

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

---

## Is "Postdenominational" Christianity Possible? : Ecclesiology in the Protestant Church of China

Ruokanen, Miikka

2015-03

---

Ruokanen , M , Chen , Y & Liu , R 2015 , ' Is "Postdenominational" Christianity Possible? Ecclesiology in the Protestant Church of China ' , Ecumenical review , vol. 67 , no. 1 , pp. 77-95 . <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12138>

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/156310>

<https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12138>

---

acceptedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*

Prof. Dr. Miikka Ruokanen, in cooperation with Dr. Liu Ruomin and Dr. Chen Yongtao: (1)

## **IS "POSTDENOMINATIONAL" CHRISTIANITY POSSIBLE? : ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE PROTESTANT CHURCH OF CHINA**

### **Abstract**

The Chinese Protestant church is the ecumenically most advanced church in the world because, as a merger of some 70 denominations, it has given up the confessional divisions and denominational structures. The Chinese model of "postdenominational" Christianity is more progressive than the ideal of the modern international ecumenical movement which promotes "unity in reconciled diversity." In this model, the confessional differences and denominational structures stay as they are but they are not any more seen as divisive; the unity of faith becomes visible in common worship of God's word and of the sacraments.

Giving up denominations was politically forced in China in the 1950's. Because the change was quick and abrupt, there was no time to develop any theological foundation for a postdenominational identity of the church. Also the ecclesial structures are complicated and weak in Chinese Protestantism. Although the Chinese model of a postdenominational church is a challenging model for world Christianity, it urgently needs theological strengthening, a deeper ecclesiology. The Chinese church is still in the process of unification.

This paper argues that merging postdenominationalism with the idea of Eucharistic communion ecclesiology, presently the most promising international ecumenical model, could greatly benefit and strengthen the Chinese Protestant church. There is a widely accepted consensus that the church is the congregation of believers in which the pure gospel of Jesus Christ is being proclaimed and the sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist) properly administered. This essential life of the Christian church becomes concrete in common worship celebrating together God's word and the sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. If there is a common understanding and shared life in this essence of the Christian faith, a lot freedom remains for varying contextual expressions of the faith.

As they worship together, the Chinese Protestant Christians must attend to the hard theological task of building up and expressing some kind of an agreeable ecclesiology on the basis of the Scripture and on the dogma of the undivided early church. Perhaps also a creation of a Chinese postdenominational catechism for a minimal expression and teaching of the common faith is necessary. Hopefully, the appreciation of the Holy Eucharist will increase in Chinese Protestantism, it would strengthen the identity of the Chinese church as an authentic ecumenical Christian church.

---

1

Prof. Dr. Miikka Ruokanen is Professor of Dogmatics (Systematic Theology) of the University of Helsinki and Guest Professor of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and Renmin University of China (Beijing); he is also Advisory Professor of Fudan University (Shanghai). Email: miikka.ruokanen@helsinki.fi

Rev. Dr. Liu Ruomin is Lecturer of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. Email: ruomin.liu@gmail.com

Rev. Dr. Chen Yongtao is Associate Professor of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. Email: chen\_0825@yahoo.com

Combined with the reality of Eucharistic communion ecclesiology, the idea of postdenominationalism has a great ecumenical potential. These two can complement each other: communion ecclesiology offers more theological substance to postdenominationalism, whereas postdenominationalism challenges traditional churches to make brave progressive moves towards a fuller visible unity of the body of Christ by giving up divisive traditions and structures. There is a growing global tendency in Protestant Christianity toward confessional and denominational indifferentism. In this new situation, the postdenominational experience of Chinese Protestantism could make an important contribution to the world-wide ecumenical development.

## Article

Chinese Protestantism is the most rapidly growing form of Christianity of our time: each year about one million adults are baptized as new members of the registered Protestant church, now counting over 30 million members. And this is only one side of the story: there are also thousands of non-registered congregations, the so-called home or house churches, which account for another over 30 million members, demonstrating the same growth rate of one million baptized adults every year. Every day a new congregation is established in China. In 1949, at the dawn of the People's Republic of China, there were some 700,000 Protestant Christians in China. Today the total number is over 60 million, almost 5 % of the population of the country. This means that the number of baptized Protestants has grown almost 90 times larger under the rule of Communism.

The Chinese church is one of the biggest national Protestant churches on the globe. It has been estimated that in the future Chinese Christianity might have a significant influence on the development of world Christianity. Yet the Chinese Christian movement is also a very complicated one. Theologically speaking, Chinese Protestantism lacks a clear ecclesial identity; varying theological emphases are tolerated, but theological expressions of the nature and the unity of the church are scarce. Practically speaking, local congregations, municipal churches, and regional provincial church structures are very independent, not being particularly subservient to guidance from the national leadership. It is very hard to define clearly what the concept "the church of China" exactly means.

The registered congregations of Chinese Protestantism live under the leadership of the *lianghui*, the two leading organizations, Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and China Christian Council (CCC). These were never meant to be real ecclesiastical structures. Rather, they were understood as temporary tools on the way towards the true Chinese Protestant church. At the beginning of the new period of openness in China, Bishop K.H. Ting stated in 1983: "The Three-Self Committee and the China Christian Council are but temporary vessels, the scaffold of the building in the construction process." Presently the Chinese church is a church *in via*, a *unifying church*, not a perfectly united church, guided by the principle of "seeking the common ground while reserving difference" (this slogan was introduced by the United Front).

In reality, what most fundamentally unifies the Chinese Christians in spite of their varying theological backgrounds and emphases is their shared highly devotional spirituality and moderately conservative, Bible-centered Evangelicalism. All this is still strongly reflecting the spirituality and theology of the Evangelical and Pietistic missionary background of Chinese Protestantism. Though the 1920's saw the rise of a significant controversy between the "liberal" and "conservative" wings of Protestantism in China, the prevailing mood was always that of conservative Christianity.

