

BOOK REVIEW

of

David Aikman,

Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power,
Regnery Publishing, 2006 [2003].

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Much of Christianity was prophesied in the Old Testament. For example, when God called Abram from his home country and his relatives, he promised “And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Genesis 12:2,3 NASB) All the families of the earth will be blessed in Abraham! Although the fulfillment of this prophesy started to be fulfilled right away (Abraham was blessed), it was centuries before the nation of Israel was established, and the blessing of all families of the earth didn’t really get started until after the resurrection. The West was, and still is, richly blessed in Abraham. But Christianity in the West has been in decline for quite some time, even as it is flourishing elsewhere. Areas of the world that the Apostle Paul himself evangelized have little Christian witness remaining. The same can happen to the West. God forbid, and it’s painful to even think about, but it is possible. But the lesson of the book under review is that the Kingdom of God is growing elsewhere even as it declines here. *Jesus in Beijing* is an amazing story of how Christ is building His Church in China.

The author, David Aikman, is not a missionary, as perhaps one might initially suppose, but rather a journalist. Missionaries have been banned from China for quite some time, in fact since 1949. So we don’t have missionaries to keep us informed about China. But in recent years there has been a relaxing of relations between the United States and China, primarily for trade reasons, and as a result China has been opening up to the West. For decades one could only speculate about the state of the Church in China. Now we are getting information. David Aikman is a former Beijing Bureau Chief for *Time* magazine, and traveled extensively in China, interviewing many Christian leaders to obtain the story he tells in this book. He thinks that what is happening now in China is similar to what happened in the Roman Empire just before its sudden and dramatic transformation to Christianity.

The book begins with an explosion! Then it gets down to the messy and mundane history, conflicts, various groups and individuals. First the explosion. Aikman describes a lecture that he and 17 other tourists attended in Beijing in 2002. The speaker was a scholar from one of China’s premier academic research institutes, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He said, in part, “One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world . . . We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don’t have any doubt about this.” While you regain your breath, we need to remind ourselves that many in the United States of America do not agree with what the Chinese scholar stated. It was the prevalent position held by our leaders (Christian and political) from the founding fathers up through perhaps Abraham Lincoln, but no longer. It is still a common and popular position by some, but what we hear more about these days is multi-culturalism, and that even wishing someone Merry Christmas might be insulting and insensitive and that manger scenes are illegal on public property (in some places).

To continue with the positive influence of Christianity already present in China, Aikman reports (in 2003) that “For the second year in a row, in December 2002, Beijing’s Forbidden City Concert Hall resonated to the solos and choruses of Handel’s *Messiah*, performed in Chinese by the choir of the National Symphony Orchestra and the China Film Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Su Wenxing, an openly professing Chinese Christian.” I continue to be amazed by the influence of Handel’s *Messiah*. Aikman continues to report that “There are Christian-run homes for old people, Christian-run orphanages, and Christian private schools the length and breadth of China.”

“The vast majority of China’s Protestant house church Christians, it turns out, are deeply pro-American and determined to evangelize the Muslim world, something Americans generally have been too frightened to do with much boldness. Among Chinese Christians themselves is the belief – indeed some Chinese Christians refer to it as a divine calling – for Christian believers from China to bring the Gospel to the Muslim nations of the world.” Everything I have referred to or quoted so far comes from the first 12 pages of the book. Later Aikman, in Chapter Ten, titled “Back to Jerusalem,” describes how Christian groups in China seriously are planning on evangelizing Tibet, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Palestine.

In Chapter Fifteen, China’s Christian Future?, Aikman speculates that “It is worth considering the possibility that not just the numerical, but the intellectual center of gravity for Christianity may move decisively out of Europe and North America as the Christianization of China continues and as China becomes a global superpower.” Of course, we don’t know the future, but Aikman’s speculation may come to pass.