

The Power to Save

A HISTORY OF THE GOSPEL IN CHINA

Bob Davey

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Faverdale North, Darlington, DL3 0PH, England
e-mail: sales@epbooks.org
web: www.epbooks.org

EP Books USA
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web: www.epbooks.us

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Foreword

It is both an honour and a privilege to have the opportunity to commend Robert Davey's *The Power to Save*. It should be prescribed reading for Christians in the Western world.

During the precise period covered by these pages, the impact of the Enlightenment and the Laodicean character of so much church life have left the misimpression that the gospel has failed and that the hope that 'Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth his successive journeys run' was simply a pipe dream of Western political expansion. Robert Davey tells a different story. Here is a vivid record of the way in which, from the day of Robert Morrison's arrival in Macao (Macau) in September 1807 until the present time, God has done great and mighty works throughout the vast landmass of China. Christ has built His church in a way that defies merely human explanation.

The Power to Save combines a bird's eye view of these wonderful works of God with thumbnail sketches of many of the individuals who — with countless unnamed others — have been instruments of heaven.

On my bookshelves stand a number of lengthy, carefully researched and learned tomes on China. This book, however, tells the story these larger works omit; it reveals what they conceal: the story of a work of grace that cannot be described in terms of historical cause and effect, and of men and

women who, Esther-like, have ‘come to the kingdom [of God!] for such a time as this’.

Reading these pages has left me with two distinct impressions, the first general and the second more personal.

The first is that *The Power to Save* is a manageable length ‘must-read’ for Christian teenagers and young adults in the West. In former days physicians would send some of their patients abroad for the good of their health (admittedly only those who could afford it). The south of France and the pure air of the Swiss Alps were seen as wonderful aids to restoring health and vigour. This book will serve as a spiritual parallel for any younger Christian who feels that the culture in which he or she lives is so debilitating that survival is a struggle and that discouragement is the order of the day. A visit abroad, and a journey through two hundred years of the church in China, will do more good than reading a shelf full of the ‘How to get the best out of being a Christian’ literary genre that currently floods the evangelical world and feeds unsuspecting minds. Here, instead, is the kind of authentic spiritual pick-me-up that we so often find in Scripture: the God who did this kind of thing there and then is our God here and now!

The second impression left by these pages is more personal, yet perhaps not untypical for a Christian from the generation of the ‘baby boomers’. We — certainly I — have lived in the West all our Christian lives. A few of us have visited China; some have walked on the Great Wall. Yet the story of many of our Christian lives has been influenced and shaped in all kinds of ways by the purposes of God for his people in China.

Until reading this survey I do not think it struck me how true that is of my own life. I suspect that may be true for many others, too. For a remarkable number of those whose names are mentioned in these pages (and some unmentioned but who were no less a part of the story) were instruments of encouragement, instruction and challenge to Christians

throughout the second half of the twentieth century. I doubt that I am altogether untypical.

The physician who gave me spiritual counsel the night I came to faith in Christ had been a missionary doctor in China with the China Inland Mission. Like many a youngster in the 'swinging sixties', one of the first Christian books I was given was Watchman Nee's *The Normal Christian Life*. As a school-boy I remember taking a bus journey from the east end of Glasgow to the west end to hear Bishop Frank Houghton speak. He would never have imagined the impact his handshake at the church door and his few words of encouragement would have on a sixteen-year-old boy. It was possible in the 1960s to meet men whose lives had been impacted by Eric Liddell (whose real greatness lay not in movie reinterpretations but in hidden, sacrificial, Christ-honouring living in China). And then there was the ever-to-be-reverenced name of William Chalmers Burns, of whom I first read in *The Memoirs and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* — and from whom I hope I learned the lesson that greatness, or usefulness, is not measured by numbers of converts but by obedience to the Lord's calling. For here was the young man who, having been God's instrument in the awakening that took place in M'Cheyne's congregation, had then virtually disappeared in obedience to God's call to go to China.

