

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## Lesson 91

### Chinese Missions – The Christian Faith Goes East

China is home to 1.3 billion people, the most populated country on the globe. Have you ever wondered how many Christians are there? The estimates vary, but seem to be somewhere between at least 20 million and perhaps as many as 100 million.<sup>1</sup> Where did all those Christians come from, especially in a communist country?

The answers to those questions come from stories of church history, many that we know, and many more lost to the pages of history. We will look at a general narrative overview of China and Christianity, and then probe the stories of three key individuals in the development of Chinese Christianity today. Through these stories, we find that God has worked through human difficulties and frailties, politically and personally, to bring growth to his Church. It is important that we realize that while these stories center on China, there are similar stories that would apply to the others countries of Asia, Africa, and the world.

Since Jesus commissioned his apostles to “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15), the church has worked toward that end. The net result is a faith that is spreading around the globe, validating the word of God that through the seed of Abraham, “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 18:18; Gal. 3:8). Today, we see the work of God in China.

### CHINA – CHRISTIAN OVERVIEW

Ruth Tucker, a Missions Professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, gives four stages of Christianity’s arrival into China. First, the Nestorian heretics that were exiled from the Byzantine Empire (see lessons 31 and 32) came into China from Persia in the 600’s. The Nestorians kept a presence in China until the 1300’s. The second stage of Christian mission work in China came from the Roman Catholic Church with a Franciscan monk in 1293, who ultimately had a church of 6,000 in Peking. Persecution ended that work very soon. The third stage was a return of Roman Catholics in the 1500’s through the efforts of Jesuits. This Catholic effort has stayed continuously, and today the number of Catholics in China number around 12 million today.<sup>2</sup> The final stage of mission work in China came with the

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<sup>1</sup> Ecumenical News International, 14 September 2005, *Just how many Christians and Communists are there in China?*, <http://www.eni.ch/articles/display.shtml?05-0691>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Protestant efforts that started in the early 1800's.<sup>3</sup> We will concentrate this class on personalities in the Protestant effort.

## **ROBERT MORRISON**

The Protestant efforts in the early 1800's started with the Presbyterian Robert Morrison. Born in England in 1782, Morrison developed an interest in missions from a young age. He decided that as long as his mother lived, he would stay near her and once she passed away, enter foreign missions.

Morrison's mother died when he was 20 years old. As Morrison contemplated where to serve as a missionary, he did so prayerfully. His prayer had been that God would station him in the most difficult area with the largest obstacles to success. Ultimately, Morrison decided that China was his mission field and he left for China in 1807.

On his journey to China, the ship's captain asked Morrison whether he expected to make an impression on the idolatrous Chinese. Morrison was noted to respond, "No, sir, but I expect God will."<sup>4</sup> Morrison arrived to a tough situation. He was under the oversight of the East India Company, which prohibited any religious outreach. While learning the language, Morrison set to writing a Chinese English dictionary as well as translating the Bible. The dictionary was impressive to the East India Company, and they hired him as a translator.

Morrison made his translation of the Bible in secret, in light of the Company's strict prohibition on evangelism. Once Morrison was done, company officials ordered Morrison's dismissal. Morrison's immediate supervisors, however, never carried out the dismissal.

Morrison went through health problems, emotional problems (bouts of depression), and family problems. He died at the young age of 52 while still in the mission field. Although Morrison served 27 years in China, he could count only 10 conversions from his efforts. English were not well received in China at the time. The Chinese Emperor struggled with the opium trade finding it destructive to his people. The East India Company was a key player in the trade buying the opium in India and selling it in China for good profits. The Emperor finally banned opium in the 1830's, and the British went to war over it (appropriately termed, "The Opium War"). The war ended with China giving England Hong

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<sup>3</sup> Tucker, Ruth, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Zondervan 2004) at 176-177.

<sup>4</sup> Eddy, Sherwood, *Pathfinders of the World Missionary Crusade* (Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1945) at 34.

Kong and use of five coastal ports. The Chinese identified many missionaries as a part of the opium trade, and there was a long resentment that fostered in the Chinese over the issue.

Although Morrison had few converts, he is still reckoned as a key figure in Chinese missions for two reasons. First, his Bible translation opened the door for many others to preach effectively. Second, while on furlough in England for two years (1824-1826), Morrison went around and urged Christians to go to China for mission work. He especially worked hard to see that unattached women consider going to convert the Chinese women.

