, Pastor F remarked, “It’s basically an issue of acceptance in the church.” Pastor F shared that after preaching this sermon, he received a message from someone in the church who said he sometimes cannot accept himself, let alone others. Pastor F said this man was “not only prejudiced against other people, but even prejudiced against himself.” However, through the message of the gospel, “We find our acceptance in Christ alone, not by performance; this message helped him address this issue in his life.” This message helped direct this man “to the right source of security rather than finding security in himself.” Pastor F

emphasized the “gospel is not about your performance ... It’s an external righteousness, which is Christ. I think that helped them to find their real value. It’s not psychological self-image. It’s what God thinks of them and how God embraces them on the cross.”

Pastor C shared how the gospel brought renewal to a boy in his church who had deep pride and a critical spirit toward others. Pastor C spoke of the gospel bringing joy from seeing what Christ did for us. He said, “When we see God’s work and Christ’s salvation, it brings joy instead of imposing a set of rules and requirements on us.” This boy always thought problems were outside of him. The problems of his family were their fault, not his. He felt he was a pretty good person. But through consistent gospel preaching, “He realized his righteousness does not come from himself, but from God’s Son. Through this revelation of the gospel, he was able to change a lot.” His repentance was deep. Before he saw himself as a victim of other people’s wrongs, but through the gospel, but he realized his self-righteousness was deep. This boy “began to see his sins more deeply.” Pastor C also observed that “Before he used his own way to cover his shame. He tried to improve himself and achieve some greatness.” When this boy realized it’s only Jesus who takes away his shame he was able to accept himself. Pastor C provided yet another example of how deeply shame runs in the Chinese culture. Because of this deep sense of shame, there are multiple expressions of criticalness toward others, drivenness toward self-glory and achievement, and relational breakdowns.

Pastor B shared how the gospel renewed him personally from his own sense of inadequacy. He said, “The emphasis is on what Christ did for us and how Christ changes us.” When he preached on Psalm 139, Pastor B proclaimed, “If I know who I am, whether I’m a boss, a professor, or pastor, these things define me.” Pastor B’s point in the

sermon was that “God knows us: he knows who we are. God has created me as a new creation in Christ. It gives me real satisfaction and security.” Pastor B remarked, “So I think when I preach the gospel, this is their deep inner need.” For Pastor B, preaching Christ is preaching the cross. “That’s where I know God will love me despite my performance.” The security of knowing God’s love for him through the cross is what produced the bedrock conviction deep within his heart that “love never fails.”

Gospel Frees From False Motives of Obedience to Get Blessings from God

In his interview, Pastor D included a unique aspect that other pastors did not. He shared how preaching Christ frees people from the false motives of obedience to get blessings from God. Most of the examples of others shared were stories of real brokenness. Pastor D, however, shared a story of a person who was outwardly very upright. His father was a missionary and his grandfather was a pastor who suffered persecution during the Cultural Revolution, yet he was always taught that obedience to God brings earthly blessings. This theology caused him to struggle in his faith because his family relationships were always difficult. He became angry and self-righteous. Pastor D remarked, “He felt he had good faith in God and good spiritual practice but later realized he was very self-righteous.” Pastor D said this man’s understanding of Christ’s suffering on the cross has “brought healing to his home.” This man began to see faith in Christ is not about worldly benefits, but spiritual benefits. “His father and grandfather taught him that faith was about blessings in this life,” remarked Pastor D, but the preaching of the gospel began to heal his own faith.

Gospel Counter to Materialism

As mentioned earlier, materialism is a powerful force in the urban Chinese environment. Pastor D deals with materialism by seeking to “preach God’s kingdom and the resurrection of Christ ... [and encouraging believers] to put their hope in God’s kingdom, not in this world.” He observed, “Their hope in this world is too big.” Pastor C identifies materialism as an idol of comfort and respect. “The reason for your house or car or comfort are all because of self. It’s idol worship. They want to enjoy comfort,” he opined. He added “But the main motive is because they want respect from other people. It’s because they have this vacuum in their heart.” So unless he preaches Christ consistently, “They will use these material things and glory to fill in the vacuum.”

Gospel Freed Woman to Truly Forgive Her Husband

Yet another example of how the gospel has been bringing spiritual renewal was through an example of a woman who was able to forgive her husband. Pastor D shared about “a sister whose husband would hurt her. She knew she had to forgive her husband, but it was forced.” It was only through the preaching of the gospel, specifically that God had forgiven her of her many sins first, that was she able to extend forgiveness toward her husband. Pastor D said, “Before she did not experience God’s forgiveness and if you have not experienced God’s forgiveness, you cannot forgive others.” She had been trying to do so out of willpower. Pastor D noticed, “Her forgiveness toward her husband was conditioned on his change.” The realization of Christ’s forgiveness enabled her to “experience Christ’s unconditional forgiveness ... and she was able to forgive him.” Preaching Christ brought about genuine reconciliation from past hurts.

Gospel Compels Believers to Live in Genuine Love and Community

Another way subjects identified how Christ-centered preaching brought about spiritual renewal was through the development of genuine love and community. Pastor G made an insightful comment about how Chinese culture is based on a *guanxi* system of give and take. People build relationships with each other for the purpose of ultimately getting some benefit back from that person. Pastor G observed,

In Chinese culture, there is no love without a reason. You love me, you treat me well, that means you want to use me. People see church the same way. You want to use us. You want money from us. So if you are not gospel-centered church and I give you money, then you give me blessing. But when the church understands the gospel, they love people out of pure love. I love you and bless the community, not because I want you to join us. It is because Jesus loves us. We do not earn this love. It's just love.

Chinese culture essentially operates on a relational bartering system. Pastor G observed that only the gospel could break through the self-centered motives of the human heart and bring about genuine love for others.

