

How To Best Help China?

The Story of Two Very Different Missionaries to China

By Ralph D. Winter

In this issue of *Mission Frontiers* Bulletin we are highlighting China. The purpose of this short article is to make sure our readers realize that the thousands of missionaries who went to China to love the people nevertheless used widely different approaches and did strikingly different things.

The work of two missionaries, Hudson Taylor and Timothy Richard, describe the amazing differences.

Both of them were fervent Evangelicals. Both believed the Bible, and believed in personal salvation and heart transformation. Both of them wore Chinese dress. Both of them endured enormous obstacles to their purposes but neither budged an inch from their calling. Hudson Taylor is very well known to our readers, while Timothy Richard is little heard of—thus we devote more space to Richard.

*Much of this information is drawn from **These Sought a Country** (1950), a little book by Kenneth Scott Latourette, the foremost historian of Christian missions in all of history. He covers both Taylor and Richard.*

Both of these men had a truly major impact on China. It would be hard to say which had the greater influence.

Hudson Taylor originally rushed to China hoping to help the huge but cultic Taiping movement become more Christian. He went out under a very unstable mission, the Chinese Evangelization Society, founded originally by Karl Gutzlaff, who was a brilliant, incredibly influential German missionary. Gutzlaff aroused all of Europe to missions, translated much of the Old Testament into Chinese directly from the Hebrew, pioneered the idea of missionaries wearing Chinese dress, etc.

Ralph D. Winter is editor of Mission Frontiers.

However, he eventually became the victim of a colossal scam in which most of nearly fifty Chinese workers turned out to be frauds, and his whole idea of “paying nationals to do the work” went down the drain—a phenomenon which could be called the “Gutzlaff Syndrome.” It was (and is) an easy mistake to make.

Despite many painful uncertainties of his work in China, Taylor at least found a wonderful wife, whose missionary parents had died. Soon, though, he came home broken in health and confused about what to do. Yet, he recovered and went back under his own agency, the China Inland Mission, now called the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. Even so, within five years, three of his four children and his wife had died.

All this time he incessantly pushed for recruits to reach the very last town and village in China, and with considerable success. His mission recruited more personnel than any other mission in China. There was a tremendous amount of integrity and spiritual vitality in his ministry. His early strategy, however, was very narrowly evangelistic. He had been influenced by the Plymouth Brethren for whom pre-millennial thinking (the world is getting worse and worse until the Rapture) was dominant. Since they couldn't see any hope for this world, there was no use trying to better it. Just getting people saved and lined up for eternity was the main thing.

Thus, Hudson Taylor came up with this logic: if you had a thousand missionaries evangelizing fifty people per day for a thousand days, you could evangelize all of China in that period. (That would only touch 50 million people, while in his day there were probably 400 million, but even so, the same logic would work if you had say, 8000 days.)



Hudson Taylor



Karl Gutzlaff



Evangelizing fifty people a day seems a little bit shallow. He didn't even want his people starting churches in the early days so that they could keep on evangelizing all day long. Latourette summarizes one of his seven policies:

(7) The objective of the mission was to present the Gospel to as many Chinese as possible. Emphasis was placed on the form of the Great Commission found in the last chapter of the Book of Mark, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." Little was said of the wording in the Gospel of Matthew: "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." . . . the emphasis was not on the growth of the Christian community and still less upon the conversion and transformation of all China. (p. 76)

On the other hand Timothy Richard went out to China with the same zeal for evangelism and the same belief in personal salvation and commitment to Christ, and with similar training and perspective. In fact, he applied to join Taylor about three years after Taylor began his own mission. But Taylor's policy was to urge people to go under the board of their own group. Since Timothy Richard was a Baptist Taylor urged him to go to China under the Baptist Missionary Society.

Luckily so, because once in China it became clear that their perspectives diverged very decidedly. Timothy Richard said he felt it was absolutely the duty of a missionary to declare the glory of God by dealing with all the various problems that a country like China would have, everything from foot-binding to nation-wide education.

Timothy Richard very clearly tackled that wide spectrum which William Carey's work demonstrated. It was unfortunate that this difference of approach, while not necessarily a matter of accusations of heresy flying back and forth, nevertheless meant that in certain parts of China when their work overlapped, Taylor decided that his people shouldn't cooperate with the work of Timothy Richard. Richard felt that you needed to deal with the local and national-level leaders. He urged that befriending those kinds of people would make things smoother in further church work in a given area and he was probably right in most cases.

He was convinced that the western world had been given gifts of insight into nature of which the Chinese were unaware, and that by engineering and science the distress and poverty levels in China could be dealt with more effectively. Believing this he easily won the confidence of a number of high ranking Chinese and influenced a great deal of the country in that way, spending every extra penny he had on scientific

apparatus and books and actually teaching science and developing science textbooks in Chinese.

Eventually even his own society, the Baptist Missionary Society in England, felt he was ranging far beyond the normal functions of a missionary and he joined an Anglican society, which had more congenial views. He even proposed, successfully, world level organizations and, like Taylor, zealously had all of China in mind. Neither of them thought in small terms.

He (Richard) held that Christianity should be presented "as the kingdom of God to be established, not only in the hearts of men, but also in all institutions on earth, for the salvation of man, body and soul, now and hereafter . . . it is positively wicked treason against God to despise all efforts at material, intellectual, social, and political welfare and call them secular rather than sacred." (p. 89)

He went on to declare that

. . . instead of preaching all the time to the thoughtless multitudes or to the rulers who are mainly guided by self-interest . . . most of the time should be devoted to preaching to the devout souls, the worthy . . . these are the born messengers of God, . . . and the multitudes follow them as certainly as the swarming bees follow the queen bee . . . He held that it was possible to find approaches which would win for Christianity the sympathy and co-operation of all the Confucianists, Buddhists, Taoists . . . He held that God had been at work in each of these religions and that by pointing out the similarities of each to Christianity contacts would be established which would win their adherents to the Christian faith (pp. 89, 90).