Here too are men and women whose life stories became the staple biographical reading of a teenage student: Hudson Taylor, Pastor Hsi, John and Betty Stam, John Sung — and, perhaps most impactful for me, the story of James Fraser and his 'prayer of faith' for the Lisu people. Then again, there was 'the small woman', Gladys Aylward, from whose lips I first learned of the martyrdoms of young Chinese Christians, and, in addition, some whose names are less well known. I think of my first meeting with another CIM figure, Henry Guinness (less well known in the Christian world than his son Os Guinness would become). Can I ever forget my first encounter with a man who had taken the trouble to find out the name of

a shy eighteen-year-old before he crossed the room to introduce himself?

So these pages do not tell the story of a separate world, a part of the body of Christ with which we in the West have no connection. If you are a Christian this is the story of your family, the spiritual anatomy of part of the body of which you are a member. It is not an identical part — it belongs to the east rather than the west side — its struggles have been different from ours; it has felt more of the burning fire of persecution than the rising damp that has rotted the church of the West; its life has been shaped much less by church-building programmes and far more by hidden conventicles; it has survived, and witnessed within, the struggle to apply biblical principles in a world of Marxist totalitarianism, not within a democratic system. Its story must not be read by us on the assumption that we have 20-20 spiritual vision, but through biblical lenses. If we are able to do that we will learn much.

Among the lessons we will learn is one that the men and women from the Western part of the body of Christ whose stories are recorded here all knew well. Shortly before reading these pages I remarked to a friend on a word that seems to have dropped out of the basic vocabulary of contemporary Christian life but was central to the vocabulary of a former generation. The word? 'Sacrifice'. I can still see in my mind's eye that one-word title on a second- (or was it third-?) hand copy of an old Inter Varsity Press book, *Sacrifice* by Howard Guinness. Revealingly, a web search offers me second-hand copies of it at prices ranging from £3.00 to £44.81, but few contemporary books on the subject. How could this fail to be a major theme in a Christian community where some seventy-nine CIM missionaries — and countless Chinese believers — had been killed in the Boxer Uprising of 1900?

Perhaps, then, these pages will serve as a sobering, but also liberating, reminder to ourselves as Western Christians that God has not sidelined the principle of fruitfulness which

His Son both exemplified and taught: 'Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die it abides alone; but if it dies it will bear much fruit' (John 12:24). Nor should it be only apostles who can write, 'We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us ... always carrying in the body the death [literally 'dying'] of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you' (2 Cor. 4:7,10-12).

There are many kinds of 'death' to be died by believers; some are literal and physical; others involve the choices we make, the marginalizing we experience, the demeaning by society and the 'shame of the cross' we are willing to endure, the commitment we are willing to make to give ourselves to prayer, to holiness in an unholy world, to witness in a hostile environment, to put Christ before career ... and so on.

The Power to Save is far more than a spiritual 'pick-me-up'. It is a sobering historical narrative and a thrilling story of men and women 'of whom this world was not worthy'. But it also carries a radical challenge to the part of the body of Christ to which most readers of its pages belong.

I pray that reading this book will stimulate deep thanksgiving to God for his amazing grace, a sense of fellowship with the whole family of God, an appreciation for Christians who have sought to be faithful citizens of China while even more fundamentally citizens of the kingdom of Christ, and a fresh consecration to trust, love, obey and serve the Saviour. May 'his kingdom stretch from shore to shore 'til moons shall wax and wane no more'!

Sinclair B. Ferguson

First Presbyterian Church,
Columbia, South Carolina



2. *Christianity in China up to* AD 1800

The first definite introduction of Christianity to China was achieved by Nestorian missionary monks and traders.

THE NESTORIANS (ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST)

Nestorius (AD 381–451) was a famous preacher/monk in the biblical city of Antioch in Syria. He became patriarch of Constantinople in AD 428 but was condemned by the Council of Ephesus in AD 431 for heresy and banished. Nestorians held that Christ had not only two distinct natures (divine and human) but was also two distinct persons — a divine Son of God indwelling the human son of Mary. The orthodox insisted that, although Christ had the two distinct natures, these were united in the one person, Jesus Christ. Nestorius died in exile, but his views found favour with churches in Assyria and Persia (modern-day Iraq and Iran). Their churches also repudiated the worship of Mary as the ‘mother of God’ and, at that time, the use of images.