Among the handful of conversions Morrison counted was a Chinese man named Liang Afa. Afa was a devout Buddhist printer that Morrison used to print Scripture. After reading and printing large portions of the Bible, Afa came to faith. Afa himself started writing Christian works and publishing his own material. Chinese officials arrested Afa, confiscated his house, and burned all his printing equipment. Afa never wavered in his faith. He worked to convert his family and then spent the rest of his life trying to teach all Chinese about Christ. Afa was repeatedly beat up, imprisoned, and persecuted for his active ministry, but he remained ever faithful, seeing multitudes converted to faith.

### **J. HUDSON TAYLOR**

Hudson Taylor is considered “one of the greatest names in mission among evangelical circles.”<sup>5</sup> Taylor was dedicated to God by his mother before he was actually born. The family was devout Methodists living in England when Taylor was born on May 21, 1832. Taylor decided as a young man that when he grew up, he wished to serve as a missionary in China. Taylor was just 21 when he sailed for China, having studied medicine briefly before leaving.

Once in China, things were rough on Taylor. His support was not coming as promised, and the locals were not receiving his mission efforts as much as he wished. Taylor’s solution was two-fold. First, he opted to change his appearance to that of the locals. He wore Chinese clothes, died his hair, and grew it out to put into a pigtail. Second, Taylor decided to leave the safe coastal towns and head inland into the heart of China.

The inland China mission efforts came out of a furlough back to England. Taylor got noticeably upset attending a worship service where hundreds of smug Christians were content in their worship ignorant of the 400 million Chinese at the

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<sup>5</sup> Anderson, *et al.*, editors, *Mission Legacies: Biographical Studies of Leaders of the Modern Missionary Movement* (Orbis Books 1994) at 197.

time that had no idea who Jesus was. Taylor organized a group of people to return with him and evangelize the heart of China.

Taylor was gifted as an administrator and organizer. His group formed an organization known as the “China Inland Mission,” a group still around today!<sup>6</sup> Today, the organization has over 30,000 missionaries active all over the world. Although raised Methodist, Taylor was non-denominational in his mission work. When he was not in the mission field, Taylor was touring the world to gather people and support for the mission efforts. He spoke to and pleaded with people from all denominations to support their respective missionaries and seek to change the world for Christ.<sup>7</sup>

On a personal level, Taylor was marked by his humility. Before he spoke to a church in Australia, Taylor was introduced as “our illustrious guest.” Taylor started by saying, “Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master.”<sup>8</sup>

Taylor’s courtship of Maria Dyer is worth a mention. Maria was orphaned from missionary parents in China and sent to England to live under a relative’s care. As a late teen, Maria returned to China to teach in one of the missionary schools (run by one of the “single ladies” that Morrison had convinced to enter the mission field!). Taylor was entranced with Maria and proposed to her by letter. The head of the school considered the pig-tailed, hair dyed, missionary too unworthy of Maria and instructed Maria to refuse the offer. Taylor kept secretly wooing Maria and some suggested that things might be different if Taylor would return to England and finish his formal education. Evidently, Taylor might then be deemed “worthy” of Maria. Maria’s response put an interesting twist on whether he would become worthy by leaving the mission field to finish his education. Said Maria,

I would wait if he went home in order to increase his usefulness. But is he to leave his [mission] work in order to gain a *name* for the sake of marrying me? If he loves me more than Jesus, he is not worthy of me – if he were to leave the Lord’s work for world’s honour, I would have nothing to do with him.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Since 1964, the China Inland Mission has gone by its changed name: “Overseas Missionary Fellowship.” For more information, see their website: [www.omf.org](http://www.omf.org).

<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon (see lessons 85-86) would remark, “China, China, China is now ringing in our ears in that special, peculiar, musical, forcible, unique way in which Mr. Taylor utters it.” Anderson at 193.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* at 199.

<sup>9</sup> Tucker at 191.

They eventually married.

Taylor was adamantly against the opium trade. He opposed it not only in words, but also in action. Taylor published repeatedly on the issue in articles for distribution in England seeking to get the Christians at home to bring pressure against the government opium interests.

Taylor gave most everything to God's mission efforts. He lost children and his wife Maria from disease, illness, and sickness found in China. Taylor himself finally died in China on June 3, 1905, after 51 years of mission work. He had brought over 800 missionaries to the work, began 125 schools, and saw 18,000 Chinese confess a faith in Christ.

### **LOTTIE MOON**

Charlotte ("Lottie") Moon impacted missions in ways still felt today. She is "required reading" for anyone who grew up in or attends a Southern Baptist Church.

Lottie was born in Virginia in 1840. Her family was quite well off, with her uncle buying Monticello after Thomas Jefferson died. This same uncle went into the mission field to Jerusalem in 1850 as part of the restoration movement (he was a follower of Alexander Campbell) (see lessons 87-88).

