On Theological Contextualization

Ken Baoping

When we are doing theology, although we must consider any new meaning in the revelation which God gives us because this revelation occurs in accordance with our concrete context, we must also consider the meaning of this revelation in the tradition of the church and of faith because God's truth is everlasting and universal. Only in this way will the message of God recounted in our theology be in accordance with God's will, and appropriate to the needs of the church and of Christians.

The context in which today's Chinese church finds itself is that China is in the midst of carrying out a reform the likes of which she has never seen before. Through this reform we want to make our socialist motherland more strong and prosperous. During the process of this reform western ideas are flowing thick and fast. The Chinese church is no exception, but is on the receiving end of all kinds of theological opinions. In 1991, the China Christian Council was accepted as a full member of the World Council of Churches. This strengthens the link between the Chinese church and the universal church. In such a context, how can we run our church well in accordance with the Three-Self principle? How can we be compatible with socialism, and at the same time function as light and salt in society? How can we have our own special characteristics, and at the same time share together with the brothers and sisters of the universal church each one's spiritual experiences? First we must correctly know ourselves and know the concrete context in which we are placed. We must listen attentively to what God is saying to our context.

-- from "On Theological Contextualization,"
The Chinese Theological Review: 1991 (forthcoming)
Provincial Christian Conferences Held

The Provincial Christian Councils of Sichuan, Fujian and Jiangsu recently held their provincial Christian conferences.

The Fujian conference took place in March with 180 delegates of which two fifths were under 50 years old. The conference received 60 requests for ordinations from churches all over the province, 90% of them for young seminary graduates. In addition to receiving the work report of the Standing Committees of the two bodies, entitled "Abundant Grace", the conference amended the constitutions of the two bodies, passed a church order for the province, and elected a new provincial leadership. Six speakers had been assigned to address the conference on self-support, theological education, church unity, overseas exchanges, churches in the countryside and church management. The last two topics were discussed with particular intensity during the meeting.

The Sichuan conference, held in April, was made up of 124 delegates from 66 different churches. In line with the aim of rejuvenating the church leadership, 39 participants were younger than 50, and the average age was 57. Thirty-eight of the delegates were women. Thirty-four per cent of the members of the newly elected Provincial Christian Council have graduated from theological colleges within the last ten years. During the conference, nine new ministers, five of them young people, were ordained in a joint service.

The Jiangsu conference was held in May with 202 delegates under the theme "Run the church well according to the Three-Self principle." The delegates took three half-days to discuss the work report of the Standing Committees. They also amended the constitutions of the two bodies and elected a new provincial leadership. On the last day of the conference, seven young people, three of them women, were ordained as ministers, with more than 1,000 Christians from the Nanjing area crowded into the Mochou Road Church. [ANS]

Mass Baptism In Hangzhou, Zhejiang

In a grand service on July 5, the first group of 308 people out of 700 new converts who had applied for baptism were baptized at Sicheng Church in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province.

Of the 308 baptismal candidates, 206 chose baptism by sprinkling and 102 were baptized by immersion. As Deng Fucun, General Secretary of the Zhejiang Christian Council reports, 64 of those baptized were under 35 years of age. As the Christian faith is often spread among family members, there were several couples as well as parents and (adult) children who were baptized together. Several more baptism services are planned for the second half of this year to baptize all who had applied. [ANS]

New Church In Qinyang, Henan Province

A new church which can seat more than one thousand worshippers was recently opened in Baixiang Town, Qinyang County, in northern Henan Province. [OVER]
New Church In Qingyang, Henan Province/2

In 1984, Christians in Baixiang started to meet at the home of one elderly Christian. By 1988, worshippers had become so numerous that room at this house was no longer sufficient. Collecting more than 4,000 yuan RMB, the Christians were able to buy a courtyard house which they rebuilt so that it could be used as a church. But as this violated building regulations, the building had to be torn down at the end of 1991. By again pooling their money, the Christians were then able to buy a large piece of unused land. After tearing down existing buildings, including a 25-meter-high smokestack, the erection of a new church could finally begin. Members of the congregation offered their hand-tractors, hauled in stones and organized their own building squad. Every day, older women from the congregation cooked food for those working at the building site. Within fifty days, a new church building 21 meters long and 11 meters wide was finished. Comments one church member: "When sisters and brothers work together, give their hearts and their strength, unite and rely on the Lord, so much can be accomplished - even this poor yellow earth can be turned into precious silver." [ANS]