Dr. E shared a specific example of how the gospel brought about genuine community in one particular church. Because of the high cost of living and housing in the city, many young people struggle to find a suitable place to live. Dr. E shared how one church rents a house where “six to eight young people live together to help lower their costs. He explained that they live together and have daily morning prayer time together.” Through this arrangement, he said, “they are living as a cohort community. They strengthen each other. Then they go out to work.” This living arrangement is counter to the isolation that many young people experience. As Dr. E describes, “It's like an island, you battle by yourself.” Another example given by Dr. E is how one church started a fellowship for young professionals to come together every week. Through this

fellowship, “They pray and encourage each other about how they can start a new business and how the business can be Christ-centered and gospel-centered.” Pastor H summed it up well, saying, “[to counter rampant] individualism, we try to emphasize that believers are a community of faith in our preaching, and that God does not save us to be alone, but so that we can join the community.”

Gospel Change Is Gradual

In hearing these stories, it can seem like Christ-centered preaching functions somewhat like a magic bullet, curing problems overnight. Pastor B wisely pointed out that even with consistent Christ-centered preaching, changes are more gradual, “So when the gospel gives peace and security, the outer change may not be so instant.” He emphasized, “There may not be instant changes to live a godly life. So believers may start doubting when they’re not changing.” Pastor B’s observation helps to bring some balance to the sometimes dramatic testimonies shared by the other pastors.

Preachers also Need Gospel Renewal

The final question of the interview centered on how the preachers themselves find personal renewal through the gospel. Here, the pastors humbly shared their own struggles and their need to be reminded of the truths of the gospel for their own hearts as they seek to minister the gospel to others.

Dr. G shared a struggle common for most pastors—seeking status from their ministry. Dr. G shared,

As an urban pastor, influenced a lot by society, that means you need status in society. As a pastor in that environment, what is your status? How big is your church? How big is your salary? How many influential church members do you have?

As mentioned previously in this section, Dr. G went on to share the testimony of one the most respected pastors in Beijing. This pastor leads a large church and many view him as a “pretty powerful person.” This pastor humbly shared with other pastors that he often works hard and does the things he does “to try to show people I am a hero.” His preaching reflected his own inner motivations and he would put pressure on his people “to try to do better or work hard.” After participating in gospel training, this pastor began to change. Previously, one person in his church remarked, “Even though [we know] Jesus is love, we feel he is a tough boss.” But as the pastor began to change, people expressed their appreciation and said, “Now you share your weakness and we really appreciate that. We see you as a person who needs God’s grace.” Dr. E, who conducts regular training for pastors, said “one of the keys” is the pastor’s own renewal. He shared, “If the preacher does not preach the gospel from the pulpit you cannot have a gospel-centered, Christ-centered ministry. Christ-centered, gospel-centered preaching is the key.” His focus is to see that the pastors themselves are living by the gospel and he encourages them to “live out the gospel yourself. You can be a preacher and not be a Christ-follower.” So in the training, “We still stress to the preachers that they need to preach the gospel to themselves first and live out the gospel. So that’s what we have been doing in our training in China.”

Pastor F shared that one of his real joys in preaching is that he gets to preach the gospel to himself. “I probably benefit the most from preparing the sermon because I’m the first one that needs to apply it to myself,” he remarked. He openly confessed his own insecurity about preaching, “which is performance based. That’s part of my nature. Seminary is also performance-based. It’s graded. Even your preaching is graded.” Pastor

F said, “I base a lot of my worth on what other people think of me. Sometimes I feel I have preached a good sermon and people say, ‘You did a good job.’ I feel honored. I feel my value is appreciated by other people.” While he acknowledged that encouragement can be good, he recognized that “I preach this sermon in faith. That’s all. No matter how my performance is, Christ has already accepted me. Therefore, what other people think of me is secondary.” He concluded, “What matters most to me is what Christ thinks of me. Since I have already confessed my sin, Christ has already accepted me; God has already accepted me.” Pastor F shared how easy it is to think of himself as a failure if he does not do a good job with his sermons. He has learned to continually preach the gospel to his own heart as a preacher so that he does not base his sense of worth on his preaching. He shared one instance when after preaching what he felt was a mediocre sermon, a congregation member bitterly criticized him. His identity in Christ is what gave him a sense of stability.

So in the past, if I did not really base my identity on Christ, I would be devastated, because I felt worthless. I did a poor job of helping other people. But since I’m still learning to root my identity in Christ, I was disappointed. That’s a natural feeling, but I was not really devastated ... So I don’t need to base my identity on whether people accept me or reject me. What really matters is Christ.”

Pastor F is learning to constantly come back to the gospel. “So I gradually apply it to myself, but I see it’s having an impact in people’s lives. I’m convinced this is the way to go in the future. Just preaching each sermon redemptively,” he said. “We always need the gospel to renew us,” he added.

Pastor D also openly shared his desire for success and his own need for the gospel. He admitted, “I had a strong desire for success. At the same time, I had a real strong sense of inferiority. My pride and sense of inferiority were like two sides of the

same coin.” His own desire for success was rooted in a desire to “be honored and respected by others.” This pride also made him “look down on others who weren’t successful.” It was only after reading the Bible that Pastor D “started realizing the only great person is Jesus.” The greatness of Jesus freed him from the pressure of having “to be superman.” His testimony was that “My values were turning to the greatness of Jesus instead of myself.” He shared how this also began to improve his relationship with his wife.

Pastor D hit on a few common struggles among almost all pastors. He mentioned the “expectation for numerical growth. Also the level of [the pastor’s] education. Then there would be more strength and power.” These struggles are “particularly strong for me as a pastor to glorify myself.” He insightfully added, “It’s even a struggle in the context of Christ-centered preaching not to be self-righteous. It’s a temptation to feel like I’m better than traditional house church pastors because I understand this concept.” Pride can creep in even when the intent is to preach Christ.

Dr. E emphasized that only as preachers live out of the gospel themselves and preach the gospel will their churches find renewal. He pointed out, “Only two things can advance gospel transformation in the congregation: how the gospel transforms pastors themselves and their willingness to share their repentance from the pulpit. I have a lot of pastor friends, and that is what I have seen.”

