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THE IMPORTANCE OF JOHN CALVIN FOR THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IN CHINA

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The image Calvin has left in the Chinese world since the missionary era of the nineteenth century is very vague, sometimes controversial or even paradoxical. There are several images of Calvin existing side by side, at least three.

The first image depicts Calvin as one of the founders of the historical Protestantism, as the most influential source of the world-wide missionary movements for the past five centuries. The second image calls to mind a terrible dictator incapable of humour, the spiritual source of fundamentalism mixed with the doctrine of predestination. The third image is that of the founder of modern democracy in the form of reasonable capitalism.

Right at the outset I would like to affirm that a correct interpretation of John Calvin is of vital importance for the building up of the Protestant Church in China. The present interpretation will take account of these three images which have been prevailing in the Chinese world for a long time. By way of conclusion, I will explore the significance of Calvin's heritages for the Protestant Church in China.

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1. Calvin's images in China

It is obvious that the first image originates from theologians and missionaries notwithstanding their post-1949 social marginalisation and lack of public influence. Calvin's heritage is embedded in parish practices, for example in the responsibilities assumed by laypeople, in diaconal services for the poor, administrative rules and discipline to name just a few.

Calvin's negative image in China, above all widely shared among intellectuals, has been inspired by Western literature. The novel "The Scarlet Letter" by Nathaniel Hawthorn (1804-1864), for example, has influenced Chinese intellectuals for quite a few generations with its depiction of Puritanism and Calvinism, presenting Calvin as a narrow-minded moralist and thus exposing him to a harsh criticism. The worst image comes from "The Right to Heresy: Castellio against Calvin" (1936) by the Austrian author Stefan Zweig (1881-1942).¹ Against the backdrop of 20th century politics, Calvin is depicted here as the spiritual fountain of tyranny and modern dictatorship. The Protestant missionary forces concomitant to the unfortunate colonisation of Africa and Asia in the 19th century did not contribute to the dissipation of this image. On the contrary, emotions aroused by the independence and sovereignty movements considerably intensified Calvin's negative image in conjunc-

¹ Cf. Ferdinand Buisson, *Sébastien Castellion*, Paris, 1892, 2 vol.; Stefan Zweig, *Castellion contre Calvin*, Paris, 1946. Albert Rilliet wrote: "The tardy scandal that caused this torture is homage to the spirit of the Reformation; it may not have been so much the rigour of the judges as their inconsistency that bestowed such a glare to Servet's demise. Everywhere else other than a reformation city, he would have perished without his memory relating to anything else than stake or its victim. In Geneva, his death inevitably made him the representative of a cause and martyr of a principle." Albert Rilliet, *Relation du procès criminel de Michel Servet*, Geneva, 1844. On this process: *Op. Calv.*, VIII, pp. 725-872. Cf. John Cadier, *Calvin, sa vie, son œuvre avec un exposé de sa philosophie*, PUF, 1967, p. 24.

tion with the totalitarian interpretation of predestination understood as the reservation of exclusive salvation of Calvinists.

These various images of Calvin have subsisted and evolved side by side in China for a very long period. This is still the case. Intellectuals, as a dominant class, have always controlled the historical impacts in conformity with the Confucian tradition for the past two millennia. Christianity ought to enter the Chinese value system and spirituality. This is a big challenge given the preconceived images and substantial cultural differences. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) serves as a model case in this undertaking, both by virtue of his missionary determination and his strategy of accommodation.² In the Chinese world, his name has become a symbol for reciprocal respect between cultures.³

A socio-religious work by a German thinker, published in China in 1985, has fundamentally changed the negative image of John Calvin among intellectuals and elites in China. It is Max Weber and his famous book, "The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism". Since then, Calvin's image has changed into that of a historical figure who enabled the formation of a reasonable world based on democratic order, even though the interpretations of this book vary widely and are very controversial. Weber's hypothesis encourages Chinese elites to reflect on the reasons underlying the evolutions and subsequent successes of the European civilisation which dominates the modern history of humanity. Chinese elites are in search of the values and universal truth transcending na-

² "One of the first Jesuit missionaries to set foot in China was the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who formulated the model – often called 'accommodation' – for the approach of Jesuits in blending Christianity with Chinese culture. Ricci was one of the most remarkable men in history." David Mungello, *Chinese Responses to Early Christian Contacts*, in: *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary & Richard Lufano, second edition, volume two, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 144.

