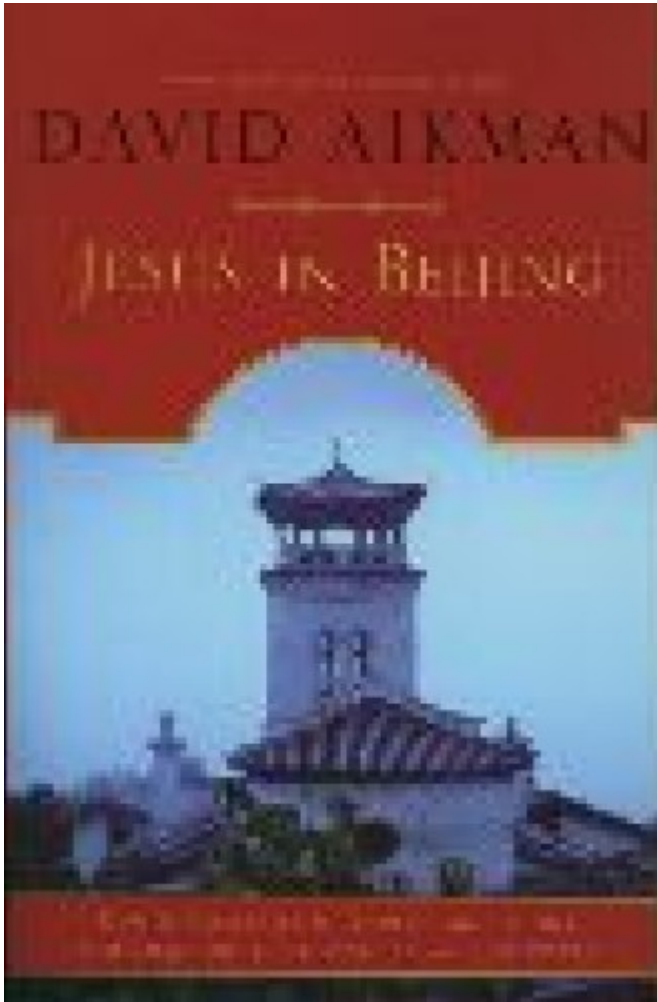


Homegrown

By [Myrrl Byler](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Jesus in Beijing

by David Aikman
Regnery

China has the potential to become a superpower rivaling the U.S. It already is playing a critical political role in Asia, and its economic power is global. While the

number of Christians in China has increased significantly during the past few decades, the church's social influence remains minimal. Attention from outside often focuses on the suffering and persecution faced by the country's believers.

David Aikman contends that this situation is changing rapidly. A former *Time* bureau chief in Beijing and a veteran journalist, Aikman states that 20 to 30 percent of the Chinese population may be Christian within three decades. If that were to happen, Christianity would become the "dominant world view of China's political and cultural establishment."

Since even the highest guesses place Christians at less than 8 percent of China's present population, the church would need to grow at an incredible rate for Aikman's prediction to become true. If Christians do become a sizable minority, they will, Aikman believes, greatly influence the direction of Chinese society. He gives examples of people from a wide spectrum of activities, including actors, government employees and business people, who have recently become Christian. The lack of a strong national ideology and the interest in religion will continue to bring educated and influential people to Christianity.

Interviews and examples demonstrate that the Chinese house church is strongly evangelical. According to Aikman, Chinese evangelicals support Israel and feel called to evangelize the Muslim world. He believes that a "Christianized China may spend less time thinking of ways to outmaneuver and neutralize the U.S. than the military strategists of the current regime." Aikman speculates that a strong evangelical influence will encourage the Chinese government to be more cooperative with the rest of the world in the fight against terrorism and the prevention of weapons of mass destruction.

The book presents a very readable and informative picture of one part of the house church movement—the various networks operating outside of the registered churches—along with some of its better-known leaders. Aikman attributes much of the rapid growth of the church to its charismatic and evangelical nature. His experiences and interviews help us to understand this very vital movement within Chinese Christianity.

But *Jesus in Beijing* perpetuates the misperception that Chinese Christians can be divided into two groups, one operating clandestinely and in opposition to the government, the other cooperating with and officially approved by the government.

Aikman does not mention that in addition to the many house churches which are opposed to any association with the registered churches, there are more than 30,000 which are registered with the government. Just because people meet for worship in homes or apartments does not mean that their actions are illegal and need to be hidden. Many believers in China attend home meetings, while others worship in larger churches. The choice is determined by issues of distance, convenience and leadership. While many house churches eventually become traditional churches, many do not.

Situations also vary greatly from one geographical location to the next. One northern rural Chinese county which I have often visited includes ten churches and more than 50 registered meeting points. No other house church networks appear to exist in the county. But a bordering county has no registered churches or meeting points, because the local government is hostile toward religious believers. There Christians must meet in relative secrecy. Situations also change. Recently I was invited to visit believers in a county where the government formerly had opposed any connection with overseas Christians.