Timothy Richard

Interestingly enough, even before he left England when he was in theological college he joined with other students in urging a revision of the curriculum to include universal history and science. This is amazing because today, after 150 years, seminaries still don't teach either universal history or science.

Although he had large views of what missionaries ought to do, he certainly did not de-emphasize evangelism and church planting.

Before Richard left Shantung he had the satisfaction of knowing that a church of seven hundred members with two or three thousand inquirers had arisen in Ch'ingchow as a result of the approximately two years that he had spent in the city, and that there were several hundred more Christians outside the city. Much of this growth was accomplished through Chinese whom Richard trained. The method helped to inspire an American Presbyterian, Nevius. (pp. 93, 94)

The "Nevius Method" that evolved is credited with much of the spectacular growth of the Korean church.

At the same time Richard was concerned to help with many other Chinese problems.

The recent famine, the chronic poverty of the mass of the Chinese, and his vision of the Kingdom of God on earth combined to lead Richard to undertake lectures on Western science to the officials and scholar class of China. He believed the civilization of the Occident to be superior to that of China in seeking “to discover the workings of God in nature” and in applying “the laws of nature for the service of mankind.” He was convinced that if he could point out to scholars and officials “ways in which they could utilize the forces of God in nature for the benefit of their fellow-countrymen,” he could influence them “to build railways, to open mines, to avert recurrences of famine, and save the people from their grinding poverty.” (pp. 95, 96)

He did not believe that his pre-field education was adequate.

To prepare himself for this expansion of his mission, Richard stinted himself on his personal expenses and devoted a legacy from a relative to the purchase of books and scientific instruments. He even studied the possibility of aviation, believing that if railways were slow in being built, aircraft might solve the problem of transportation—and this nearly a generation before the Wright brothers! With the help of his books and apparatus Richard lectured to officials and scholars on such subjects as astronomy, chemistry, mechanics, the use of steam, especially in railways and ships, electricity, photography, medicine, and surgery. When we remember that this was in the years when these subjects were still novelties to the Chinese, we can appreciate the sacrificial initiative which was entailed.

He paid attention to devout people, especially leaders.

In this fashion Richard not only aided the introduction of Western science to China but promoted social intercourse between influential Chinese and missionaries. Among other friendships, Richard formed a valued one with a governor, Chang Chih-tung, who within a few years was to be a leader in attempts to “reform” China by introducing much of Western science and education (p. 96).

His “far out” ideas did not go over with everyone. As with William Carey, younger missionaries arrived and opposed his approach.

Younger missionaries of his society had arrived in Shansi. They believed him to be in error theologically and held that his approach to Chinese religions was wrong—that in pointing out what from the Christian standpoint was true in these faiths and indicating where Christianity went beyond them, he was too tolerant. They wished him to alter his methods and to submit himself to the guidance of the group. This Richard felt that he could not conscientiously do. Moreover, he had a quite natural conviction that having been in China much longer than they, he was more experienced and therefore wiser in mission method. (p. 99)

As with Carey, withdrawal rather than conflict seemed to be the best path.

He felt that he had come to a turning point in his missionary career and wished to lay before the Baptist Missionary Society a new scheme for the future. Although he had declined to go into the service of the government, he still believed that as a Christian missionary he must concern himself with all that made for the well-being of the Chinese, physical and intellectual as well as moral and spiritual. He had memorialized (appealed to) high Chinese officials suggesting the building of railways, the opening of mines, and the establishment of factories for the manufacture of cotton goods. He had suggested that commissions of Chinese be sent to foreign countries to survey the educational systems of the world, to study religious conditions in other lands, and to report on industry and transportation as they were to be found abroad, and had suggested a bureau be established in Peking to see that the findings of these commissions were given publicity throughout the Empire. In England he laid before the Baptist Missionary Society a proposal that it join with all the other missionary societies in establishing a high-grade Christian college in each provincial capital with a curriculum which would embrace Western science and Christianity. Thus the future leaders of China would be brought to accept the Christian faith and would give themselves to winning their fellow countrymen and to utilizing the knowledge and appliances of the West in furthering the welfare of the land and in bringing the Kingdom of God. (p. 98)

Although the Baptist Missionary Society declined to back his proposal “for lack of funds,” Richard did not give up, and after withdrawing from the Society which he served for twenty years, he continued on in many strategic efforts for another twenty five. Latourette summarizes:

Hundreds, perhaps thousands of individuals have known the transforming power of the Gospel who but for Richard would almost certainly not have been in touch with it.

William Carey, too, continued on after turning over his mission to the younger members who objected. One wonders what could have been done collaboratively had the opposition in these cases been less insistent.

In Richard’s case world events themselves more and more seemed to favor a pessimistic view of a world getting worse and worse, one that could not effectively yield to God’s will. The First World War was a major negative. While Richard died just before the Great Depression, and of course, WWII, those events hardened the view of an evangelism-only approach.

Latourette notes that scholars contrast Taylor and Richard, however, they both made notable contributions:

Each man is representative of schools of thought which were widely prevalent in the nineteenth and the fore part of the twentieth century and are still with us. (p. 90) 🌐