Lottie was small in stature, but large in intellect! Standing only 4'3," Lottie joined four other women as the first Southern women to receive Masters Degrees. Lottie was fluent in Spanish and English, and was also good at Greek, Hebrew, and Latin before she ever went to China!

The Civil War destroyed the family fortune and Lottie went to work as a schoolteacher in Kentucky. Lottie taught with her dear friend, a Presbyterian named A. C. Stafford. The year 1873 was significant for both women. That year, the Southern Presbyterians appointed Stafford to go to China as a missionary. The same year, the Southern Baptists also appointed Lottie to go to China as a missionary.

Lottie left for China and lived there until her death, 39 years later in 1912. Lottie's first order of business was to learn the Chinese language. She mastered it quickly and began teaching in a girl's school. Lottie was not intent on being a teacher per se. The school to her was simply a place to teach Christ.

Much like Taylor, Lottie prioritized learning and practicing Chinese culture in all the way as where it did not conflict with her Christian faith, including native dress. This made quite an impression on the local women Lottie saw as her mission field. Although a number of Chinese would revile her as the “devil woman,” Lottie took up a common life in China, going to the market, the local threshing floor, the schools, or anywhere else where she could visit with people, show them love in concrete ways, and seek to teach them about Christ.

Lottie loved one of her professors, Crawford Toy. Toy also went to the mission field in China, and for a time, they considered marriage. Toy was fired from the mission field for his views on the inspiration of Scripture and he returned to the United States, later becoming the professor of Semitic languages at Harvard. When asked if she had ever been in love, Lottie reportedly said, “Yes, but God had first claim on my life and since the two conflicted, there could be no question about the result.”<sup>10</sup>

Lottie actually ventured out into the inland areas of China on her own. She eventually moved to the village of Pingtu, where she knew absolutely no one. There were no other Christians there. It was on September 16, 1887, while at Pingtu that Lottie wrote back to the Southern Baptist women in the United States and urged them to take an offering at Christmas time to send more women missionaries over to Pingtu. The collection, taken in 1888, raised \$3,315, a thousand dollars more than the goal. Instead of sending two more missionaries, they were able to send three.

Every year at Christmas time to this day, Southern Baptists gather a “Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions.” As of 2006, the cumulative amount gathered was nearly \$2.8 billion. The offering is thought by many to be the largest annual offering collected by Christians<sup>11</sup> (over \$150 million in 2006 alone!).<sup>12</sup>

In 1912, Lottie was still evangelizing by and large on her own, when a nurse came to check in on Lottie. Lottie was sick, physically and emotionally. Lottie’s weight was down to 50 pounds. Nurse Pettigrew worked to get Lottie treated, but ultimately it was decided that Lottie’s best chance of survival was in the United States. Lottie was placed on a ship where she died just offshore Japan on Christmas Eve, 1912.

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson at 211.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* at 205.

<sup>12</sup> International Mission Board website at:  
[www.imb.org/main/give/page.asp?StoryID=5523&LanguageID=1709](http://www.imb.org/main/give/page.asp?StoryID=5523&LanguageID=1709).

## WATCHMAN NEE

We cannot leave our tour of Chinese Church History without mentioning Watchman Nee. Nee was born in 1903 into a Christian family that worshipped in a non-denominational congregation. Nee was a brilliant student growing up, who dedicated his life to Christ at age 17.

Nee never attended any theological schools, yet he has over 60 works that are available in English today. Nee was a voracious reader and an extremely intelligent man. Ranked first in his class throughout school, Nee changed the direction of his studies once he began following Christ. Nee's big influences over his own study included Pilgrim's Progress (see lesson 82), as well as works by Andrew Murray, John Foe, and others. Nee had a near photographic memory for anything he read. He also had an extensive library, spending one third of his income on living expenses, giving one third to mission efforts, and using one third to buy books.

Nee's bookishness is interesting for at least two reasons. First, he always taught and practiced the greater importance to living the Christian life as opposed to simply knowing it. Second, even though Nee read so many accepted Christian works, he always seemed to have a fresh approach to Scriptures. When Western Christians read Nee, most do not find the same typical ideas put out in other Christian works.

For example, consider Nee's comments on the passage in Matthew 22:28-30. In the passage, Sadducees (who do not believe in the resurrection) are quizzing Jesus. The passage reads:

**28**"Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?"

**29**Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. **30**At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven."

Nee explained that the Sadducees were missing two different types of knowledge, that of Scripture and that of the power of God.