The Nestorians, with missionary zeal, diffused their doctrines along trade routes as far as Arabia, India, Scythia, Mongolia and China, from the fifth century AD onwards. The

system of belief and practice of the Nestorians was fundamentally weak from a biblical point of view. All the contemporary Christian confessions of faith, and earlier ones, lacked any clear statement on the doctrines concerning the nature and the way of salvation, such as, for instance, justification by grace alone through faith alone. It was this failing that contributed much to the growth and popularity of the monastic and ascetic way of life in the Christian church.

Tradition has an early date for the entrance of Christianity into China, but there is no evidence for this. The third-century Christian writer Arnobius (c. AD 400) mentions a people known as the 'Seres' as having been evangelized by his time, and this is taken by some to refer to the Chinese. The earliest plausible date for the entrance of Christianity into China would be about AD 505, with the arrival of Nestorian missionary monks in China. It was they, it is said, who first brought back silkworm eggs to Constantinople in AD 511.

The first definite date showing a Nestorian presence in China is a monument standing in the Forest of Steles Museum in Xian in the province of



The Nestorian Tablet, AD 781

Shaanxi. It dates from AD 781 and reviews the history of Nestorianism in that part of China from its introduction in AD 635. It also contains a summary of some of their doctrines and practices. The monument itself states that it was carved by the monk Jingjing of the Da Qin monastery. The site of the Da Qin monastery, about fifty miles south-west of Xian, was rediscovered by the Englishman Martin Palmer in 1998. The church building had been obliterated by Mao Zedong's fanatical Red Guards, but a pagoda has been left standing.

There is little trace of the survival of Nestorianism in China from these early times. After a period of severe persecution and proscription of all forms of monasticism in AD 845, the Nestorians seem to have died out in China by 900.

NESTORIANS UNDER THE MONGOLS AND THEREAFTER

Nestorianism had taken root in Mesopotamia and central and north-eastern Asia. In AD 1007 the Keraites, a Turkish tribe living south-east of Lake Baikal, became Christian. Nestorian Keraites were in the high service of Genghis Khan (c. 1162–1227) and his successors. A Kereyid Nestorian princess, Sorghaghtani (c. 1198–1252) was married to the fourth son of Genghis Khan. She was the mother of three brothers, Mongke Khan, Hulagu (Guyuk) Khan (who overran much of west Asia, conquered Baghdad and founded a dynasty in Persia) and Kublai Khan, who became emperor of all China in 1279. Sorghaghtani became the moving spirit behind the throne and was responsible for many of the trade openings and intellectual exchanges. This was made possible by her place in the largest contiguous empire known in the whole of world history to this day. She was the most competent and powerful woman in the Mongol empire.

The Yuan dynasty in China (1279–1368) was established by Kublai Khan but lasted less than a hundred years. Under the Mongols, the Nestorians found favour. By about 1330 it is

recorded that there were 30,000 Nestorians in Cathay (China). Monasteries and churches were recorded in at least five provinces. A Nestorian metropolitan, or archbishop, had his seat at Khanbaliq (present-day Beijing).

Rabban Bar Sauma (c. 1220–94) was a Turkic/Mongol born near Beijing. He became a Nestorian monk and diplomat. He travelled on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem with his student Rabban Marcos. As a result of military unrest they never reached their destination, but instead spent many years in Baghdad. Marcos became the patriarch of the Church of the East in AD 1281. Rabban Bar Sauma was sent on a mission as Mongol ambassador to Europe in 1287. The mission bore little fruit, but he did meet King Edward I of England at Bordeaux and also Pope Nicholas IV in 1288. On his return to Baghdad, Rabban Bar Sauma wrote up a keenly observed account of all his travels. His account has been translated from the Syriac into English and gives a fascinating extra viewpoint to Marco Polo's account of his travels to China. Rabban Bar Sauma died in 1294.