Pastor B shared his temptation to crave success. He said, “I have two primary challenges ... Desiring the success of my ministry and preaching, and second, craving the approval of the brothers and sisters. These temporal things give me my joy and peace.” He mentioned that he sometimes uses ministry as away to cover up the shame of failure

in other areas such as his marriage. “I use outward success to prove myself, and feel better about myself,” he confessed. These tendencies were a repeated theme among many subjects.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher interviewed eight subjects to collect their insights about how they preach the gospel to bring about spiritual renewal in the context of urban China to the post-1981 generation. Several common themes emerged as they shared about the most challenging struggles young people face living in the city: materialism, busyness, the drive for success, heavy financial pressures, isolation and loneliness, and marital breakdown. The pastors also shared encouraging stories of how the gospel has been renewing their churches and bringing about powerful changes. Though these changes are often gradual, they are substantive changes at the deepest level of their hearts. As idols of acceptance, success, and saving face are exposed, these preachers are learning to proclaim Christ in a way that speaks to the deepest levels of believers’ hearts. Many stories were shared about the gospel’s power to renew churches and the preachers themselves. In the next section, the researcher will discuss conclusions from all the data gathered from the literature and interviews.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how house church leaders preach Christ in the context of urban China to the post-1981 generation. While there is a growing body of literature addressing the topic of Christ-centered preaching in general, there is very little research addressing how Christ-centered preaching is done in the context of urban China to the post-1981 generation in particular. The rapid growth of Christianity in China is matched only by the rapid urbanization and change in cultural values. China has evolved from a mostly agrarian culture to an urban, modernized, high-tech culture. The nature of the house church itself has also changed from a mostly persecuted, separatist, pietistic church to a more publicly accepted, culture-engaging church. These changes have brought about new challenges for house church leaders in reaching a new generation with the gospel. Older, more traditional house churches are not able to effectively reach this younger generation. City church pastors must learn the baseline narratives of the younger generation in order to preach the gospel of Christ to them effectively. The following research questions served as the intended focus for the interviews:

1. How do the values of traditional Chinese house churches differ from those of the younger urban house churches?
2. What are the unique challenges to ministry house churches face as a result of living in the city?
3. What are the unique issues the younger generation in China is dealing with?
4. How do Chinese city house leaders preach Christ in order to encourage spiritual renewal in their churches?

First, research was conducted on the most current and relevant literature regarding the nature of the traditional Chinese house church. Research was also conducted on the nature of the emerging city churches in China, including the impact of urbanization, and the changing value system of the younger generation. The last area of research focused on literature addressing Christ-centered preaching. Then interviews guided by these four questions were conducted with seven pastors and one high-level city pastor trainer with significant experience in Christ-centered preaching. Their answers to these four questions were analyzed and presented in chapter four. This final chapter brings the data from the literature review together with the findings of the last chapter in order to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

Summary of Study and Findings

Research Findings of the Values of the Post-1981 Generation

The literature review and interviews have clearly shown that the post-1981 generation in China is grappling and struggling to find its way in an increasingly materialistic and economically prosperous China. The current generation is not familiar with the struggles of ideology of the former generation. There is no defining national ideology that compels people to “plunge [their] limited life into the unlimited cause of serving the people.”³¹⁵ Though the previous generation had very little in the way of material prosperity, they had a strong sense of national purpose, living “by the great revolutionary will and communist ideal.”³¹⁶ This collective revolutionary spirit had an overpowering uniting effect on the masses such that no matter “how difficult reality

³¹⁵ Jonathan Li, “After Thirty Years,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/after-thirty-years>.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

seemed to be, we could overcome it. We would prevail, because we could always find inspiration from the founding fathers and the revolutionary martyrs.”³¹⁷ The previous generation was poor but strong in ideology and purpose.

With Deng’s Opening Up policy, the post-1981 generation enjoys increasing material prosperity but lacks a true sense of national and ideological purpose. Trendy clothes replaced the old military style drab green garb of the Mao generation.³¹⁸ Individualism, materialism, and capitalism drive this generation. As Aikman notes, this generation is wondering what it means to make money or whether economic prosperity comes “with concrete ethical and philosophical foundations.”³¹⁹ Paul Liu, professor in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, sums up the differences between the generations well. “The Chinese people had belief but did not have anything to eat. Now, thirty years later, most Chinese people have enough to eat, but nothing to believe.”³²⁰

The interviews clearly confirmed this state of affairs. Pastor E noted that this generation is “much more materialistic and wants more tangible things instead of promises and commitment.” He insisted, “They value the visible things like money and houses.” Pastor F, who grew up toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, remarked that this generation “is far more materialistic. They want something more tangible.” He noted that his was a generation that “received ideology ... communistic ideology was still very strong and dominant during our school years.” Pastor E noted how this pervasive materialistic outlook has influenced the church as well, when he stated “Years ago,

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 16.

³²⁰ Quoted in Bush and Fulton, *China’s Next Generation*, Loc 417 of 589.

believers were not as secular as today. They distanced themselves from the world ... but these days, the young people are more secularized.” Materialism has clearly become the dominant worldview of this generation. Urban church leaders face the challenge of preaching the superiority of Christ over and against materialism.

It is not surprising to discover that materialism has also been the main driver behind this generation’s sense of identity and worth. Pastor A remarked how people gauge someone’s worth based on the type of car they drive. “The same car means the same price ... your consumption level is the same.” He commented, “Even when you meet with your friends, your salary determines your level of respect.”

Both the literature and interviews confirm the reality that materialism has created a significant spiritual vacuum in this generation. Pastor F, whose generation grew up rejecting all religions as superstitious, feels this generation is “more open to spiritual matters, but they are also more spiritually pluralistic than our generation.” This is consistent with journalist Evan Osnos’ observation that, “As communism fades into today’s free-market reality, many Chinese describe a ‘crisis of faith’ and seek solace everywhere from mystical Taoist sects to Bahai temples and Christian mega churches.”³²¹ The literature, indeed, confirms that religious belief is making a resurgence in China, despite the atheistic dogma of the Communist Party. “One of the most significant consequences of China's remarkable reform and liberalization of social life since the

³²¹ Osnos, “Jesus in China,” http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-06-22/news/0806210659_1_house-churches-christianity-fact-party-members.