³ Wolfgang Franke, a leading European Sinologue of the twentieth century called Matteo Ricci "the most outstanding cultural mediator between China and the West of all times." In Goodrich and Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, p. 1144.

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tional or ethnic borders. For the Chinese intellectuals and elites, the decline of the Middle Kingdom following the opium war in 1840 and the subsequent colonisation have been the object of deep reflection on the destiny of their people.

Western thinking and spiritual systems have been gradually introduced in the Chinese world throughout the 20th century. Marxist works and philosophies from Britain, Germany, France, Russia, etc. are interpreted in the light of Confucianism. During the historical period following the national catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the significance of Weber's thesis was highly enlightening for Chinese elites. Chinese tradition is characterised by the Confucianist ethic which has imposed fixed norms on all social behaviours in all walks of life for two millennia. Western civilisation is based on the ethic of the Geneva-based Reformer. This comparison wins over the Chinese elites and intellectuals in their search for the bases and ideas of Western models and the causes of Western accomplishment.

Briefly speaking, the three images of John Calvin in the Chinese world demonstrate the urgent need for the Chinese theologians to interpret Calvin's historical significance for the Church.

2. Calvin and the Protestant Church in China: en route towards the future

2.1. Calvin: a historical figure with influence on the whole of humanity

Calvin arouses the attention of Chinese intellectuals and elites in the current period of transition to its modernisation. In the Chinese world, i.e. the continent, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and diasporas in the USA and other places, Calvin's inspiration and spiritual, ethical and practical legacies have become the sources and forces for the future of the Chinese nation. The very existence of a connection between Calvin and

China's modernisation may sound astonishing given the fact that there is no recognised influence of Calvin in the Chinese world, be it his person, his works, his spiritual dimension, or the activities of his disciples in the Western world.

In the Sino-cultural world, however, the past several decades have seen numerous research activities on Calvin in the fields of politics, economics, ethics, commerce and history. At the same time, the Chinese Christian communities have also tried to discover Calvin's historical contributions outside the ecclesiological and missiological domains.

Briefly speaking, the current academic research on Calvin in China may be viewed under two aspects: one engaged by academic intellectuals, the other by Protestant theologians, first and foremost within the Union Theological Seminary, the only institute at college level in China. In a different category, there is still another aspect: a practical, non-academic aspect regarding Calvin's influence in China at the Parish level of the Protestant Church through mediation of pre-1949 missionary traditions. Diaconal and educational ideas for the poor, longings for civil justice etc. have been important contents of the sermons of parish pastors since the 19th century.

Nevertheless, no preparations of ceremonies or activities for the Calvin Jubilee 2009 have been undertaken by the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) as a nation-wide political and ecclesiastical organisation for Protestantism in China. For laypersons and pastors of the Protestant Church in China, however, it is clear that the Calvin Jubilee 2009 is the most important historical and pastoral event of the year to be remembered in their prayers and thoughts.

I have reason to believe that the Calvin Jubilee 2009 marks a really historic moment for the Chinese world. Through reflection and reconsideration it should be brought to light that Calvin has exercised a significant influence, albeit implicitly, for the Chinese nation.

2.2. My interpretations of John Calvin's legacy for Protestantism in China in three points

2.2.1 Interpretations of the Chinese reality as the background of theological reflection on Calvin in China;

2.2.2 Works of Chinese intellectuals (Marxists and Confucianists) regarding Calvin's thoughts;

2.2.3 Revival Theology in Chinese Protestantism with reference to ecclesiology in line with the legacy of Calvin.

2.2.1. Interpretations of the Chinese reality as the background of theological reflection on Calvin in China

Today's China may be interpreted under four aspects with a view to examining Calvin's influence on China: the political China, the economic China, the cultural China and the ethical China.

