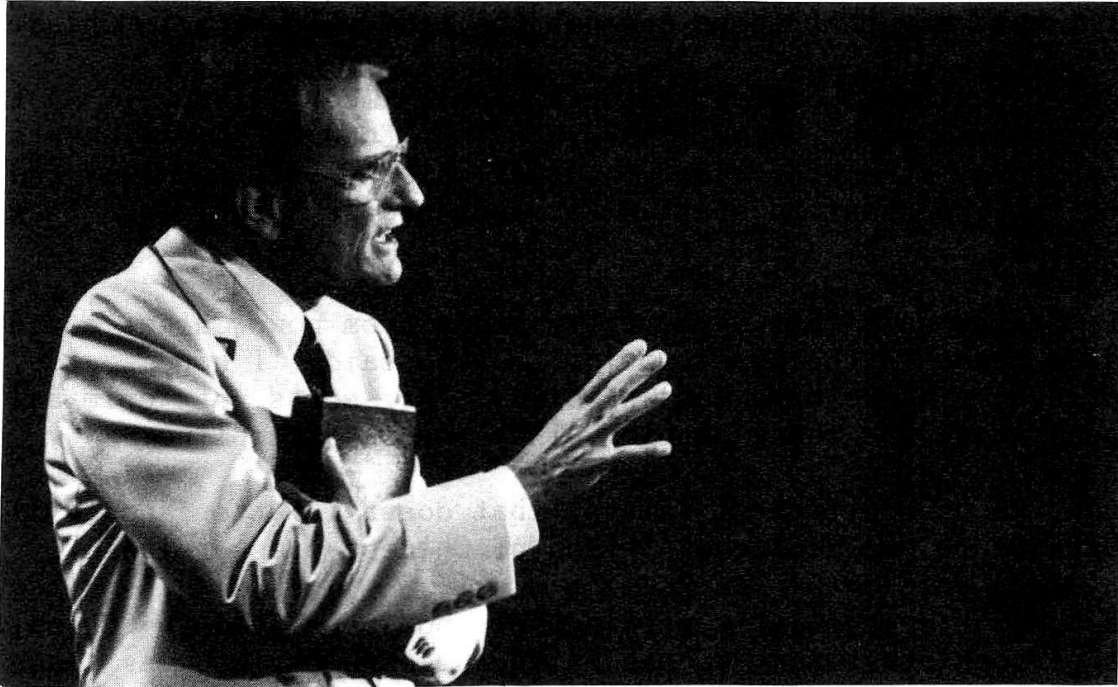


BILLY GRAHAM VISITS CHINA



by
**Donald
MacInnis**

On Friday, April 29, the American evangelist, Billy Graham, held a press conference in Hong Kong to report on his three-week visit in China. Although he preached in three packed church services, and spoke to numerous other groups, the main impact of his visit, according to a member of his delegation, was his low-key approach, which disarmed his critics, relieved anxieties and opened doors to Chinese leaders in four cities, Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The long-term positive results of his visit will be felt, he said, by the Christians in China.

The visit came in response to invitations from the Chinese Christian Council and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. The American party met with students of the Nanjing Theological Seminary, Catholic and Protestant clergy in Shanghai, faculty and student groups from several universities, and with numbers of officials in all four cities.

The highest-ranking government person Dr. Graham talked with was Premier Li Peng. While Dr. Graham would not reveal the details of his 50-minute conversation with Mr. Li, the Chinese press release gave these highlights:

"China can never be prosperous and strong only with material development. It also needs spiritual forces.

"The Chinese constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief. But in the past we didn't practice it in full. We are trying to correct the past. But I must say that there are not too many believers in China.

"To become a strong country, material achievement alone is not enough. We need moral power, too. There are four fundamental elements for building up moral strength, namely: ideals, discipline, morality and culture. It is important to start with young people, to give them cultural education.

"When Dr. Graham said that maybe fifty years from now China could become a leading power in the moral world, Li Peng said, 'I hope so too, but at the present time we have many problems. All sorts of criminal behavior happens among the young people. They refuse discipline.'