1980s is a massive revival of religion.”³²² The church has been given both a unique challenge and opportunity in presenting the gospel to this generation.

The literature and interviews also reveal that this generation is much more individualistic, which places the burden on each person to create his or her sense of identity.

Research Findings of the New Urbanized Face of China

The overwhelming pace of urbanization in China has created a host of unanticipated economic and social problems. The intent of the Cultural Revolution to obliterate the line between wealthy landlords and rulers from the massive peasant class ironically led to even greater stratification in Chinese society. Miller notes how economic development has created a greater gap between the wealthy and rising middle class versus the throngs of poor migrant workers sweating away in labor-intensive jobs while living in urban slums.³²³ The migrant working population accounts for up to thirty 34 percent of Beijing’s population.³²⁴ Those who cannot attain middle class status face challenges making their way in the city. China’s *hukou* system prevents those coming from outside the city from receiving basic social services and even education for their children. Migrants are also denied basic workers’ compensation or medical insurance.³²⁵ They are usually relegated to squalid living conditions as they cannot afford housing with a private bathroom and kitchen.

³²² Yao, “Contemporary Confucian Revival and Its Intersections with Christianity in China,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/contemporary-confucian-revival-and-its-interactions-with-christianity-in-china>.

³²³ Miller, *China’s Urban Billion*, 4-5.

³²⁴ Ibid., 16

³²⁵ Asian Development Bank, *Strategic Options for Urbanization in the People’s Republic of China*, 16.

The data from the interviews reveals how even among those who are financially stable, urban dwellers still face a strong sense of competition and pressure. Pastor A noted that those who are from the outside “want to prove themselves at work” and “really work hard at earning their identity, to give them face, and prove their worth.” He spoke of this attitude in terms of “pride in their hearts.” Pastor G described the temptation in the urban environment as a “lot of pressure to achieve and earn [an impressive] reputation.” The interviewees highlighted a kind of pressure that is not financial, but touches at the core of their sense of identity.

The interviewees also noted the challenges they face in pastoring in cities that demand a heavy workload. Pastor B said his people typically “work from nine a.m. to nine p.m., six days a week” and are often “pressured into drinking and smoking.” He lamented that his people “don’t have too much space for spiritual things.” Part of the reason behind the intense workload is the pressure to maintain a certain lifestyle. Pastor F described the cost of housing as “ridiculously high.” Pastor B also mentioned that whether buying or renting a home, the cost of living in the city is “very high.” Pastor F mentioned the “pace of life in the city is much faster than in rural areas ... and the workload is heavy.” Urban life has created working and financial pressures that previous generations of China did not face.

Research Findings of the Urban Church Versus the Traditional House Church

There are substantial differences between the traditional house church, which was born out of persecution, and the modern day urban church in China. One such difference is the attitude of the two churches toward the world. The traditional house church viewed the world as a primarily hostile force and thus sought to separate from the world as much

as possible.³²⁶ The interview subjects all portrayed the traditional house church as separatist and extremely pietistic. Pastor D elaborated on how they “make a pretty strong separation between faith and this world.” He gave specific examples of how traditional house churches forbid their people to “watch movies” or “spend money going to the sauna.” It is “very bad,” he added.

Words such as “very conservative and protective” were used to describe the traditional house church. Pastor D attributed this attitude as a natural response to the severe persecution the church endured for so long in China. The other pastors used words such as “suffering” and “cross-bearing” to describe the spirituality of the traditional house church.

With the decline of severe persecution against Christians in China, the literature asserts that the modern urban church feels more compelled “to engage their society with the Gospel [as] seen in their work in areas such as education, outreach to the poor, publishing, media, and cultural events.”³²⁷ Urban pastors and leaders all agreed the urban church seeks to actively engage the culture around them to see how the gospel influences society. Pastor B described city churches as wanting to be a force for societal good and stability. “They talk about how to deal with issues so there is peace and stability.” He spoke of city churches trying to help their people see faith as “a means of dealing with their lives” and encourages believers to “use the gospel to influence everything.” Pastor D spoke of city churches aggressively going into the city and on college campuses to evangelize. Pastor G summed up the general consensus among the younger pastors that

³²⁶ Bush and Fulton, *China's Next Generation*, Loc 210 of 589.

³²⁷ Ibid., Loc 231 of 589.

city churches are “very influential in China now.” Pastor G said city churches are “more dynamic, more outgoing, and more welcoming to younger people and society.”

Nevertheless, even if traditional house churches tend to be separatist and legalistic, the literature and interviewees portray the leaders of the traditional house churches as figures to be respected, almost revered. Traditional house church leaders are known for their deep piety, powerful prayer life, a simple but powerful reliance on God, and signs and wonders performed by the Holy Spirit.³²⁸ They are admired for their uncompromising stance on truth even if it meant long-term imprisonment and death.³²⁹ Pastor G expressed respect and admiration for the older leaders of the traditional house church, though he was somewhat critical of their lack of theological precision. Pastor G described the house church pastors’ preaching as “much more testimony” and sharing about “many miracles.” He further stated, “Their piety is very hard to pass down or to even communicate to the next generation because it’s more based on experience.”

Research Findings on Christ-Centered Preaching

The growing literature on Christ-centered preaching explains the philosophical and theological differences between Christ-centered preaching versus broadly evangelical preaching. However, there is very little literature that specifically addresses Christ-centered preaching in the context of China, let alone preaching to the post-1981 generation in China. The interviews were particularly insightful in showing how urban church pastors preach Christ to the younger generation.

³²⁸ Ibid., Loc 218 of 589.

³²⁹ Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 73-89.