Church Magazine Criticizes "Ignorant" Local Cadres

In its June issue, the national Christian magazine, Tian Feng, strongly criticized the ignorant behavior of some local cadres in Jiangxi Province. Under the heading "Discrimination does not help in uniting with religious believers", the magazine published the signed letter of a Christian from Jiangxi who complains that in his village, local cadres had established a rule that households with Christian members were not eligible to be model households because Christians are engaged in "superstitious activities."

In a lengthy rebuttal, the editors state that such action violates both the Chinese constitution and Communist Party policy, and stress that only "ignorant people" can mistake Christianity for "superstition." Quoting from the constitution as well as from the Party magazine, Red Flag, the editors note that Christians should be treated like all other citizens and should therefore also be eligible to serve as models in society. Party policy was not to stress the difference between believers and non-believers, but rather to unite the masses in the building up of the motherland. A final paragraph calls on the local cadres to fight against criminality and genuine superstition, for discrimination against Christians could only hamper the development of the countryside. [ANS]

Over 120 Students Graduated From Yunnan Seminary

Yunnan Theological Seminary, founded in 1989, celebrated its first two-year class graduation in July this year. As Bai Youhua, a graduate, reports in the May issue of the national Christian magazine, Tian Feng, the more than 120 students from 14 nationalities will immediately start to work as evangelists in all areas of the province.

In addition to the two-year program, since 1989 Yunnan Seminary has run three three-month training classes for evangelists, one exclusively for evangelists from the Lisu minority. [OVER]
Over 120 Students Graduated From Yunnan Seminary/2

There are approximately 100,000 Lisu Christians in Yunnan, representing about one-fifth of all Christians in the province. Furthermore, three Bible translation courses were held, and Bibles are now being translated into several minority languages.

With the seminary being short of staff, students have been integrally involved in the running of the school. They have taken over many management functions, including the purchase and preparation of food for students and teachers.

As Bai Youhua reports, the seminary puts a strong emphasis on the spiritual growth of students. Time is set aside every day for individual Bible study, and there are morning and evening prayers as well as a Saturday prayer service. In addition, physical education is stressed. Remarks Bai, "95% of the Christians live in high mountainous regions... you cannot be an evangelist in Yunnan if you aren't fit." [ANS]

New Developments In Jiujiang Church

Like many other Chinese churches, the church in Jiujiang was, until recently, administrated without any written guidelines. Recently, however, administrative and financial regulations were set up both for the local church and for the local Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee. At the same time, a financial report was written and published, the first one in many years.

On April 19 this year, a female evangelist who had been serving in Jiujiang was ordained as a minister. This was the first ordination in the Jiujiang church in 40 years. Jiujiang is in the central province of Jiangxi.

Another first was a three-day training class, held in April for pastors and responsible lay workers from churches and home worship gathering points in Jiujiang city and the surrounding counties. The participants studied basic Christian doctrines and discussed their responsibilities as church workers. [ANS]

Introducing Bishop Shen Yifan

Beginning with this issue, ANS will on occasion publish short biographical sketches of prominent Chinese Christians who may not be very well known in the West. Shanghai Bishop Shen was selected General Secretary of the China Christian Council at the Fifth National Christian Conference this past January. –eds.

Bishop Shen Yifan is a fifth generation Christian, both of whose grandmothers were Bible women in the former Episcopal Diocese of Jiangsu. His father, T.K. Shen, was the first bishop of Shaanxi Diocese, a home missionary district of the Chinese Episcopal Church (Chung Hwa Sheng Kung Hui), and he later served as principal of Central Theological School in Shanghai. [OVER]
Introducing Bishop Shen Yifan/2

Born in 1928, Shen Yifan received his primary and secondary education in Christian schools. Strongly influenced by the piety and Christian devotion of his parents, he decided to enter the ministry when he was still in senior middle school. Shen studied philosophy at the University of Nanking, and graduated with honors in 1948. He went on to do his seminary training at Central Theological School, earning his B.D. in 1951.

