

Guest Editorial

Amazed and Perplexed: Hope and Certainty in the Sovereignty of God through the Ages

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The October 2019 and the January 2020 issues of *Global Missiology* offer an overview of the advance of the Gospel in modern times. It is appropriate that the theme of these two issues, “Amazed and Perplexed,” brackets the end of an old year and the beginning of a new, and even more so as the year we have entered is also the dawning of a new decade in the still new third millennium A.D. This series of “Amazed and Perplexed” articles calls us to gratitude and wonder in response to God’s work in the world, and to hopeful anticipation of what is yet to come. However, this call comes at a counterintuitive time of apparent setback for the Chinese church.

For over a year, pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Reformed Church, a prominent unregistered urban church in Chengdu, China, has been in detention. He was tried in closed-door proceedings on December 26, 2019, and the sentence was announced on the website of Chengdu Intermediate People’s Court on December 30: nine years and a fine of 50,000 RMB.¹ The news reached the West almost immediately.² Not only is the sentence unusually harsh for a case involving a pastor in the post-Mao era, but it is also clear from the charges of “inciting the overthrow of state authority” and “illegal business operations”—umbrella charges often leveled against pastors of unregistered churches targeted by the regime—that this is a case of the party-state suppressing dissent. It is an unjust sentence used by a powerful government to crush an individual who has “incited” its ire and to warn others like him. Moreover, this incident illustrates a trend of repression under Chinese President Xi Jinping that threatens to reverse the growth of urban unregistered churches during the optimistic decades of the 1990s and early 2000s. The Chinese state has succeeded in picking off vibrant urban unregistered churches one by one—first Shouwang and then Zion in Beijing, and now Early Rain in Chengdu.

“How long, O Lord?” is an often-heard refrain throughout the Psalms. The injustice of this case is egregious. To deprive an innocent man in his prime nine years of his liberty and productive life. To deprive a child in his formative years nine years of his father’s presence. To deprive a woman nine years of life with her husband. And more... How should we hold in tension on the one hand our hope founded upon God’s sovereignty and the power of the Gospel as this “Amazed and Perplexed” series reminds us and, on the other, the fragility of the Church and the vulnerability of the individual under a crushing reality? God is identified as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” many times in the Scriptures. This refrain seems to be an invitation to remember, in particular those who have gone before us and God’s work in their midst. God’s people have lived the paradox of hope and certainty in his sovereignty in the midst of apparent injustice, suffering, and setback through the ages. St. John wrote Revelation from exile during the reign of Domitian. St. Augustine started writing his magisterial *City of God* after the sack of Rome by Alaric in A.D. 410. The circumstances in which these two authors undertook their writing projects could not be more different—the former when the Roman Empire was at its height, and the latter when it was in evident decline. John presented the Christians of the late first century with a vision of the exalted Christ and the glorious new heaven and new earth, a vision

that has nourished God's suffering people through the ages. Augustine refuted the recriminations of those who blamed Christians for the empire's disasters and bequeathed to posterity a grand vista of God's dealings with humanity.

Whether we live under the crushing hand of a powerful state as John did, or in the chaos and uncertainty brought about by a failing state as Augustine did, or somewhere in between, we would do well to remember Augustine's insight regarding the identity of God's people, namely as "citizens" called from every nation into a "heavenly city," and their relationship to the "earthly city" in which they dwell:

...the Heavenly City could not have laws of religion common with the earthly city, and in defence of her religious laws she was bound to dissent from those who thought differently and to prove a burdensome nuisance to them. Thus she had to endure their anger and hatred, and the assaults of persecution; until at length that City shattered the morale of her adversaries by the terror inspired by her numbers, and by the help she continually received from God (Augustine 19.17).

Even as they endure anger, hatred, and persecution, citizens of the Heavenly City are instruments of peace in the earthly city where they sojourn:

.... the Heavenly City in her pilgrimage here on earth makes use of the earthly peace and defends and seeks the compromise between human wills in respect of the provisions relevant to the mortal nature of man, so far as may be permitted without detriment to true religion and piety. In fact, that City relates the earthly peace to the heavenly peace, which is so truly peaceful that it should be regarded as the only peace deserving the name, ... for this peace is the perfectly ordered and completely harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and of each other in God.... This peace the Heavenly City possesses in faith while on its pilgrimage, and it lives a life of righteousness, based on this faith, having the attainment of that peace in view in every good action it performs in relation to God, and in relation to a neighbour, since the life of a city is inevitably a social life (Augustine 19.17).

As a former legal scholar, Wang Yi has been a strong advocate of civil society and taken an unequivocal stance in the arena of rights defense, which arguably falls under "the compromise between human wills in respect of the provisions relevant to the mortal nature of man." It is right for God's people to seek the best earthly peace can offer. Yet, both the civil society of liberal democracies and the "harmonious society" that President Xi's regime seeks to create by repressing dissent are but mere reflections, or even poor counterfeits, of the heavenly peace of "perfectly ordered and harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and of each other in God."

Augustine was no stranger to unjust court judgements, as can be seen in his discussion of "situations where God's justice is not apparent" in the same work: "...we do not know... why an innocent man leaves the court not merely unavenged but actually condemned, either overcome by the injustice of the judge, or overwhelmed by false evidence, while, in contrast, his criminal adversary gloats over him, as he goes away not only unpunished but even vindicated..." (Augustine 20.2). Even so, citizens of the Heavenly City have hope and certainty:

Thus we do not know by what judgement God causes these situations, or else allows them to happen; for in him there is the highest power, the highest wisdom, the highest justice, and in him there is no weakness, no unreason, no injustice.... However, when we reach that judgment of God...then it will become plain that God's judgments are perfectly just, not only all the judgments that will then be passed, but also all the judgments passed from the beginning, and all which are to be pronounced hereafter until that judgment day. At that day, too, it will become evident by what just decision of God it comes about that at this present time so many, in fact almost all, of the just judgments of God are hidden from mortal perception and understanding (Augustine 20.2).

Herein lies the paradox: God's people live lives of righteousness when God's justice is not apparent, for as citizens of the Heavenly City they possess by faith "the heavenly peace" on their pilgrimage, "having the attainment of that peace in view in every good action" they perform "in relation to God, and in relation to a neighbour." May our neighbors and those who come after us have cause to be amazed and perplexed.

¹ See Chinese announcement on <http://cdfy.chinacourt.gov.cn/article/detail/2019/12/id/4750085.shtml> and ChinaAid commentary on https://www.chinaaid.net/2019/12/blog-post_67.html (accessed January 4, 2020).

² *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Time*, and *Christianity Today* all carried articles about the case. US-based ChinaAid is the channel through which the news came and carries responses from Wang Yi's congregation to the sentence.

References

Augustine. *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.