## Advanced ecumenism

In some sense we could say that Chinese Protestantism represents the most advanced realization of ecumenism: None of the traditional denominations have continued, and the Chinese Protestant Christians have overcome many obstacles which still divide Protestants in every other part of this world. Within Chinese Protestantism unity is not coercive: various forms of local church structures, different theological emphases, and various styles of spirituality and worship are tolerated within the one and the same church movement. They need not engender reasons for division.

For instance, Chinese Protestantism tolerates various practices of Baptism (such as sprinkling or immersion) and various theological understandings and forms of celebrating the Holy Eucharist. Groups with an Adventist background worship on Saturdays, and any number of local or regional churches may or may not engage in worship that emphasizes liturgy. Chinese indigenous churches such as the True Jesus Church (founded in 1917) or the Little Flock (founded in 1926) have the freedom to keep their particular identity and yet remain a legitimate part of the national Protestant church. Differences on certain issues of theology or church practices are not regarded as divisive, and mutual respect is a highly valued virtue within Chinese Protestantism. Such toleration of difference is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture.

In spite of this outwardly harmonious scene, however, skeptics might ask: Is this harmony a genuine ecumenical achievement or is it just a forced political necessity which will last only as long as outward pressure compels Christians to be outwardly united? Looking more closely at the development of Chinese Protestantism, we can notice **three main factors contributing to the evolution towards “postdenominationalism.”** (1) First, Chinese Christians always felt that denominationalism is a Western import reflecting the historical processes in Western Christianity and having very little meaning and relevance to the real life, culture, and the social situation of Chinese believers. The Chinese as a whole, including Christians, have always been anti-imperialist and suspicious of new things coming from outside. It thus became imperative that Chinese Christians get rid of the colonial image of the church, especially because of the Communist rule which took the absolute power from the end of 1949 onwards.

(2) Second, after many decades of turmoil, war, and internal divisions, fostering national unity became one of the high ideals of the newly established People’s Republic of China in the 1950’s. Most of the congregations under the leadership of the TSPM committed herself wholeheartedly to this ideal; it was not just a necessity coerced from outside but it became a true ideal of a great number of Chinese Christians. (3) Third, doctrine always had a low key in Chinese Protestantism. Chinese Christianity is a practical, communal spirituality based on a straightforward interpretation and active use of the Bible. The lowered emphasis on doctrine made possible a greater tolerance in matters of faith. Moreover, all of these attitudes are linked to the traditional view of religion in China: theoretical questions of religion have always been less important than the practical and ethical issues. There was never any seat of ultimate authority on matters of faith in Chinese Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism. These three factors should be kept in mind as we proceed to a closer look at how the idea of postdenominationalism evolved in Chinese Protestantism.

## Early attempts at unity

Historically speaking, Chinese Protestant believers were never fond of the confessional divisions brought to them by Western missionaries. As early as 1910, in the first World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, a well-known Chinese Christian leader, Cheng Chingyi (later the chairperson of the National Council of Churches in China), said: "Speaking plainly, we hope to see, in the near future, a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions. This may seem somewhat peculiar to some of you; but, friends, do not forget to view us from our standpoint, and if you fail to do that, the Chinese will remain always as a mysterious people to you!" Cheng Chingyi was recalling the "three-self principles" introduced by the British missionary Henry Venn in 1850. Venn emphasized that young churches should strive for self-government, self-support, and self-propagation. According to Cheng, denominationalism was of little interest to the Chinese; in fact, it was only harmful, weakening Christians in their struggle against "the powerful force of heathenism."

Cheng Chingyi was an example of how the ideas emerging in the newly begun international ecumenical movement were combined with interests deeply rooted in the rapidly developing Chinese Protestantism. 1900-1920 was a period of fast growth in the Protestantism of China, but it was also a period of great social and political changes in Chinese society. In 1911 the Qing dynasty fell, and the Republic of China was established in 1912; the Chinese empire, with a history of thousands of years, ceased to exist. New ideas of nationalism, democracy, modernism, and scientific progress became the ideals of Chinese intellectuals. During the period in question, there were **three important movements** that emerged in Chinese Protestantism: (1) a movement to create an autonomous church, (2) a movement to develop an indigenous Christianity, and (3) the interchurch coalition movement.

(1) **The autonomous church movement** began in the 1920's with a series of declarations by Chinese Christian leaders calling for independence from foreign-sponsored churches and missions. They were emphasizing the need for administrative and economic independence from foreign control and insisting on the right of the Chinese to freely preach the gospel in their own way. Thus, the movement was calling for the three-self principles to be put into practice. Within this movement were those who possessed a deep dissatisfaction with the denominationalism characterizing the churches in Europe and North America and which was irrelevant to the context and history of China. An ideal of replacing denominationalism with some kind of "supra-denominationalism" and that of creating a united church in China became commonplace.

(2) **The movement to develop an indigenous Christianity** had its roots in the 1910's and 1920's. The birth of indigenous Chinese Christian groups testifies that Chinese Christians were uncomfortable with and critical towards Western imported denominationalism. The True Jesus Church (est. 1917), the Family of Jesus (est. 1922), and the Little Flock (est. 1926) wanted to refute the teachings of the Western denominations by returning to the simple meaning of the Bible. They also refused any aid from the West in terms of both personnel and finances. Moreover, they rejected church organization and ministry in the form introduced by the Western missionaries. These indigenous Christians did not want to follow Western liturgical traditions or evangelical methods but to employ their own style of Christian spirituality and worship. In a sense, the indigenous groups were

rather radical practitioners of the three-self principles. The new independent church groups manifested steady growth, so that in the 1940's they accounted for 20-25% of all Protestants in China.