After 1949, Shen Yifan was unable to continue his theological studies overseas as he had planned. However, the tremendous social changes he witnessed in the early years of the People's Republic posed new visions as well as new challenges for him. For three and one half years, he served at All Saints' Church in Shanghai, where he was ordained to the diaconate and the priesthood. In 1955, he was appointed a secretary of the Standing Committee of the General Synod of the Chinese Episcopal Church. He became involved in church reconstruction programs according to the Three-Self principle and was also active in youth and literary work.

Because of his commitment to church unity, Shen Yifan actively participated in the movement to achieve close Christian cooperation in the unified worship services of the late 1950s. This was a decisive step towards post-denominationalism in the Chinese church. In 1958, he was called to serve as a pastor at New Grace Church, Shanghai, and in 1962 he accepted the pastorate of Shanghai's Community Church.

During the Cultural Revolution, Shen Yifan was harassed and disgraced by the Red Guards, and was assigned to work in a factory for seven years. When churches began to re-open in the early eighties, he resumed his ministry as pastor for the growing congregation of Shanghai Community Church. At that time, he also began to do research work at the Institute of Religious Studies of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

Since 1980, Shen Yifan has played an active role in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the church on the national level. He became a member of the Standing Committee of the newly formed China Christian Council in 1980. Six years later, he was elected resident Vice President of the CCC, and earlier this year, Vice President and General Secretary. He was consecrated as bishop by the Shanghai Christian Council in 1988, a position which gives him greater pastoral responsibility in the Shanghai area.

Shen Yifan's theological interests are expressed in a number of substantial essays published in recent years. These include "Chinese Christianity in Theological Reflections" (published in The Chinese Theological Review: 1985) and "Theological Trends in the Chinese Church" (published in CTR: 1988). His lyric "Christ Ever Eternal" (1982) which is included in the Chinese New Hymnal testifies to Christ's abiding presence throughout China's years of social turmoil and the subsequent church revival, and also [OVER]
Introducing Bishop Shen Yifan/3

to Bishop Shen's perception of the glorious Cosmic Christ. Bishop Shen lectures on Systematic Theology and the History of Christian Thought at East China Theological Seminary in Shanghai, and since 1987, he has chaired the CCC Commission on Theological Education.

Since 1981, Shen Yifan has travelled widely in Asia, Europe and North America, attending conferences and visiting churches and church agencies. He was a delegate to the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches which met in Canberra in 1991, where he participated in the entry of the China Christian Council to that world body as a full member. [ANS]

International Exchanges

Dr. Wenzao Han, Executive Vice-President of the China Christian Council, participated in an ecumenical conference on the environment in Rio de Janeiro (June 3-14), organized by the World Council of Churches. The gathering was part of the Global Forum, a conference of non-governmental groups from 170 countries, held in conjunction with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit).

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Bishop Shen Yifan and Dr. Li Pingye attended an international conference on "Churches Of The Reformation In Countries Of The Reformation" which was held in June in Neuendettelsau, FR Germany.

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The Chairperson of the Asian Church Women's Conference, Mrs. Monika Mannan, and Mrs. Yoo Cook (Eunice) Kim, Executive General Secretary of the Conference, visited Shanghai, Nanjing and Beijing in June, at the invitation of the CCC.

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In early August, Bishop Shen Yifan led a nine person delegation from the CCC on an eleven day visit to the Republic of Korea, at the invitation of the National Council of Churches in Korea. This represents the first visit of an official CCC delegation to churches in Seoul and neighboring areas. In June and July, the CCC hosted separate delegations from the NCC/K and the Korean Methodist Church. The delegations visited Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, Shenyang, Changchun, Yanji and other cities. Among other activities, both delegations met with ethnic Korean Christians and church workers in the Northeast.