Christ-centered preaching is to be distinguished from broadly evangelical preaching by the premise that the gospel is the ongoing source of spiritual renewal. Tim Keller describes the gospel as “not just the ABCs but the A to Z of the Christian life,” and teaches the need to believe “the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on.”³³⁰ Though no evangelical denies the gospel as the initial entry point into the Christian life, Keller argues that the gospel remains the ongoing source of power and change throughout the Christian life. Keller would say that Christ-centered preaching is synonymous with gospel-centered preaching, for “Preaching the gospel means preaching Christ and his saving work and his grace.”³³¹

The literature reviewed for this paper critiques the fruit of broadly evangelical preaching as moralistic and Christ-less. Much evangelical preaching has been summed up by Christian Smith’s now well-popularized phrase “moralistic therapeutic deism.”³³² Smith’s interviews of over 3,000 American youth who grew up in the church revealed that their understanding of Christianity boils down to the belief that 1) “A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth;” 2) “God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions;” 3) “The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself;” 4) “God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem;” and 5) “Good people go to heaven when they die.”³³³ These tenets

³³⁰ Keller, *Center Church*, 48.

³³¹ Tim Keller, *Preaching*, Loc 800 of 4183.

³³² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 154.

³³³ Mohler, “Therapeutic Moralistic Deism—The New American Religion,” <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2/>.

have been dubbed as the new “American religion.” Startlingly absent is the language of sin and repentance, substitutionary atonement, grace and forgiveness, judgment and salvation, justification and sanctification. In its stead is a watered down version of Christianity that renders the faith to nothing more than “inculcating a moralistic approach to life ... that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person.”³³⁴

The relatively little literature available critiquing the preaching in China confirms the moralistic message being heard in the churches in China. One observer noted the absence of the gospel in a typical sermon preached here in China. In one example, a pastor opened the text on Genesis 32:1-4 by examining the many ways Jacob put himself first above others. She proceeded to admonish the congregation to follow Jacob’s example by putting themselves first to obtain God’s blessings. Only then will the temptation to judge others be put to rest since others will be behind them. She then expounded upon the significance of being the firstborn in the family and learning to honor one’s parents.³³⁵ The underlying message undergirding this preaching is clear: the goal of the Christian life is to find worldly success and honor within the biological family structure.

Even those churches that understand the importance of the gospel, however, may not fully grasp its significance for the ongoing growth of the believer. Tim Keller speaks of the danger of church leaders preaching the gospel as simply an evangelistic truth relevant only for unbelievers:

³³⁴ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 154.

³³⁵ Swells in the Middle Kingdom (alias), “Learning from a Bad Sermon,” <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/from-the-west-courtyard/learning-from-a-bad-sermon>.

There is always a danger that church leaders and ministers will conceive of the gospel as merely the minimum standard of doctrinal content for being a Christian believer. As a result, many preachers and leaders are energized by thoughts of teaching more advanced doctrine, or of deeper forms of spirituality, or of intentional community and the sacraments, or of “deeper discipleship,” or of psychological healing, or of social justice and cultural engagement. One of the reasons is the natural emergence of specialization as a church grows and ages. People naturally want to go deeper into various topics and ministry disciplines. But this tendency can cause us to lose sight of the whole. Though we may have an area or a ministry that we tend to focus on, the gospel is what brings unity to all that we do. Every form of ministry is empowered by the gospel, based on the gospel, and is a result of the gospel.³³⁶

The goal of Christ-centered preaching is to continually present the gospel as the regular and primary truth for the ongoing spiritual renewal of the church. Richard Lovelace, deceased professor of church history at Gordon Conwell Seminary and expert on the spiritual dynamics of church revivals, wrote, “Most people’s problems are just a failure to be oriented to the gospel—a failure to grasp and believe it through and through.”³³⁷ Albert Mohler goes a step further in warning how easy it is for those in the church to base their spiritual standing before God on the fruits of the gospel, rather than the gospel itself.

Hell will be filled with people who were avidly committed to Christian values. Christian values cannot save anyone and never will. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a Christian value, and a comfortability with Christian values can blind sinners to their need for the gospel.³³⁸

A common misunderstanding and accusation against Christ-centered preaching is that it leads to antinomianism. The literature clearly rebuts this. Tony Merida, professor of preaching at Southeastern Baptist Seminary, explains “moralism” (legalism) as “giving demands apart from God’s grace,” while “antinomianism” (license) is “treating God’s

³³⁶ Tim Keller, *Center Church*, 36.

³³⁷ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Renewal*, 211.

³³⁸ Albert Mohler, “Christian Values Cannot Save Anyone,” <http://www.albertmohler.com/2012/09/11/christian-values-cannot-save-anyone>.

commands lightly because of grace.”³³⁹ Tim Keller defines legalism and license this way: “Legalism says that we have to live a holy, good life in order to be saved. Antinomianism says that because we are saved, we don’t have to live a holy, good life.”³⁴⁰ The literature shows that Christ-centered preaching opposes both legalism and license.

The literature also emphasizes another distinction of Christ-centered preaching. The aim of such preaching is to go beyond surface behavior to the heart. Sinclair Ferguson emphasizes that correct doctrine of the gospel is not enough. The only way Christians will change is if the heart changes:

... legalism and antinomianism seem to be simple opposites—all that is needed, it seems is right doctrine. But the more basic issue is: How do I think about God, and what instincts and dispositions and affections toward him does this evoke in me? At that level legalism and antinomianism share a common root that has invaded not only mind but heart, affections, and will—how we feel toward God as well as the doctrine of God we profess.³⁴¹

Keller urges preachers to not only be faithful to the doctrinal truth of the Bible, but to penetrate listener’s hearts. He says preaching “must capture the listeners’ interest and imaginations; it must be compelling and penetrate to their hearts.”³⁴²

The interview data from Chinese church leaders practicing Christ-centered preaching confirms the power of the gospel to cut through both moralistic and antinomianism tendencies of the heart to bring about genuine transformation. The overwhelmingly common observation among the interviewees regarding barriers to the gospel was the strong moralistic fiber that is deeply embedded into the Chinese culture.

³³⁹ Tony Merida, “Christ-Centered Preaching (Part 3),” <http://tonymerida.net/2013/christ-centered-preaching-part-3-practical-application-in-christ-centered-expository-preaching>.