The issue of indigenization gradually gained more attention among Christian intellectuals since the 1920's. They wanted to view the process of creating an indigenous Christianity ("Sino-Christianity") as a deeper question of inculturation: How could they understand the Christian faith in terms of the Chinese classics, traditional customs, and Chinese ways of thinking and life? This new intensified cultural interest was linked with the general nationalistic atmosphere dominating the newly established Republic of China. Moreover, the Anti-Christian movement of 1922-1927 alarmed Christian leaders and intellectuals. This movement criticized Christianity contradicting the scientific and democratic development of the society being developed among Chinese university students as well as in other segments of society. Furthermore, Christianity was seen as the vanguard of Western imperialism and as having too much influence on the Chinese educational system through the Christian school system. The Anti-Christian movement of the 1920's had its forerunner in the May Fourth movement, or, the New Culture movement, which had been going on since 1917 and which was promoting the guiding themes of modernization, science, and democracy. This new wave of Chinese intellectualism repudiated all religion as harmful, unscientific, and irrational superstition.

(3)**The interchurch coalition movement** gained impetus in the 1920's. There was a growing indifference and even resistance toward confessionalism and denominationalism among the Chinese Protestant Christians. One of the best known early statements concerning denominationalism was that of the First National Chinese Christian Conference (this is the name given by the Chinese; Western missionaries called it the Fifth General Missionary Conference), held in Shanghai in 1922 (50% of the participants were native Chinese): "We Chinese Christians who represent the various leading denominations express our regret that we are divided by the denominationalism which comes from the West... We recognize fully that denominationalism is based upon differences the historical significance of which, however real and vital to the missionaries from the West, is not shared by us Chinese. Therefore, denominationalism, instead of being a source of inspiration, has been and is a source of confusion, bewilderment, and inefficiency... We firmly believe that it is only the united Church that can save China, for our task is great and enough strength can only be obtained through solid unity." In the face of growing nationalism and criticism of Christianity, the Chinese Christians saw it imperative to get rid of the imperialistic image of their faith, which was viewed as a foreign import and as a means for Western influence and control on Chinese people.

The Shanghai conference of 1922 was truly a milestone and turning point in the history of Chinese Protestantism. It was no longer a purely missionary gathering but the first national conference where the concerns about "the Chinese church" were dominating the forum, reflecting the rapid growth of Chinese Christianity. The first ecumenical organ on Chinese soil, the **National Christian Council of China**, was established in that conference. Its main functions were "to foster and express the fellowship and unity of the Christian Church in China and the realization of its oneness with the church throughout the world" and to help "the development of the Church in self-support, self-government, and self-propagation." Thus the three-self principle was adapted as the guiding idea of Chinese ecumenism.

The function of the Council, however, was limited to practical cooperation and to an advisory role: “The National Christian Council of China will play an advisory role in all matters excepting church doctrine and administration.” This decision to leave out doctrinal discussions and administrative changes became symptomatic for the later unification attempts in Chinese Protestantism: First, doctrinal questions have always been avoided, although it is obviously impossible to make deep progress in unity without paying attention at least to some foundational theological doctrines, especially in ecclesiology. Excluding doctrinal issues from the agenda of the newly established council reflects the typical lack of interest in theoretical questions in religion among the Chinese. Second, administrative pluralism had the result that church administration, at least on the national level, has always been rather weak in Chinese Protestantism.

The Chinese leadership of the newly established Council believed that Christian unity with a theological and doctrinal pluralism was desirable; unity was considered a matter of practical life, and doctrinal unity was not considered necessary. Liu Tingfang’s famous phrase “to agree to differ but to resolve to love” conveyed that attitude very well. But there was also another reason: The 1920’s saw a widening gap between the “liberals” and “conservatives” among the foreign missionaries working in China. New missionaries, especially those coming from America, were heavily influenced during their training in college by the results of historical-critical exegesis, new ideas of evolution, social gospel, etc. It would have been very difficult, if not impossible, at this time to reach a theological consensus and to formulate a common confession of faith for the whole Protestant community in China.

The growing tension between the “conservative” and “liberal” or “modernist” camps in Chinese Protestantism became visible in 1929 as the conservative camp established the **League of Christian Churches** to form a counterpart to the National Christian Council. The League criticized the denominationalism imported from the West, but it emphasized a theological consensus on certain Evangelical doctrinal fundamentals as the necessary prerequisite for true unity: functional unity in church life and practice was viewed as not enough. This conservative tradition is present until today among the non-registered Christian groups in China.

From the point of view of the Chinese participants in the Shanghai meeting of 1922, the independence of the Chinese church from Western control was the highest goal: the process of unification becomes possible only by the way of developing an indigenous Christianity and putting into practice the three-self principles. A Chinese delegate Ying Yuandao summed this up: “The representatives that participated in the Conference, half of whom were native Chinese, were especially intent on hearing the opinions of the Chinese delegation. In this fact we can see a shift taking place in who has the major say in Chinese Christian affairs from the Western missionaries to the native Chinese community... the main theme of the conference was finally decided upon as a ‘Church of China.’ Its main purpose was to promote the development of a church of China, while at the same time conveying to the Chinese people that the true Christian churches of China are those run and attended by Chinese, not by Westerners.”

The 1920’s saw a number of **successful unions** within the Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, and Methodist denominations. The most famous significant unified church was **The Church of Christ in China**, established in 1927. This unified church brought

together 16 church groups from Presbyterian, Baptist, and Congregational backgrounds. This new “super-denomination” was the first church union in China to go beyond confessional lines, and it became at that time the biggest church in China. Later more church groups with Methodist, Baptist, and Congregational backgrounds joined as new members. Even here the union was seen in rather practical terms: the aim was to unite in one organic body of worship, mutual edification, and service, asking no one to sacrifice beliefs which they viewed as vital to Christian living. In reality, The Church of Christ became a kind of **loose federal union with most authority remaining at the synodical level**. The lack of doctrinal and ecclesiastical coherence left the church short of a fully functional church body. The situation of the 1920’s is surprisingly similar to the state of Protestantism in today’s China.