When the opportunity came, the Chinese threw the Mongols out. In 1368, the Mongols were replaced by the native dynasty of the Mings. Since the majority of Nestorians were of Mongol stock, they too were evicted. The native Christians remaining were severely persecuted and curtailed. By the late sixteenth century there were no traceable Nestorians left in China.

THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

With the rise of the Mongol dynasties, travellers, traders and diplomats arrived at the courts of the khans in central Asia and north China. The Franciscans Giovanni di Plano Carpino and Willem de Rubruk were sent by the pope and made official contact in 1246 and 1254 respectively. The Italian brothers Niccolo and Maffeo Polo set out on business affairs from Constantinople in 1259. They eventually arrived in 1266

at the seat of the Grand Khan at Khanbaliq. They returned bearing letters from Kublai Khan to the pope asking for a hundred teachers of science and religion to be sent to instruct the Chinese in the learning and faith of Europe. In 1271, armed with letters from the pope, the Polo brothers returned to China accompanied by only two Dominican monks and Niccolo's seventeen-year-old son Marco Polo. The monks, however, turned back because of the dangers. The Polo family arrived at Kublai Khan's summer palace at Shang Tu (Xanadu) in 1275 and stayed in China for seventeen years. Marco Polo took service with Kublai Khan and was entrusted with diplomatic missions and travelled extensively in China. He was even made governor of Yangzhou on the Grand Canal for three years. On the return of the Polo family to Venice in 1295, Marco Polo published a delightful narrative of his experiences, which was soon translated into many European languages. A heavily annotated copy of the book was in the possession of Christopher Columbus on his voyage of discovery to America. He was aiming for China.

THE FIRST ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSION IN CHINA

A Franciscan monk, Giovanni of Monte Corvino, arrived in Beijing (Khanbaliq) in 1294 with a letter from the pope. He was kindly received and stayed until his death around 1329. He was allowed to build two churches in Beijing and claimed to have baptized about six thousand converts by 1305. The pope sent further help and also appointed him Archbishop of Cambulac (Khanbaliq, Beijing) with a diocese of much of East Asia! By his death it was claimed he had 30,000 converts. The Great Khan sent to the pope for a replacement legate. Giovanni of Marignolli did not arrive until 1342. He returned after three years with a glowing report of progress. In Europe the plague of the Black Death distracted attention and reduced the manpower available for distant missions. On the fall of the Mongol dynasty in 1368 their successors, the Chinese

Mings, destroyed both the Nestorian Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Christianity completely disappeared from China.

THE SECOND ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSION IN CHINA: ITS ESTABLISHMENT (1601–1700)

Ironically it was under the later Mings (Ming dynasty, 1368–1644) that, in the year 1601 at Beijing, a new Roman Catholic Jesuit mission was established in China. The approach was not, as before, from the landward route, but by sea. Navigation of the eastern waters was now under the control of the Catholic countries of Portugal and Spain. In 1557 a Portuguese settlement in the peninsula of Macao (Macau) in southern China was approved by the imperial court. This foothold in the country became the only European settlement allowed by the Chinese in the whole of China. Nearby Canton (Guangzhou) became, in due course, the only port through which trade with the West was permitted until the nineteenth century.

The Jesuit Francis of Xavier died on his way to China on an island just off the coast of China in 1552. Alessandro Valignani became the superintendent of Jesuit missions in the East and went to Macao in 1579. He recruited the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who managed to settle in Chaoch'ing (Zhaoqing) on the mainland in 1583. An astonishingly talented and prudent man, by 1601 he had moved in stages to Peking (Beijing). Ricci had made himself very proficient with the Chinese classics. He dressed as a literary man and gained much influence with court scholars with his display of Western scientific learning and technology. He translated Euclid's *Geometry* into Chinese and won approval by his skill in making and repairing clocks, drawing maps and compiling reliable calendars. He gained an official position. He also had a number of converts. Ricci restated Christianity in Confucian thought and terminology while opposing Buddhist and Taoist concepts.