³⁴⁰ Keller, *Center Church*, 31.

³⁴¹ Ferguson, *The Whole of Christ*, Loc 1523 of 5616.

³⁴² Keller, *Preaching*, Loc 1924 of 4183.

Pastor H mentioned the moralistic motivations of his own church members when speaking of the temptations they face to do dishonest work. “Young people may do the right thing only out of moralistic sense of right or wrong rather than because of Christ,” he said. Pastor H recounted,

Even if they don’t know the gospel that well, they usually approach it from a moralistic perspective. Muslims and Buddhists know [what is right and what is] wrong. They do it out of moralistic and religious obligation, not based on a clear understanding of the holiness of God.

Pastor G shared a similar observation when talking about the deep moralism found in most evangelical churches in China:

Most evangelical church will tell you receiving salvation is very easy. If you want it, you can have it. Pretty much, they want people to believe the first time they hear the gospel. There is nothing wrong with that, but after that they say “you should be like me, you should do this or do that.” They give you lots of things you must do if you are a Christian. So it’s easy to join but very hard to live out.

He remarked, “The whole culture is performance and earning.” Pastor D also lamented, “Much of evangelical preaching is pretty moralistic. And also very pragmatic.” He contrasted this with Christ-centered preaching, which “exalts Christ and focuses on helping people worship Christ.” Pastor C noted how the church regrettably mirrors the values of society “because the whole Chinese culture is very moralistic and pragmatic, so this is a very fundamental mentality.” The church proclaims the same message of the world. “And even when believers come to church, they receive moralistic preaching. So it’s very difficult. It’s like learning to swim on dry land.”

Pastor G ascribes the performance orientation to the underlying Confucian influence on the culture:

If you live in Chinese culture, you’re influenced by the culture. In China the big influence is Confucianism. So everything is according to your performance. If you

live in that culture, you believe that whatever I have, I earned. I have a better life because I earned it. So deep inside, there is legalism there.

Pastor B mentioned the very same thing, saying, “So in Chinese culture, another thing is working hard. Confucius has a saying, “The universe is continually in its proper order and a man should work hard to find his place to strengthen himself in that.” Pastor B continued, “Their hearts are not secure, but they still want to know; they want us to tell them what to do.” All of these pastors agreed that moralism poses a formidable threat to the gospel of grace in the Chinese urban churches. Moralism and performance are deeply ingrained in the fabric of the culture, so clearly communicating the gospel of grace is not an easy task.

The pastors also shared the need for the gospel to penetrate the depths of the heart’s motivations when preaching. Pastor D echoed the core issue of the fallen human condition. He spoke of it in terms of idolatry, saying, “Christ-centered preaching is meant to deal with the heart, not the emotions.” For him, the gospel tries “to deal with the heart... to look at their own heart’s idols.” Pastor D testified to the power of the gospel to confront the idols of his own heart. “Before, I didn’t know I had idols in my heart. After I heard about this, I realized I had an idol of comfort. Fleshly comfort.” He testified, “After studying Christ-centered preaching, I had to deal with this idol. This was a very big change.”

Pastor D spoke of how he preaches Christ to deal with the idol of success. He related success to the idol of acceptance, “One very big idol is success. Another is finding acceptance from people in this world. These are big idols.” He tries to help “people to see they’re accepted in Christ. He died for me. This can bring renewal.” One particular example given by Pastor D was of a brother who was driven to succeed at work. His

marriage suffered because of his drive to succeed and he and his wife were on the brink of divorce. According to Pastor D, as this man thought about the resurrection of Christ and God's kingdom, he realized he should not be pursuing the success of this world. If Christ really did rise from the dead, then his hope and purpose are not in this world but in God's kingdom. Pastor D said, "Then he really changed. He was really humbled. Real success is Christ's success." While this man is still growing, "his relationship with his wife has been reconciled." The root idol of success and acceptance by others was the source of this man's marital problems and drivenness. It was a reorientation to Christ that began to free this man from his idols.

Pastor B shared how the gospel renewed him personally from his own sense of inadequacy. He said, "The emphasis is on what Christ did for us. And how Christ changes us." When he preached on Psalm 139, Pastor B proclaimed, "If I know who I am, whether I'm a boss, a professor, or pastor, these things define me." For Pastor B, preaching Christ is preaching "the cross. That's where I know God will love me despite my performance." The security of knowing God's love for him through the cross is what produced the bedrock conviction deep within his heart that "love never fails." Just as the literature showed how the gospel counters both moralism and antinomianism, the interviewees also spoke of how the gospel has been doing the same in their churches. One of the main idols of Chinese culture is materialism. With a flourishing economy, many Chinese are seeking after material pursuits to fill their spiritual void. Pastor C identifies materialism as an idol of comfort and respect: "The reason for your house or car or comfort are all because of self. It's idol worship. They want to enjoy comfort." There is yet another reason, he explained, "But the main motive is because they want respect from

other people. It's because they have this vacuum in their heart." So unless he preaches Christ consistently, "They will use these material things and glory to fill in the vacuum."

More than preaching Christ to their hearers, the pastors also mentioned how the gospel has been the source of personal renewal as well. Dr. E emphasized that only as preachers live out of the gospel themselves and preach the gospel will their churches find renewal. He pointed out, "Only those two things can advance the gospel transformation in the congregation; how the gospel transforms pastors themselves, and their willingness to share their repentance from the pulpit. I have a lot of pastor friends, and that is what I have seen."

The temptation to seek after the idols of success and approval are just as strong for pastors as it is for their hearers. Pastor B shared his temptation to crave success. He said, "I have two primary challenges ... First, desiring the success of my ministry and preaching, and second, craving the approval of the brothers and sisters. These temporal things give me my joy and peace." He mentioned that sometimes he uses ministry as a way to cover up the shame of failure in other areas such as his marriage. "I use the outward success to prove myself and feel better about myself," he confessed. His ongoing need has been to apply the gospel to his own heart.