The process of implementing the three-self ideals continued in the 1930’s and 40’s. The role of Chinese clergy and leadership in Chinese Protestantism was gradually strengthened; decisions were increasingly made by the native Chinese, not by the Western missionaries or their organizations. The Sino-Japanese war was an additional factor weakening the role of Western missionaries, as many American and European missionaries were expelled or sent to concentration camps by the Japanese. Many missionary institutions had to be closed down. The Chinese civil war was also impeding the effectiveness of the work of Western missionaries. The changing conditions of China were compelling the Chinese Christians step by step to take over the management of the church. The period of 1930-1950 also saw the birth of critical, independent Chinese theological thinking. Chinese Christian intellectuals, such as T.C. Chao, L.C. Wu, and Y.T. Wu, were confronting problems of integrating their Christian faith with traditional Chinese philosophical and moral ideas, with modern science, social development, nationalism, and Communism. Their special concern was to make the Chinese believers aware of their moral responsibility in the society.

### **The compelled unification of the churches in the 1950’s**

The process of developing an indigenous Christianity and of pursuing the three-self program, strongly promoted in the early decades of the 20th century, were put into full practice in Chinese Protestantism after the Communist revolution of 1949. The Western elements of the church had to be eradicated, and among the worst of them was the variety of imported denominational ideas combined with “imperialistic” paternalism. In order to survive in the changed political conditions, Chinese Protestantism had quickly to get rid of all Western control and influence. Now the three-self principles, complete financial independence, purely Chinese leadership, and church life without any foreign influence became a new dogma of Chinese Protestantism. All of the foreign missionaries had to go, and the relationships between Chinese churches and foreign missions were cut off.

An extremely important ideological principle of the Chinese version of the three-self idea is **to foster national unity**. This became very clear in the 1950’s, and it has been very much emphasized as well after the new start of the church since the early 1980’s up to present time. The idea of national unity became a slogan everywhere, and the call “with one heart and concerted effort to build up a new united China” was being heard everywhere in the China of the 1950’s.

The history of China had very often been the history of internal divisions, wars, bloodshed, and desperate suffering. Many Christians now saw the unity of the motherland under the rule of the Communist Party as the guarantee of peace and social

stability. It was a high patriotic duty of every believer to support this goal. Building up a strongly united, prosperous, safe, and harmonious motherland together with other fellow-citizens, whether Christians or not, was seen as the fundamental moral calling of every Christian believer. Interference of foreign powers in China's affairs had proved to have had disastrous consequences to the people of China. Consequently, true patriotism, including the principle of three-self is strongly anti-imperialistic, denying any foreign influence on China's internal affairs, including religion. This is quite clearly an authentic and sincere conviction of many Chinese Christians even today. The idea of **patriotism** has always had a strong appeal for Christians in any country at any time. And patriotism always had special characteristics flavored by the place and time where it took place. This is the case as well among Chinese Christians.

Political necessity compelled the Chinese church quickly to put fully into practice what had been a dream decades earlier. Radical social and political changes became an outward pressure to force some 70 different confessional Protestant denominations to merge into one Protestant movement led by the inner-church political mass movement, the national **Three-Self Patriotic Movement** of 1951. Anti-American political sentiment caused by the Korean war speeded up the necessity of cutting off all the relations with the foreign missions and churches.

The rapid unification of Chinese Protestantism took place largely for political reasons and under the leadership of political organs. There was hardly any theological discussion involved. A Chinese church leader Gao Ying comments on the development of the TSPM in the 1950's: "No meeting was held to discuss doctrinal differences or to promote organic union, but there was increasing practical cooperation among Christians working together, due to the concrete needs of the situation." The quick unification of denominations was above all a practical necessity in the changed political environment. In 1950 Bishop K.H. Ting pointed out: "The most important thing at present is not unity but whole-hearted cooperation and close relations plus mutual love."

It was, of course, unrealistic to assume all at once a complete unity. In this emergency situation the only possibility was to concentrate on practical cooperation in the spirit of mutual tolerance and to enter into a long process of concrete coexistence, which eventually might lead into a fuller true unity, including the theological and doctrinal expressions of that unity. We might call this a kind of "ecumenical method" in which "**practical fellowship in reconciled diversity**" is the leading principle. Such an approach reflects the well-known modern ecumenical method of "unity in reconciled diversity." Here unity is not doctrinal but practical; unity is neither full nor perfect, but it is enough for reconciled coexistence and cooperation in the midst of differences in spirituality, theological emphases, ecclesial structures, worship traditions, etc.

Beyond political necessity were other concrete reasons for unification. For instance, as foreign mission funding ended, local or regional churches could not take financial responsibility for all of their educational and charity institutions; cooperation and merger became imperative. The churches, however, had soon to give up their schools, hospitals, and other institutions that were taken over by the state. Gradually, the Chinese church entered a postdenominational era during the late 1950's. Separate denominational structures disappeared by 1958. A sort of common form of worship services was also completed by 1958, though room was left for variations. The idea was to create a spirituality of postdenominationalism by forming a common mode of worshiping. A very important force for postdenominationalism was the establishment of the Nanjing Union Theological

Seminary in 1952. Twelve seminaries with the background of five denominations were united and became the leading, indeed, the only national Protestant theological seminary in the country. It remains such up to present day.

The period of denominational Protestant churches in China was, after all, relatively short, being only about one hundred years. Protestant missionaries entered China in the beginning of the 19th century, proper church growth and the formation of Christian congregations in China started around 1860; in 1958 the Three-Self-led church abolished the right for denominations to exist. (Another story involves those Christians who never recognized the leadership of the TSPM. Today they are called "home church" or "house church" Christians. A closer study of that movement is out of the scope this paper.)