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A delegation from the Indonesian Council of Churches, led by Chairman Dr. Sularso Sopater, visited China in June. This was the first church visit from Indonesia since the restoration of diplomatic ties between Indonesia and China.

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Blessed by God and guided by the Three-Self principle, the Chinese church, building upon a basis of an overall reemergence in church life, has experienced considerable development over the past ten years. The pace of development in the rural church, in particular, has been even faster: the number of Christians has grown more rapidly in the countryside than elsewhere, meeting points have proliferated, there has been a steady increase in new church construction, and the process of setting up county-level Christian Councils and Three-Self associations has begun. By means of various kinds of training courses, a corps of lay workers with some degree of biblical knowledge and spiritual attainment has taken shape, forming a nucleus of strength in pastoral work in the rural churches. They have taken upon the heavy responsibility of pastoring the flock and running the rural church well, and due to their industry, the patriotic and church loving witness of the broad mass of Christians in rural areas never ceases.

The situation in the rural church today is a cause for joy and praise, while the many problems and difficulties which still exist require us to turn quickly to the Lord in prayer. Relying on God, we must grapple conscientiously with each problem in turn.

Three basic conditions prevail in the rural church:

In recent years, the number of Christians in rural areas has increased quite rapidly, while the number of evangelists has decreased. Professional evangelists are even rarer. In Shanghai, for example, there are currently 100,000 Christians, 60 per cent of whom, about 60,000, are in the countryside. This is 2.5 times the number ten years ago. And in recent years the increase has been even more rapid. One suburban county had 2,213 Christians in 1985. By 1990, this number had increased to 10,397, 4.5 times the number five years ago. In 1985 there were six evangelists, or one for every 360 Christians. Five years later there were 10 evangelists, which meant one for every 1,000 Christians: even fewer than before! Nationally, about 80 per cent of Christians are found in rural areas, where the educational level of lay workers and evangelists is fairly low, some are in fact illiterate; most have not been Christians long. Their experience in evangelism is limited, and most have little if any understanding of the Three-Self principle or the religious policy. They have enthusiasm, but lack genuine knowledge. The kind of contrast formed of this triumvirate - many (Christians), few (church workers), inadequate qualifications - presents serious difficulties for attempts at running the church well in the countryside.

Another basic condition prevailing in the rural church is low educational level and insufficient grounding in the faith. Eighty per cent of these Christians are women with third-grade or lower education; over half are illiterate. Since rural areas generally tend to be quite backward in cultural, scientific and medical terms, the quest for healing and the casting out of demons is a major reason for conversion.

The third condition has to do with the size of rural areas, with churches and meeting points widely scattered. Churches are organizationally very weak; furthermore, in most cases from county level down there are no Christian Councils or Three-Self associations, no church and meeting point administrative bodies. (For example there are 12 counties in the Jining district of Shandong, but only two have Three-Self church affairs organizations.) Where these two organizations have already been established at county level and below, most are limited by a lack of strength and personnel, and whether in terms of numbers or quality, are far from suited to the needs of a developed church; some of these organizations are empty shells - they exist in name but are without substance. (For example in one suburban Shanghai county, an administrative committee for the village church and meeting points has been in existence for nearly three years, but has yet to meet. Members of the administrative committee aren't even sure who the other members are.)

These three conditions inhibit the healthy development of rural churches: This is reflected in loose organization and muddled administration; a feudal patriarchal style of leadership, where guidelines are either ignored or nonexistent, and which is subjective, arbitrary and frequently undemocratic. In this situation, all sorts of phenomena arise which frequently conflict against doctrine, the truth of the gospel and the Three-Self principle, or even violate religious policy.

Funding difficulties are also common in rural churches. Finances are often preserved of the "three no's": no order, no bookkeeping, no one in charge; a situation which easily leads to irresponsible spending or misappropriation of common funds. [OVER]
Report Of The Rural Church Group/2

Administratively, churches and meeting points lack a unified church order; things are allowed to take their own course. This situation has led to imbalance among districts: some have more than enough while others have very little. (Chongming County, Shanghai, is 100 kilometers east to west, with one church and four meeting points, all concentrated in the eastern part; the western part boasts not even one meeting point, which means that Christians living in the western part are hard put to worship conveniently.) Or it may be that a few people arbitrarily decide how many meeting points there will be and where, without reference to the number of Christians in an area nor to their location or actual needs. In such a situation, the distribution of churches and meeting points follows no logical pattern.