When Matteo Ricci died in 1610 his able Jesuit successors, such as the German Adam Schall von Bell (1599–1661) and the Belgian Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–88), continued his eclectic programme. Between 1620 and 1629 nineteen Jesuits joined the staff and they had missionary centres in six provinces. Schall von Bell was appointed court astronomer in the new Qing (Ching) dynasty (1644–1911) and Verbiest, the most influential of all, was president of the Board of Mathematics and also court astronomer. By the time of the death of Verbiest in 1688 it was reckoned that there were more than 300,000 Roman Catholic proselytes living in 1,200 communities in spite of some periods of persecution. In 1692 the emperor Kangxi granted toleration for Christianity by an edict. This increased the opportunities for missions. The future looked very bright for Roman Catholicism.

THE RITES QUESTION AND THE DOWNFALL OF THE SECOND ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSION IN CHINA (1700–1800)

What destroyed the Roman Catholic mission in China was the jealous rivalries that arose between the Jesuits, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Spanish Dominicans and Franciscans who had made their way to China from the Philippines towards the middle of the seventeenth century. The Dominicans and Franciscans were not slow to accuse the Jesuits of compromising the faith. They objected to Matteo Ricci's contention that the ceremonial rites of Confucianism and ancestor reverence were primarily social and political in nature and could be practised legitimately by converts. To them, all these rites were idolatrous. This controversy became known as 'the Rites Question'.

In 1697 the pope asked the Inquisition to look into the Rites Question in order to bring it to a conclusion. However, the Jesuits in China believed they already had papal authority to do what they thought best and they approached the

Chinese emperor, Kangxi, for his opinion. He confirmed and backed the Jesuit position. This proved disastrous because in 1704 the Inquisition found against the Jesuits and the decision was confirmed by a papal bull in 1715. This reduced the issue in China to a simple matter of supremacy — pope or emperor. The emperor expelled the papal legate and ordered out all missionaries who did not follow the Jesuits. Later, in 1724, edicts of expulsion and confiscation of property were issued against the whole Roman Catholic Church, the four churches in Peking excepted. Chinese Christians were ordered to renounce their faith. These and subsequent decrees were not enforced with equal vigour over the entire empire.

The comparative failure of the Roman Catholic mission up to this time was due to the dominant role of the foreign priesthood, the emphasis on political patronage and social status and, above all, because of its primary allegiance to a foreign authority. This was anathema to any Chinese emperor. After 1724 heroic priests stayed on as best they could, always in grave danger. In spite of all, the Roman Catholic Church still survived in China and in 1800 it is reckoned that there were up to 150,000 baptized Roman Catholic community members in China, half of the number that there had been in 1688. In 1807 there were recorded 1,800 adult Roman Catholic baptisms in China. This was the year that the very first Protestant missionary, Robert Morrison, arrived in China.

POSTSCRIPT: ROMAN CATHOLICS IN CHINA TODAY

The French Revolution and Napoleonic wars (1789–1815) threw Europe into confusion and crippled any efforts on the part of Roman Catholic missions towards China. Only after 1840 were recruits sent to China from Europe in any large numbers. Roman Catholicism's fortune in China then roughly paralleled that of the Protestants during the missionary era, without experiencing any of the spiritual revivals. Today they

number around sixteen million in China and are known as *Tianzhu jiaotu* (Lord of Heaven religion followers).

The system of belief and practice of the Roman Catholic Church has always been fundamentally unbiblical, especially with regard to the doctrines concerning the nature and the way of salvation and the question of where authority lies for the Christian. The original Protestant missionaries, from Robert Morrison in 1807 onwards, clearly believed this to be so and studiously distanced themselves from the Roman Catholics in their dealings with the Chinese authorities. So do evangelical Christians in China to this day. The Communist authorities in China today treat Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as separate religions.

THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL UNKNOWN IN CHINA

The biblical gospel had never been introduced to China. This was why Robert Morrison was sent as a missionary to China by the London Missionary Society in 1807. The gospel he brought to China was both Protestant and evangelical. His first task was to translate the Bible into Chinese.