### **A new start after the Cultural Revolution**

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) Chinese Christians, whether joined with the TSPM or not, all endured much suffering. Many foreign Christians believed that Chinese Christianity had more or less ceased to exist. But the contrary was the case: a newly vitalized, rapidly growing Christian movement appeared from the ashes of brutal persecution. The Third National Chinese Christian Conference of 1980, representing all the Christian congregations belonging to the TSPM, established the foundation of present Chinese Protestantism. It was firmly reaffirmed that no return to the old Western-imported denominationalism was possible.

A new nationwide church body, the **China Christian Council**, was established in 1980 in the Third National Chinese Christian Conference of the New China. This conference was the historical starting point of the new orientation of the Protestant church in the new China, which had entered the new era of openness and modernization. From the very moment of its foundation it was clearly stated that CCC is **not a church but a federation of local, municipal, regional, and provincial Christian congregations and churches**. It is an organ to foster the process of unification. The constitution of the CCC (accepted by the Fourth National Chinese Christian Conference in 1986) defines the unifying aim of the CCC on a Trinitarian theological basis, including the three-self principles: "Its aim is to unite all Christians throughout the country who believe in the heavenly Father and who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord in effectively administering the Chinese independent, autonomous, self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the Scriptures, working in full cooperation and with unity of purpose."

Although the new constitution employed some theological argumentation, above all, the role of the CCC was seen as a **practical** one: "The Council will give major attention to the work of improving the pastoral care of Christians all over China, including the training of appropriate church workers [especially theological education], the publication of the Bible and literature of Christian nurture, and the strengthening of the ties among churches and fellow-Christians." These were things most urgently needed after the period of the devastating Cultural Revolution. Also "developing friendly ties with overseas churches" on the basis of perfect equality was defined as a task of the CCC. One further task added to the revised constitution of 2002 (by the Seventh National Chinese Christian Conference) is to "uphold unified worship." This is a sign of a further concern to make the unity a practical reality.

It was understood that the Chinese Protestant church is not yet a fully united church but **a uniting church, a church in the process of unification**. The idea of some plurality in faith and doctrine was accepted in 1980: “In any question that has to do with our faith our principle is to practice mutual respect and not to interfere with or impose uniformity on our beliefs.” Philip L. Wickeri explains the role of the CCC: “The China Christian Council is, according to its constitution, an organization designed to promote Christian unity and Three-Self. It is neither an ecclesiastical structure nor an expression of church unity as such. To speak of the Chinese church, therefore, is to speak of the community of Christian congregations in China, whose unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity are derived from the authority of the Bible, the proper preaching of the Word, and the right administration of the sacraments.” Kan Baoping underlines the limited role of the CCC: “The China Christian Council is not a power center. It is only a decision making body of some sort, but it does not have the authority to enforce its decision in local churches.”

The first constitution for the postdenominational Chinese Protestant church was accepted in the Fifth National Chinese Christian Conference in January 1992. The Church Order for Trial Use in Chinese Churches finds the foundation of the church in the Scripture, combined with an ecumenical faith and a proper contextualization in the Chinese situation: “The basic content of this church order is drafted in accordance with the teachings of the Bible, the inheritance of church tradition, and the life of the church ecumenical and integrated with the actual context of the church in China today; it has its own Chinese characteristics.” Asserted here is a clear intention to be part of the ecumenical family of the Christian churches while, at the same time, being a uniquely Chinese church. All this is an important step towards a more theologically based understanding of ecclesiology.

Differences in church regulations and practices are tolerated and accepted as long as they do not contradict the three-self principle: “Because there are differences in the history, denominational background, and pattern of development in churches throughout China, church affairs organizations in different provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities may draft or revise their own church orders according to this one or implement their own rules and regulations. Because some churches and meeting points have significant differences in viewpoint and tradition with the church as a whole, they can develop according to their own traditions, providing that they do not violate the Three-Self principle.”

The trial church order explicitly **rejects any kind of forced unity**: “All local churches should take into consideration the different spiritual experiences and needs of believers, and in matters of faith, tradition, and liturgy there should be mutual respect and mutual acceptance, not attacks and forced unity. At the same time, efforts should be made to maintain a heart of unity according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.” Chinese Protestantism is in favor of a **“unity without uniformity.”** The ever increasing and strengthening unity of the church is in the process of emergence; it is the object of faith and hope, something that will gradually become more real and concrete under the guidance of God’s Spirit.

The same trial church order emphasizes the **Trinitarian basis** of ecclesiology and the **Apostle’s Creed** as the doctrinal foundation of the church: “The Church is the Body of Christ, the Household of God, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The faith of the Church is founded upon the Bible and the Apostles’ Creed.” In practice, the Nicene Creed is also in active use in the Chinese

Protestant Church and is included in the small catechism of 1983 (see below). In theological seminaries also the Definition of Chalcedon and the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque*) are used in teaching. Thus, it is evident that the Chinese Protestant church intends to stick to **classical Trinitarian and Christological dogma** - this is a very important development **towards a more theological self-understanding of the *ecclesia* in China!** The trial church order highlights: “The Chinese church shares in the life of fellowship of the Church universal.” (The Church Order for Trial Use in Chinese Churches of January 1992 was adopted in the Sixth National Chinese Christian Conference in December 1996.)

### **The Congregationalist and Presbyterian models dominate**

Chinese Protestantism exists in a peculiar situation. Ecclesiological speaking, the Chinese church is predominantly following the Congregationalist model: **the structure of the church and the decision-making system both are Congregationalist**, although there are also important **Presbyterian** elements in the governance of the church.