Pastoral work suffers because so one knows how to initiate thorough, long-term, solidly thought-out training. There is a one-sided stress on holding big meetings and revival; districts even compete with each other in this. Little wonder a responsible colleague for the Christian Council and Three-Self Association in one province has remarked that such meetings in his area had resulted in chaos.

In many areas denominational tendencies have appeared, with groups seeking independence in their own cause. In some areas things have gone a step further and serious splits have developed. Self-styled evangelists are thick as flies in rural areas; they move about unhindered as they constantly ordain clergy and hold worship services.

Things like this, which are counter to basic faith and doctrine, are more serious in some areas. Vestiges of feudal superstition have disguised themselves in Christian trappings and have been widely disseminated in the churches. Faith healing and exorcism, with the church turned into a hospital, are widespread phenomena. And there is a plethora of weird language and ritual. For example, in a newly built church in one province, a chair was placed in the pulpit, and one person insisted on further placing a “sacred sword” on this chair, saying that only then did it really represent the throne of God. In another place believers take candles and firecrackers to worship with them and set off the firecrackers as they enter the church. There are people who say that Jesus is unable to save people, that he is just a ticket, whose time has long since passed, and that it is only by relying on the Holy Spirit that the ticket can be cashed in, etc.

The various conditions that apply in the rural church provide a ready market for feudal superstition and heresy, as well as an opening for infiltration by hostile groups from overseas; enthusiastic but ill-informed good Christians have become captive to every kind of chaotic phenomenon, and some have even become prey for the small minority of people who make use of religion for illegal purposes.

Faced with both the joys and troubles of the present situation in the rural church, we urgently call upon the whole church to strive with all its might to run the rural church well in accordance with the Three-Self principle. This is our historical mission from God! We offer the following ideas for your consideration:

1. Stress thinking. Following the Three-Self principle, what positive efforts can be made to speed up the work of making the rural church well run? This is not only a question for the present, but one with profound historical significance. The great tasks of defending the truth of the gospel, purifying the church, and consolidating and developing the fruits of Three-Self, are general issues which must be set up by the people of whether or not the Chinese church can be well run, as well as on whether we can effectively contend with hostile groups both at home and abroad, resist infiltration from outside, and safeguard social unity and stability. Thinking and behavior which treat running the church well as a secondary issue, which fear difficulties, which are content to wait and see while doing nothing, are intolerable! Colleagues have pointed out that we must have full confidence and faith that God’s grace is sufficient unto us and that God will continue to lead and watch over us. At the same time, we should see that the broad mass of Christians and lay workers in the countryside have a simple enthusiasm made up of a pious love of the Lord and the church. The majority among them have a strong sense of having stood up. Their feelings for Party and nation are deep and simple. For our part, we have more than forty years of the fruits and experience of Three-Self and a base of pastoral work built up over recent years, we can most certainly overcome all the obstacles to our progress and make the church well run, thus contributing to the Chinese church and to the church universal.

2. We call upon the two Christian bodies at the national, provincial and municipal levels to make the countryside the focus of efforts to run the church well and to shape policies for the situation there. In order to strengthen guidance and expedite rural church work, we suggest that the CCC and TSPM set up a committee on rural church work, as part of the new NCCC to be elected at this meeting; and further suggest that such a committee (or work group) be set up by the two bodies at provincial, autonomous region or municipality levels. The importance of the two bodies at the county level should be heightened, and provincial and municipal CCCs and Three-Self Associations should delegate a certain amount of personnel toward strengthening the leadership of their [OVER]
two organizations at county level. We further stress that these county level organizations should do much more in concrete terms to make the rural church well run, and to safeguard the legitimate rights of the church. This is an important path to uniting believers and augmenting cohesiveness.