Nee lamented that many Christians do not understand the need for both types of knowledge. Nee then commented that knowing only Scripture is inadequate. Satan knew Scripture enough to quote it while tempting Jesus. Then, Nee pointed out that when the wise men were seeking Jesus, King Herod was concerned and called the priests and teachers of the law inquiring about where the Messiah was to be born. These Jews knew their Scripture. They did not ask for five days to figure

it out! On sight, they quoted Malachi 5:2 where the Messiah is prophesied to come from Bethlehem Ephratah. Yet, Nee emphasized, the teachers and priests then went home! They knew where Jesus was to be born, they knew that some thought he was being born at that time, and they just went home. They could have seen the baby Jesus, but they just went home!!! Nee says, they knew the Scripture, but not the power of God! We should know both!

A classic Nee book is *The Normal Christian Life*, built from Nee's teaching on Romans. Nee believed that the lessons in Romans about the cross of Christ and the sacrifice that justifies sinners, the need to reckon ourselves dead to sin, the intense teaching about the law of sin and death, should never be considered matters understood and practiced by the spiritual elite. Nee saw this as normative. This is the "normal Christian life" that all should seek to understand and live.

Another work that has a "Nee twist" to it is Nee's comments on Ephesians. The book is entitled, "Sit Walk Stand." Nee notes the posture words Paul uses in the letter and builds a progression around them. Paul first writes that, "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). Nee states that this is our first posture; we must understand we sit with Christ in the heavenly realms.

The second posture word Nee cites from Paul is "walk." Paul says we used to walk according to the course of the world (Eph. 2:2) but now we walk in the good works God has prepared for us (Eph. 2:10). This is a walk worthy of our calling (Eph. 4:1). It is a walk in love (Eph. 5:2). Nee notes that as we sit in the heavenlies with Christ, we have the power and understanding, as well as the commission to then walk in the ways he would have us walk.

The final posture word Paul uses in Ephesians is "stand." Paul writes that we are to wear the armor of Christ to be able to stand against Satan and his schemes (Eph. 6:11). In this passage on spiritual warfare, between verses 11-14, Paul references us standing against Satan 3 times. Nee emphasizes that we will stand only once we understand our seat with Christ in the heavenlies and our walk in the paths God has for us on earth.

Nee was an extraordinary teacher who went from house church to house church teaching and speaking. This was not easy, especially after the Communist takeover in 1933. Nee had health problems (tuberculosis, heart ailments, chronic intestinal disorders, etc.), but he counted all these ailments as small and they never robbed him of his joy in Christ. The Communists imprisoned Nee when Nee refused to stop teaching. Nee was ordered to cease or to leave China. He did neither. Nee was following the heart of Paul noted in Acts 20:24, "But I consider



my life of no account as if precious to myself, in order that I may finish my course and the ministry which I have received from the Lord Jesus.”

Nee was imprisoned in 1952 for the crimes of his faith and of teaching in churches. Although his sentence was for 15 years, the Communist government did not release him. They kept him confined until his death in his cell 20 years later. During these twenty years, Nee was allowed no visitors except his wife, who died 6 months before Nee.

Under Nee’s pillow at his death, in his own handwriting, was scrawled a note on a piece of paper that read:

Christ is the Son of God who died for the redemption of sinners and resurrected after three days. This is the greatest truth in the universe. I die because of my belief in Christ. Watchman Nee.

### **POINTS FOR HOME**

Christ commanded, “Go into the entire world and preach the gospel.” Christ did not die for one race, one nationality, or one group of people. He died for people of all nations. The ultimate question for each of us is where do we fit into that picture?

1. Find God’s path for you. Find your mission field. Is it at home? Work? In a social setting? In a neighborhood? Or, maybe God has plans for you in a foreign mission field – either individually or financially. We know that God has created us “in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:10), so where are we doing those that fit into God’s work among the lost?
2. Jesus told his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Mt. 9:37-38). When have you and I last done that? Is that on our prayer list? Do we pray not only for the missionaries we know, but also for God to find more? Do we include that as a career choice for our children? Should we not be teaching our children stories about missionaries and opening up their horizons to the possibility? A retirement choice for ourselves or our parents? How serious are we about God’s mission to seek and save the lost?

3. Let's read of the people of faith that have served God in other lands. Let us never confuse God as the "Lord of the Americans that others are welcome to follow as well." God reigned on high long before the United States of America, and will for eternity. God wants "*everyone* to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9), and we will find great strength (and some stretching too!) when we learn the stories of others in other lands following Jesus.