Because neither the diocese nor any theologically justified nationwide ecclesiastical structures exist, the most effective level of ecclesiastical order is local and municipal church administration. Actual church life takes place in local churches, but all of the major decisions concerning finances, construction of church buildings, theological training, ordination of pastors, maintenance of good relations with political decision makers, etc., take place on the level of relatively large cities, which often are regional or provincial centers. The money to run the church comes from the grass-root level, but the church organs of the cities make the important economical decisions. The church follows in this way the model of the secular political structure.

The crucial role of the city level of church government became evident after the Cultural Revolution. When the confiscated church property started being returned back to churches in the 1980's, the city *lianghui* represented the Chinese Protestant church in each region. The most important church structure in Chinese Protestantism is, thus, a kind of an **enlarged form of Congregationalism**: the ecclesiastical *lianghui* on the level of the city is the real administrative center of church life.

The leadership and **decision-making** system in this city-centered structure follows the **Presbyterian** model. The pastors and the leading lay-workers, especially the elders, combine to use the real power in decision making. In some places elders are more influential than pastors. This same Presbyterian model works also on the level of local congregations; but their scope of power is much more limited, and they are dependent upon the decisions made by the *lianghui* leaders of the city. The **Presbyterian power structure** is applied on all levels of ecclesiastical administration, including local, county, city, regional, provincial, and national levels. The governing process is not grounded in any democratic vote of all believers or members of the congregation.

The understanding of the **ministry** in Chinese Protestantism also follows the Presbyterian basics. Alongside the ordained ministry, the ministry of all believers and the role of lay workers are very much emphasized. In reality, the church is mostly led and pastored by lay workers, elders, and preachers or evangelists. This is partly also due to practical necessity since, nationwide, there is approximately one pastor for 10.000 believers, and most of the pastors are working in cities. In the countryside, smaller

townships, and counties there may be groups of 50,000 believers with no pastor at all or groups of 150,000-170,000 believers having only one pastor. It is self-evident that the role of lay elders and preachers is crucially important in the Chinese church.

In some sense, the geography of the Chinese church resembles the situation of the church during the early Christian centuries. A major city with its surroundings was the “diocese” of a bishop who pastored his flock with the aid of presbyters or pastors. The Chinese structure is somewhat similar, though, while the Chinese model lacks bishops, their role is compensated by **a group of pastors and elders**. A remnant of the Episcopal order, however, remains in the Chinese Protestant church. After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese church still had two bishops who had been consecrated in the Anglican tradition, K.H. Ting and Wang Shenyin. During the opening up of China in the 1980’s, two more bishops were consecrated, but without any diocese or administrative power. They worked with the national *lianghui*. No continuity of the ministry of the bishop was guaranteed. The bishop was seen as a Christian leader who supports the nationwide church by exercising his theological and spiritual wisdom, his moral example, and his pastoral authority for the good of all.

The Church Order for Trial Use of 1992 recognizes the existence of the ministry of the **bishop** in the Chinese Protestant church, limiting his role to that of a spiritual example: “A bishop has a wider area of pastoral responsibility, but does not have special administrative authority.” Since the 1980’s, however, no new bishops have been consecrated. All the bishops of the Chinese Protestant church have by now passed away (but surprisingly, consecration of bishops has recently taken place in some non-registered Protestant groups or so-called “house churches”). The fact of bishops reveals that contradictory ecclesiastical views exist inside the Chinese church and that further theological reflection and discussion on ecclesiology are needed. Influenced by ecumenical encounter, among many Protestant churches there is a rising interest in the ministry of bishop as the symbol of unity and continuity of the Christian church. The ministry of bishop could be a theological and pastoral resource for the Chinese postdenominational church, too.

#### **A new term coined: “postdenominationalism”**

Occasionally, the term “non-denominationalism” was used to describe the development of the Chinese Protestant church of the 1950’s. A new, theologically promising concept termed “postdenominationalism” was coined by the TSPM and CCC leaders in 1981 (Cai Wenhao was the first to express this term on March 24, 1981, during the visit of a TSPM delegation to Hongkong), and it has since become a widely used term within Chinese Protestantism. If a church is “postdenominational” (*hou zongpai*) it means that she can remember and to some extent even appreciate her denominational past. Some theological, spiritual, or liturgical peculiarities or traditions of that past must and will be tolerated within a newly formed “postdenominational” church, but all of the denominational administrative structures must go. In contrast, another kind of a concept of an “after- or non-denominational” (*zongpai hou*) church exists, which means that theology, ecclesiastical order, liturgy, and other ecclesiastical practices are completely unified. Chinese Protestantism does not aim at such unification; it belongs to the fundamentals of Chinese Christianity to practice tolerance and to permit multiple styles of congregational life, worship, spirituality, etc.

This short survey of the history of ecclesiology in Chinese Protestantism shows that, in spite of the ecumenical progress that has taken place in China, there is an **enormous need for a theological reflection and construction of ecclesiology**. What really is the church in China? And where is it headed? Gao Ying points clearly to the need of doctrinal discussion and development in order to overcome obstacles to the way of achieving deeper unity within the Chinese Protestant church. Referring to the peculiar role of the True Jesus Church, the Little Flock, and the Seventh Day Adventists within the TSPM, she says: “The main obstacle to our church unity is the absence of common understanding of the church and of the ministry... The non-theological and non-ecclesiastical factors directed us to get into the postdenominational stage too quickly; hence we are left with many problems that we have not yet solved.” The three indigenous groups mentioned form only about 2,5% of the total number of the Chinese Protestants today, but their insistence on their exceptional doctrinal views in ecclesiology and ministry are an obstacle to further progress in postdenominational unity. Lurking even is a danger of re-denominationalism, coming back of the old denominations or emergence of new confessional groupings. Biblical-theological reflection and negotiations are needed.