3. Speed-up training of personnel. We suggest that the two-year seminaries at the provincial level set up guidelines for these schools which are more explicitly aimed at training people for the rural church, and that they draw up suitable curricular plans adapted to the needs of the rural church.

All sorts of lay training courses should be continued; this is an important way in which to solve the current shortage of evangelists. Though there are quite a number of people who have gone through such courses, we should not rest on our laurels, there is a continued need for lay training. These courses must thoroughly implement the principles of love for the country and love for the church, as well as pedagogical guidelines for overall spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical development. Short term specialized courses are also needed, such as those dealing with rural church "finances," and courses on "church management" for those in charge of churches and meeting points, etc. We must change the present situation in which lay training is carried on willy-nilly, without planning. It must be done in a conscious and systematic way, with long term goals as well as planning for the short term.

4. Draw up a clear, easily understood and remembered basic church order. This should not simply be handed down from on high, but implemented on the basis of democratic collective discussion and consensus between those in charge and the believers, so that the process of drawing up such regulations can become an occasion for education, thus enhancing people's knowledge and encouraging consensus. People will happily comply with and conscientiously apply a church order which is arrived at in this way. Where a church order has already been adopted, the need for improvement, examination, supervision and thorough implementation remains.

5. In financial matters, we suggest the following:

(1) We hope that all levels of the two organizations will offer help with budget for the rural church.

(2) We suggest that provincial and municipal levels of the two bodies set up pastoral funds for rural churches to help our colleagues who serve in rural areas, especially so young seminary graduates can go about their work free of anxiety for the future.

(3) Following the teaching of the Bible and the Three-Self principle, we should educate our believers about their own financial responsibility for their church, and encourage them to give willingly and strive to do their part.

(4) Assistance should be given to rural churches with financial difficulties and we propose that churches provide mutual assistance to each other: those on the coast helping those inland, city churches helping country churches, the haves helping the have-nots. But this type of mutual assistance must be done through the offices of the provincial level CCs and Three-Self Associations, otherwise irregularities will arise.

(5) Qualified areas should be encouraged to set up self-support enterprises.

6. The Committee on the Rural Church under the CCC and TSPM should consider publishing popular reading materials suitable for Christians and lay workers in the rural church (such as books, brochures and flyers, collections of hymns popular in the rural church, spring festival couplets, parallel couplets and simple quizzes on doctrine and the Three-Self principle, etc.). We suggest that Tian Feng increase in size, adding sections devoted to the rural church, or that it publish a special rural edition of the magazine.

7. Win over self-styled evangelists. Organize them for training courses as well as those with potential into the ranks of lay workers or specialized evangelists. Organize "evangelism teams" to go into rural churches with a lot of problems, complicated situations and weak in personnel to spread the truth of the gospel and the spirit of Three-Self in a focused way. Whether these are "evangelism teams", "propaganda teams", or fact-finding or assistance teams, they can aid the CCs and Three-Self Associations to solve problems in a focused way through their understanding of the local situation.

8. Cooperate with the government in further implementation of the religious policy, and work towards solving the issue of venues for worship, by adjusting and supplementing the number of churches and meeting points for a more reasonable distribution of these as needed or as possible. Our colleagues' responses also indicate that in some districts government cadres are unable to do a good job of implementing the religious policy or even violate it. We should request that the government strengthen its leadership and education of grassroots cadres who deal with religion and raise their standard of work and policy level.

Many colleagues have also been at pains to point out, on the basis of their own experience, that we must strive to do our own work well, leading the believers in love of country and love of church, encouraging them to actively participate in central [OVER]
items of the government's work of rural development, such as collection of state grain, birth control, the building of water conservancy projects, getting the harvest in quickly, and so on. In general, wherever the church and Christians do things of concrete benefit to society, in those places the religious policy will be better, or at least comparatively better, implemented. We are grateful for your consideration of our analysis and suggestions and welcome your comments.

(Rua Yaozeng)

Abbreviations used in this issue of ANS: CCC, The China Christian Council; TSPM, The National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches of China; CCs, Christian Councils; CTR, Chinese Theological Review.
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