Pastor D also openly shared his desire for success and his own need for the gospel. He admitted, "I had a strong desire for success. At the same time, I had a real strong sense of inferiority. My pride and sense of inferiority were like two sides of the same coin." His own desire for success was rooted in a desire to "be honored and respected by others." This pride also made him "look down on others who weren't successful." It was only after reading the Bible that Pastor D "started realizing the only

truly great person is Jesus.” The greatness of Jesus freed him from the pressure of having “to be superman.” His own testimony was that “My values were turning to the greatness of Jesus instead of myself.”

Discussion of Findings

The literature and interviews confirmed that the gospel of grace is the only power that can penetrate the depths of the human heart. Whether in the context of Chinese or any other culture, the gospel is always the true solution for the root problem of the human condition—sin. As Pastor F remarked, “I think ... our sin issue is always a constant with all people, all over the world. So in that sense, for the post-eighties generation, they still have to deal with this sin in their lives, their sinful nature, and the different expressions of it in their lives.” Regardless of culture, the universal reality of sin remains as the ultimate problem. The only solution will always be a clear proclamation of the gospel.

What is particularly surprising, however, is the great spiritual fervor and renewal coming out of a recovery of the gospel. It was clear, especially in the interviews, just how much the gospel was generating new zeal, renewed commitment and deeper repentance among the house church leaders. It almost seemed as if the gospel had somehow become obscured or even lost among the older traditional house church networks. None of the pastors would go so far as to say this. Yet, it was evident that the gospel had been buried among layers of moralistic, separatist pietism. Pastor G offered a strong descriptive contrast between the traditional house churches versus the gospel-centered urban churches when he said, “one is heaven and the other is hell.” He continually criticized the traditional house churches’ spirituality as testimony-based and “very hard to pass on or to even communicate to the next generation because it’s based more on experience.”

Though these pastors respected the spiritual fervor and commitment of the earlier traditional house church leaders, they nevertheless felt that the outcome of their theology, or lack thereof, contributed to a spiritually stagnant church. It is clear to me that a firm recovery of the gospel message became a source of new wonder and amazement for the younger city church pastors.

To this researcher, the interviews provided much deeper insight into why and just how much the gospel is bringing spiritual renewal to these churches. There is very little research or literature on the impact of the gospel in city churches. While the literature provided information on the nature of modern day Chinese culture and how the values of the younger generation are changing, resources on Christ-centered preaching to this generation are lacking.

The pastors overwhelmingly spoke of how much the Chinese culture promotes a drive to perform and prove oneself to one's peers and society. The Confucian culture of shame and honor mixed with the strong need to perform and prove oneself infiltrates the culture of the church as well. This strong performance-oriented culture cannot be changed by simply telling people how to live. In a culture where honor and shame are strong motivators and identities are rooted in one's ability to increase his honor in the culture, only the power of a deeply rooted gospel can replace the idols of this shame- and honor-based culture. The shame of not earning as much money as one's peers, or of not driving as nice a car, or not having as nice a home can only be replaced by a deep faith in the love of Christ. The performance orientation of the Chinese culture can only change when the performance Christ already accomplished for us through his sinless life, death,

and resurrection becomes rooted in the human heart. Only the gospel of grace has the power to demolish these deeply rooted idols of the culture.

Another insight that emerged from the literature and interviews was the need for a new generation of younger church leaders who have both a deep understanding of the changing cultural dynamics of China and a deep understanding of the gospel. It was clear in the interviews what while the younger city church pastors held the older generation of pastors in high esteem, they also recognized the need for the church to adapt to new cultural realities. The church is no longer under the intense persecution it once faced. Rather than seeing the world as a hostile force to try to avoid and separate from, this new generation of Christians wants to know how to live out their faith in the midst of the culture. They are seeking ways to engage the culture with their Christian faith. They want to know how to work and raise a family as a Christian. They want to know how to bring about justice and social good for the betterment of China. While the previous generation of Christians often made a sharp distinction between the sacred and secular, the younger generation of Christians wants to know how the sacred and secular come together in the gospel. The younger city church pastors have the challenge of thinking more theologically about these issues. The older house church leaders continually emphasized cross-bearing, suffering, and repentance. The younger church leaders now have to equip their people not only to carry a cross, but also how to bring the cross into the world in which they live.

As stated in the introduction of this paper, earlier missionary efforts focused mainly on bringing the gospel to unreached peoples in China and establishing churches. While the need to take the gospel to the still unreached parts of China remains, much of

the missionary efforts in China must now focus on equipping and growing these church leaders to theological and spiritual maturity. Even though there are countless house churches throughout China, many of them lack a strong biblical, theological, gospel-centric foundation. On top of that, many are very isolated and still do not know how to cooperate together for the furtherance of the gospel. Since many of these city church leaders are still very young (most of the pastors interviewed were in their thirties), they need mentors and shepherds. Many of these young leaders are left to themselves to figure out pastoral ministry. They have access to high-quality theological training, but lack good mentors. This where gospel-centered missionaries who have a strong background in church ministry can provide individual mentoring and facilitate networking among the house church leaders.

I really appreciated the admission of some of these pastors that they need to apply the gospel to their own lives. Dr. E emphasized that only as preachers themselves live out of the gospel and preach the gospel will churches find renewal, as they themselves tell how their own lives have been transformed by the gospel. Pastor B's admission that he struggles with relying on the success of his ministry and preaching, along with the approval of his brothers and sisters in Christ to give him his "joy and peace" was refreshingly honest. The knowledge of the gospel and how it applies to the preacher is important, but being mentored by a seasoned pastor is indispensable. Where will these young leaders go to hear the gospel? Where will they continually hear the words needed for the transformation of their own hearts? They will not find it among the older traditional house church leaders. They will find it only among other like-minded pastors and missionaries.