The Protestant church in China exists most clearly on the local and municipal levels. On the national level there is nothing that could really be called the church. Bishop K.H. Ting makes a clear distinction between the essence of the church and other organizations which might be helpful for the church but are not the church (such as TSPM): “Our work in the church needs to have an adequate basis in faith and theology. The church is a social organization. But from the perspective of a Christian’s faith, thinking, and frame of mind, the church is different from social organizations such as the Women’s Federation and the Red Cross. It is not like any other organization. It has its sacred dimension... Precisely because of the place of the church in Christian doctrine, Christians find it uncomfortable and out of order to have any other organization set above the church... The essence of Christianity is the church and not any movement.” The real theological definition and formation of the nationwide church in Chinese Protestantism is something that needs to take place in the future.

### **Can the idea of “postdenominationalism” make a contribution to global ecumenism?**

As mentioned above, we can understand the term “postdenominationalism” as a kind of an ecumenical method of a “**practical fellowship in reconciled diversity**.” This kind of practical unity takes place in common worship, church life, witness, and service to the larger society. It is not yet a fully unified church but a church on her way towards a fuller union. Differences in spirituality, theological emphases, ecclesiastical structures, worship traditions, etc., are permitted. We can also say that postdenominationalism is a more radical ecumenical concept than the modern ecumenical model of the "unity in reconciled diversity," because it assumes the **complete abolition** of denominational ecclesiastical organizations, whereas "unity in reconciled diversity" does not aim at the abolition of denominational structures.

According to this international ecumenical model, there would be mutual recognition of each other as true Christian churches, recognition of each other's ministry and sacraments, common worship (co-celebration of the Holy Eucharist, e.g.), etc., but no organizational or administrative unification. The Chinese model differs from this one: first, there was the abolition of denominational structures (by political necessity), then came common worship and shared life, and eventually there might be

something that could be called a new church. This church would be postdenominational in relation to the model that permits the continuance of denominations.

This situation arouses a legion of questions: Would postdenominationalism mean that a new "super-denomination" would be established? Would it create a new type of a confession? What would be its doctrinal basis, or is a doctrinal definition of the church necessary at all? Is it enough just to stick to the classical dogma of the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Definition of Chalcedon, or is some updated theological definition of the church unavoidable? Or would it be possible to see the essence of the unified church as something that just "happens" in worship, in the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments, as well as in church life and spirituality? If so, the church would be seen in terms of **actualism** rather than in terms of essentialism.

In fact, there is a Western phenomenon that is to some extent parallel to what happened in Chinese Protestantism. The 1973 signed Concord of Leuenberg established a full union of the pulpit and altar (the word and the sacraments) between a great number of European Lutheran, Reformed, and Evangelical churches (historical unions between the Lutheran and Reformed churches in Germany). No full agreement on doctrinal issues was required, mutual recognition and common worship was declared possible on the basis of what actually happens when the gospel is being preached and the sacraments are being celebrated. A growing doctrinal consensus might follow later.

The Fellowship of Leuenberg is based on a certain kind of actualist-existential ontology. It is clear that both in the Chinese postdenominational model and in the Concord of Leuenberg the traditional role of doctrine has changed: **doctrine has been given a low key and the actual life of the church, based on the word and the sacraments, a high key**. This kind of actualist or vitalist model will find it difficult, of course, to deal with the traditional areas of conflict. Or, perhaps new questions and new answers will arise outside any reference to the old doctrinal disputes.

The Concord of Leuenberg is based on the idea of a union in reconciled diversity, whereas the Chinese church moves towards the older ecumenical ideal of an "**organic unity**," full visible unity. But there are also differences between the Chinese church and the model of an organic unity. Postdenominationalism tolerates difference; it does not demand homogeneity in most aspects of theology, church structure, and church practices, as an organic unity might do. Consequently, we can see postdenominationalism as an ecumenical model that lies between the model of unity in reconciled diversity and that of an organic unity. The Chinese model of postdenominationalism is more radical than that of the Concord of Leuenberg, which still allows the member churches to stick to their respective confessions.

### **Combining postdenominationalism with communion ecclesiology**

The ecumenical model of **Eucharistic communion ecclesiology** which dominates modern ecumenical dialogue today, could become a great potential for Chinese Protestantism in the future. Communion ecclesiology means basically three main things: (1) The Holy Trinity himself is a communion of the three persons; accordingly, Christian existence, both of individual believers and

of the community of the faith, is seen as an intimate **union** (*koinonia*) with the life of the Holy Trinity. (2) It understands the church, not as an institution, but as a dynamic, living **communion of love** among the believers. The church is not the Kingdom of God but it is the **people of God** on pilgrimage towards the eschatological Kingdom. (3) Both our union with the Triune God and with our fellow Christians becomes **visible and concrete in the common celebration of God's Word and the Holy Eucharist** in worship. When receiving the body and blood of Christ at the holy meal, we become the **one visible body of Christ**. Only this kind of participation in Christ makes the church united.

The model of communion ecclesiology is in harmony with the commonly accepted Protestant definition of the Church. The most important Protestant book of confession, accepted by the most of the Protestant churches, *The Augsburg Confession* (1530), states: "The church is the congregation of believers in which the gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are correctly administered." Accordingly, the foundation of the **unity** of the church is based on the common understanding of the **gospel of Jesus Christ** which is offered to us in the word and the sacraments: "For the true unity of the church **it is sufficient to agree on the doctrine of the gospel** and on the administration of the sacraments (*satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum*)."

*The Augsburg Confession* explicitly states that, if there is a unity in the gospel, there is no need to have similar or unified forms of worship or spiritual life in order to maintain the unity of the church: "It is not necessary to have everywhere similar human traditions, rites, or ceremonies." God's word and the sacraments mediating the gospel of Jesus Christ are the only necessary foundation of the unity, everything else, such as the structures, ministry patterns, liturgy, worship, spirituality, style of prayer etc., may vary from church to church. This opens up a great **freedom to the contextual understanding** of the church, theology, and spiritual life. But the question how much we should have explicit theological consensus on "the doctrine of the gospel" divides theologians: Some say, before we can worship together, we should first have a clear doctrinal agreement on the essence of the Christian gospel, while others say the actual common celebration of the word and the sacraments is enough for true unity.