"'Although we have different faiths, that doesn't matter and will not be any obstacle to our dialogue.'" [End of Chinese press release.]

Although outdoor evangelistic meetings are not permitted in China, Dr. Graham's personal testimony to his faith in Jesus Christ was made many times, both with individuals and groups. In the Hong Kong press conference he said, "In nearly every conversation I spoke of what Jesus Christ means to me personally, and what I believe Christianity could do for the future of China."

He also brought up the subject of religious freedom and human rights in many conversations with government leaders. "On the subject of religious freedom I was told time after time that they recognize they have had serious problems, and continue to have some. They stated that part of the problem is fear left over from the Cultural Revolution. They are only ten years away from that terrible period which dragged China along the edge of hell. They are recovering rapidly from it, but they all admitted they have a long way to go.

"They talked openly about persecution, especially during the Cultural Revolution. We asked people who had been persecuted and jailed then if the situation has changed recently. Everyone said it is far better than it has been in many years. I am encouraged that there is now a limited [emphasis in the original] measure of religious freedom and that thousands of churches have reopened in recent years. I expressed the hope there will be steady progress toward greater religious freedom for all believers."

Dr. Graham was told about the new law on religion being drafted at

the present time. "The Chinese constitution guarantees religious freedom, yet it is not fully implemented by local officials in many areas," he said. "They hope the new law will clarify and solve many of these problems."

He raised the question of direct discrimination against Christians, and of indirect discrimination in such things as housing, income, education and social status. "Many leaders admit this," he said, "and are hopeful in the discussion about the new law that it will be a wide-ranging discussion of the issues involved with religious belief that will help educate both officials and the populace."

Dr. Graham was asked if there were any restrictions placed on his preaching. He replied that there were none. "The message I preached in China is the same message I have preached all over the world: the good news that God loves us and sent His Son into the world to forgive us and reconcile us to God so we could have our hearts changed and have hope for the future I sensed in the parts of China we visited a great spiritual hunger that I believe can only be met by a personal relationship with Christ."

He believes that reports of tremendous church growth in China, especially in the rural areas, are accurate. He reported on a two-hour discussion on religion with church leaders, atheistic leaders, economic leaders and others, nearly all of them professors at universities. One, introduced as an atheist scholar who studies religious phenomena in China, acknowledged that there was [Christian] religious growth everywhere in China. "There is no single province in China," he said, "without a strong Christian minority."

Dr. Graham believes that China may be in the midst of "one of the greatest spiritual awakenings in history." Even official statistics indicate that the number of Christians has increased by eight-fold or more since 1949, he said. No one knows what the total number is, "but almost everyone admits that there are many millions, and that it is growing very fast. At the same time, Chinese Christians are still a tiny minority and they live in a society which is guided by an atheistic ideology."

Then what about the future? "I came away rejoicing that the gospel is being faithfully proclaimed in China both in churches and in private meetings, and that the Bible is becoming more available. . . . I am very optimistic about the future of the Christian faith in China. Christians in China could be salt and light in Chinese society, and could be a

great moral and spiritual force for good in the nation where God has placed them."

Speaking of the potential impact of Chinese Christians on the church elsewhere in the world, he said, "The Chinese church lacks many things materially, but they have a spiritual wealth which can overflow to those of us in other parts of the world. They have a spiritual depth which has grown strong through persecutions and hardships. They have a love for others which is a challenge to us all. Many of those I met have a great sense of forgiveness for those that persecuted them. I have realized in a fresh way that Christ, who was born at the point where Africa, Europe and Asia touch, transcends all cultural, ethnic and political barriers."

Dr. Graham summed up his thoughts on leaving China after his memorable three-week visit: "I . . . leave China with a deeper conviction that the central issues of our time are not economic or political, but moral and spiritual in nature. All across the world, including China, people are searching for purpose and meaning in life, and for hope for the future - even though they may not be conscious of it.

"It is my prayer that across our world, we will have a new realization of our need for moral and spiritual foundations for our lives and that many will turn to Christ, who alone can give us the guidance and power we need in our world."



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