Generalizations and assumptions based on isolated experiences may easily give a distorted picture. In assessing the Chinese situation, overseas believers need a strong dose of humility and a sense of the complexity of the issues.

The devout faith and sacrificial lives of the Chinese believers described by Aikman are inspiring to all who come into contact with them. But young church leaders are being trained in many places besides the more clandestine seminaries described in the book. Thousands of churches across China openly organize training classes—from several weeks to a year long—for house church leaders. Rapid church growth increases the workload of leaders and pastors and underscores the need for more and better training, especially in the countryside.

Though Aikman focuses on those groups opposed to government registration, he also provides information about the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. While much of Aikman's historical information is well supported, he does push familiar misperceptions.

The distinction between liberals and conservatives is quite irrelevant to the majority of believers in China. While a handful of leaders within the Three-Self Movement may be described as theologically liberal, the overwhelming majority of pastors and

believers within the registered churches remain very conservative on almost all issues, with the exception of the role of women in leadership.

Contrary to the impression the book gives, pastors do preach on the second coming of Christ, and they are not paid by the government. There certainly are controls and limits, and too often there is government interference in the work of the church. But Aikman paints a negative picture of the government leaders who oversee religion, without acknowledging that some of them assist local churches—for example, by helping them regain church property or buildings. There are church leaders whom believers do not support, leaders who are too close to the government, and many believers have become disillusioned with church politics. However, this is true of both registered churches and clandestine house churches, and some leave house churches because of the personality cults that arise around powerful leaders.

In addition to his portraits of Christian leaders like Wang Mingdao, Aikman also discusses Bishop K. H. Ting, who has led the Chinese church for many years. Aikman joins the speculation on Ting's status as a Communist Party member, but the evidence he offers will be more convincing to those predisposed to believe the assertions than to those who examine this evidence more critically. While I have met many pastors who disagree with Ting's theology, they also understand the complex issues he has faced and appreciate what he has done to advance the cause of the church.

Although Aikman's focus is on Protestants, he includes a one-chapter summary of the Catholic Church in China. He depends on the writings of respected Catholic scholar Richard Madsen for his analysis.

Aikman is less critical of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association than he is of its Protestant counterpart. Despite the tension between the Vatican and the Beijing government, there is often better understanding between China's underground Catholics and those in the official patriotic association. Although Catholics are not growing in number as rapidly as Protestants, the Catholic Church provides its leaders with education opportunities and seeks to engage the larger society on some social issues.

While foreign missionaries have influenced some of the clandestine house church networks, their influence does not extend to the larger church. The Western missionary adventure stories of subterfuge that Aikman tells make for interesting

reading, but they also perpetuate old stereotypes. The suffering of some believers is real, and the fines some are required to pay are excessive. Unfortunately, their sufferings are sometimes indirectly caused by “heroic” foreign missionaries playing to audiences outside of China. Many Christian organizations involved in sending teachers to China may be troubled by the impression Aikman gives that most Christian teachers of English in China are primarily interested in evangelism. In fact, many Christian organizations and teachers feel that their chief contribution lies in the quality of their professional work.

Aikman’s assertion that a growing base of Christian believers may affect China’s relations with the U.S. is most intriguing. Will the evangelical nature of the church lead to support for American policies, particularly support for Israel? Since this subject had never come up in my discussions with Chinese Christians, I asked several Chinese pastors for their opinion. The general consensus was that at present the vast majority of Chinese believers are not informed on matters of American foreign policy, nor are they particularly interested in the role of Israel. This could change as the church grows and matures, but whether Chinese Christians will be able or want to influence government policy is questionable. Perhaps a comparison with the sizable Christian population of South Korea might be instructive in determining what role a similar Christian population in China might play.

Historically Westerners have interpreted signs of modernization and reform within China as evidence that the nation is becoming more Western. The assumption that Christians in China support certain American values and viewpoints follows this tradition. That American fast food outlets dot the Chinese landscape and cultural accommodations characterize the cities does not mean that the Chinese people are becoming more Western. Western-educated Chinese professionals consistently adapt what they experience and learn overseas into something that is distinctively Chinese and often non-Western.

The Chinese church has improved its status and image within the broader culture, but its influence should not be exaggerated. The projection that the church will be able to influence the government toward a more pro-Israeli and U.S. agenda is unrealistic. While a certain segment of the house churches within China may agree with this agenda, it is questionable whether this sentiment is held by the majority of believers.

As Aikman notes, the church is pro-Chinese and patriotic, committed to China’s future. The church in China will, I believe, become much more than simply an ally of

a certain brand of American political and religious thinking. Just as China constantly surprises outside observers in other areas, so the church will also become its own entity, with its own mission to the people of China and its own voice and vision for the world.