A final observation gleaned through the literature and interviews was the vital need for churches to provide an alternative community for their people. The literature described the younger urban generation as the “most alienated” because of their increasing loneliness.³⁴³ Though this generation has experienced a level of material prosperity unknown in the history of China, they are isolated by virtue of their upbringing as only-children and by the inherent isolation that comes with city life. They face increasing pressure to perform and succeed at school and work, which alienates them further from their peers. The literature also noted their reliance on social media as a social outlet, observing their retreat to “the security of Internet chat rooms” and the way they “spend hours playing online games with friends.”³⁴⁴ Pastor B made the correlation between heavy online activity and falling into “sexual temptation” and loneliness. He spoke of how the younger generation will “go online to find comfort.” This is a generation that is relationally handicapped and disconnected from their parents and peers. The church must stand as the alternate community for this lonely segment of society.

Churches that are shaped by the gospel will provide an attractive and rich source of acceptance and love. If it is true that honor and shame are derived from the community, then the church must be the alternate community that treats one another based on the acceptance of Christ. This acceptance is not based on one’s performance or social standing, but purely on the finished work of Christ on our behalf. The church provides the spiritual family and friendships this generation is keenly seeking but lacking.

³⁴³ Bush and Fulton, *China’s Next Generation*, Loc 178 of 589.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Loc 183 of 589.

In this way, city churches can offer something attractive and compelling for the younger generation. They can provide a true home and family for this lonely generation.

Recommendations for Practice

It is this researcher's strong belief that the health of the church in China will ultimately stem from the health of its pastors and leaders. The only way the church will grasp the gospel and its implications for life will be if the pastors themselves grasp the gospel in their own hearts and learn to live its truth in their own lives. The interviews testified to spiritual renewal happening among leadership teams and churches once the pastors themselves learned to apply the gospel in their own lives. Ultimately, authentic Christ-centered preaching springs from gospel-centered pastors. I could not agree more with Dr. E, who said that "one of the keys" for a healthy church is the pastor's own renewal. He shared, "If the preacher does not preach the gospel from the pulpit you cannot have a gospel-centered, Christ-centered ministry."

My recommendation is to establish gospel-centered ministry networks among city pastors. Pastors themselves need ongoing renewal and encouragement to flourish in their respective ministries. The safest way for city pastors in China to find ongoing spiritual encouragement will be through a network of other like-minded pastors who can gather to share openly and pray for one another. In a culture where transparency is made difficult by a strong sense of honor and shame and not showing weakness, it is imperative for pastors to find a safe place where they can be honest about their struggles and weaknesses.

Since this safety is very difficult to create among indigenous church leaders themselves, missionaries and foreign workers would be the best people to create and

facilitate this kind of networking. There are not many gospel-centered city pastors who have the level of influence to unite the pastors in the city on their own. However, if a foreign missionary gathers pastors who have a common interest in Christ-centered preaching and ministry, this kind of network is possible. This networking can also be used as a way to further equip pastors with Christ-centered preaching resources and materials. Another benefit of such gatherings would be to discuss how the gospel can be contextualized for the younger urban generation. Foreign missionaries will always face a limitation in how much they can actually equip indigenous pastors. While foreign missionaries can help create such networks and provide theological training, only the city pastors themselves know how to best take the gospel into their own culture and context.

Adding a course on Christ-centered preaching to the curriculum of the many underground seminaries in China would greatly facilitate Christ-centered preaching in China. Most seminaries teach a standard curriculum of theology, Bible and practical ministry classes. These seminaries are thoroughly biblical and committed to the historical-grammatical approach to Bible interpretation. The vast majority, however, do not have a course on Christ-centered preaching or on Christ-centered hermeneutics. There are essentially two barriers. First, the leaders of these seminaries must buy into the concept of Christ-centered preaching. Second, even if they are open to such an approach, they must have someone who is qualified to teach such a course.

Regarding the first barrier, I am encouraged to see more and more Chinese seminaries open to adding a course on Christ-centered preaching. This researcher has been able to teach this course to several different seminaries and Bible schools that previously did not offer it. When seminary leaders hear about the value of Christ-centered

preaching, they are usually open to having a course taught on this subject. These seminaries are key training grounds for future church leaders and can become the source of disseminating key theological concepts on a massive scale. I have been encouraged to see a growing movement of city churches and seminaries that are adopting a Christ-centered approach to the Scriptures and preaching. It is my sincere hope that more trainers and teachers with experienced pastoral ministry backgrounds can go into these schools and train a new generation of pastors in the area of Christ-centered preaching.

Recommendations for Further Research

China is probably experiencing more rapid changes to its culture than any other part of the world. The steep rise in urbanization, the institution of the one-child policy, the recent change of that policy to a two-child policy, and the swift rise of materialism have all combined to create a dynamic culture. The culture continues to change as China experiences even more Westernization. Research on the culture cannot keep up with ongoing changes. As mentioned earlier, there is plenty of research on the history of China up to the time of urbanization. There is relatively little published research on post-urbanized China. There is great need for more research to be done on city life in China as well as on the value system of the younger generation. China will continue to experience more changes in the years to come and the culture will become even more nuanced and multidimensional. Therefore, there will be even more of a need for cultural anthropologists and sociologists to gather new information about the changes happening in the country.

One organization that is doing cutting-edge cultural research is ChinaSource. Based in Hong Kong, this organization is composed of Christian researchers who are

dedicated to serving the church in China by exploring the social, political, and spiritual climate of China. This is the group doing the most to further our academic understanding of the cultural dynamics of China. I recommend ChinaSource as a premier resource for anyone wishing to do additional studies on the cultural and spiritual dynamics of China.

The work of missionaries and even indigenous church leaders is always to study both the gospel and the culture. Although the effectiveness of gospel ministry has always depended on the work of the Holy Spirit and the promise and power of Christ to build His church, God has commissioned preachers to work hard at bringing the gospel to people they are seeking to reach. The effort requires an intimate knowledge of both the culture and the gospel. In this regard, I would like to see additional resources and studies on how the gospel can confront the culture of urban China. Extant research and literature deal with one or the other, but almost nothing examines the intersection of the gospel and culture. Additional research on that topic would serve the church well.

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