Until present time, due to its Pietistic and Evangelical missionary background, Chinese Protestantism concentrates on preaching and has a weak sense of sacramental spirituality and liturgical life. But these elements might become stronger as the level of theological education is arising among the Chinese pastors and preachers and the knowledge of Christianity is increasing among the believers. This again, will increase the ecumenical potential of Chinese postdenominationalism. It is also worth noting that prayer spirituality is very powerful in Chinese Protestantism; this could easily be united with liturgical spirituality. Furthermore, Chinese churches are dominated by red crosses of Jesus and believers love to speak about "the holy blood of Jesus" (Yesu de bao xue) - here is a strong point of contact with the Holy Eucharist which offers us the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

### **Confessional indifferentism is increasing globally**

The actual implementation of the Leuenberg Fellowship during the last decades shows that confessional issues are being more and more de-emphasized in European Christianity: in some sense also Western churches are gradually becoming "postdenominational." Confessional indifferentism is clearly growing among Western Protestant denominations not only in

Europe, but similarly in North America and other parts of the world. And what should we say about the boom of the non-white indigenous and neo-Pentecostal churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America? They are certainly "postdenominational" in relation to traditional Western denominations, but they might also be seen as new indigenous denominations, although their doctrinal profile in most cases is very low indeed. We can with good reason say that Chinese Protestantism is the forerunner of what is going on now almost everywhere in the world.

In spite of its practicality, however, postdenominationalism needs profound theological reflection and discussion to define more accurately what is the *nesesse est* of the true ecclesiastical unity; and this must be differentiated from its *non nesesse est*, which constitutes the right for legitimate plurality. The Chinese church does not have any official Protestant doctrinal confessions; the Scripture is the sole source and norm for preaching and teaching. The concept of doctrine is also based on **actualist ontology** in that doctrine just "happens" in the act of preaching, teaching, and praying. In this church, doctrine is not in the form of Protestant confessions or creeds; the Bible and the classical ecumenical creeds of the early church as such are seen as the sufficient expressions of the faith. Their correct understanding takes place in the proclamation of God's word.

### **Some doctrinal expression is unavoidable**

But, in the long run, a certain development towards some kind of doctrinal expression seems to be unavoidable in order to foster and protect the unity of the church - human mind and intelligence necessitate a cognitive recognition what is truly Christian and what is not. Moreover, the historical continuity of the apostolic witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, facing the possibility of all kinds of distortions and heresies, requires a clear expression of what is authentically Christian. Such a development does not necessarily mean high profile doctrines or doctrinal systems, but **some sort of doctrinal minimalism should continue on in Chinese Protestantism**. As mentioned above, "postdenominationalism" is not equal to "non-denominationalism."

Postdenominationalism is not indifferent to tradition and doctrinal issues but critical and creative in relation to questions of doctrine and confession, paying serious attention to the real context in which the church and the believers live.

In addition to the necessity of ecclesiological clarification, there is also a growing need to express clearly the common faith of the believers who belong to the postdenominational church. This need has become more and more urgent in recent times because of the rise of some wild heretical movements. The church should have **pedagogical and catechetical tools** for teaching how to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. When Christians are asked, "What do you believe?" they should be able to give satisfactory, understandable answers.

The first step towards the right direction was taken by the CCC when it published *A Christian Catechism* in 1983, a short pamphlet of some fifty pages divided into separate sections on the Bible, God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Salvation, the Church, and Discipleship, arranged in a question-and-answer format. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed were attached. The text of this little catechism was created by Wang Weifan, a teacher of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (retired in 1999). The final published text remains essentially his text, since neither any editorial committee was assigned to approve it nor to forward it as approved by the National Conference. But the CCC has published it which makes it an authoritative text to a certain extent. To

meet today's growing challenge of Christian education, **a new, enlarged version of Chinese Protestant catechism is urgently needed.**

### **Postdenominationalism and communion ecclesiology complement each other**

If we try to answer the question given in the title of the present paper, we should most likely say: postdenominational Christianity is not only possible but it is **absolutely necessary!** But then we should immediately add: the tolerant and actualistic model of postdenominationalism prevalent in Chinese Protestantism will eventually need some doctrinal essence in order to maintain the unity and the continuity of the church.

The Chinese Protestant church has laid the only possible foundation for progressive ecumenism: the Holy Scripture and the early ecumenical creeds are the common basis. All ecclesiology and all actual life of the church, comprising her preaching and administration of the sacraments, is based on Scripture and dogma, whether understood in terms of actualism or essentialism. *Lex orandi* precedes *lex credendi*: common worship and spiritual life can be understood as an anticipation or prolepsis of the unity to be more clearly expressed theologically in the future. The churches must have the courage to abandon some of their denominational heritage and find a fresh, relevant understanding of their faith on the basis of Scripture and dogma. There is a constant need to express the old truths in an interesting and understandable way in the new contexts.

This kind of a **proleptic ecumenical method** requires a lot of courage among the churches and believers. As they worship together, the Chinese Protestant Christians must attend to the hard theological and ecumenical task of building up and expressing some kind of an understandable and agreeable ecclesiology on the basis of the Scripture and on the dogma of the undivided early church. Hopefully, the appreciation of the Holy Eucharist will increase in Chinese Protestantism: Christian worship is based equally on both preaching God's word and on the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ.

Combined with the dominating ecumenical concept of Eucharistic communion ecclesiology, the idea of postdenominationalism will have great ecumenical potential. These two can complement each other: **communion ecclesiology offers more theological substance to postdenominationalism, whereas postdenominationalism challenges traditional churches to make brave progressive moves towards a fuller visible unity of the body of Christ.**