First, the current political China conveys a picture of a very particular country. There are two 19th-century German thinkers whose political theories build a firm ground of the political China as its fundamental State ideology embedded in its constitution and military forces. Chinese political elites believe that the only road towards truth and paradise is to be found in the theory of these German thinkers. This situation in China can be expressed by the concept of Marxism. After almost 2000 years of monarchical imperialist history, a deeper concern of the Chinese people is justice and equality before the law. The political China is aware of the fact that the Chinese people demand order and justice. Since the 1980s, elites have been looking for a road towards universal values transcending the Marxist doctrine. At this juncture, it is the mission of the Church in China to introduce Calvin's thoughts and this Reformers' practices by taking initiatives which may be classified as historical.

The political challenges concerning justice are very hard and serious ones for us. The phenomena of corruption, judicial abuses, control on press etc. will work as a strong break for China on its way towards political modernisation in the direction aspired by academics and scholars.

The economic China is of a particular importance for our present theme. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections are very illuminating in this respect: "Concerning the relationship of worldly orders to each other and to the Church, the Lutheran doctrine of three estates (economic, political and ecclesiastical) attributes its decisive characteristic and permanent significance to a co-ordinate order rather than any sort of super-ordinate power, which means that the worldly orders are maintained by alien rule by the Church and vice versa. In my opinion, this doctrine must be replaced by one drawn from the Bible, namely the doctrine of four divine mandates: marriage and family, work, government, Church. These four mandates come from God as they carry out a divine mission based on and testified by the Revelation, as well as the divine promise."⁴ For China, the responsibility concerning economic matters means that a strict ethical position should be taken in conformation with the international commercial and ecological regulations including the ethics of international capital transfer⁵ etc. Problems relating to pollution, exploitation of labour and violation of copyright may trigger a crisis of credibility and economic morality in China. All this paves the road for the introduction of Calvin's thoughts in China.

The current cultural China in our globalised world may be interpreted as an alarm on the part of the Chinese authorities to protect traditional heritages. The call to reconsider Calvin's thoughts as being useful for the Chinese society dates back to the 1980s or earlier. Calvin, just as

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Geneva: Labor et Fides, 278 [printed in English by SCM Press in 1955]; Cf. "*Oeconomicus, politicus, and ecclesiasticus or hierarchicus.*" See Schmid, Heinrich, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, p. 604-23.

⁵ "Calvin did not regard the biblical prohibition of interest as being universally valid (for him, it was an aspect of Mosaic Law applied to the 'political constitution' of the State of Israel); he authorised interest in small doses as long as the charity and equality principles were respected (CR 24, 679-683). Cf. *Économique (Morale)*, by Higginson, Richard, *Dictionnaire critique de Théologie*, compiled by John-Yves Lacoste, Paris: PUF, 1998, p. 386.

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Kant, Voltaire, Bacon etc., is considered first and foremost one of the greatest cultural figures in the spiritual development of humankind. Confucianism and Taoism build together China's cultural basis. However, this is no longer sufficient for our society. As traditional resources, they have to enter into dialogue with other values.

The ethical China in a spiritual sense is a specific terrain apt for accepting the values of Calvin's legacy concerning the moral life in a secular society. Confucianism and Taoism are fundamental spiritual elements of the Chinese world. There is a strong historic tendency to revive the great national tradition which was practically destroyed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution under the slogan of smashing the old world and establishing a new world. The ethic-related thoughts of the Calvinist tradition may contribute to a dialogue with the Chinese traditions concerning the norms and regulations in modern life including the moral stances on the nature of social life.

2.2.2. Works of Chinese intellectuals regarding Calvin's thoughts

The significance of Calvin's legacy will be rendered manifest inasmuch as the academic works of Chinese scholars will confirm the universal truths and values of Calvin's works. Once the research projects currently in progress in this field are concluded, China will be able to benefit from the research on Calvin which has been accomplished in the whole world, too.

The quintessence of Max Weber's socio-religious theory, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" has effectively shed light on the interpretations of Calvin and his impact in China since the 1980s. Since then, Calvin has become one of the most important figures in the spiritual history of humankind in the Chinese world. Over the past few decades, Chinese intellectuals have translated many books and articles on Calvin written by Western scholars. Researches on different themes

related to Calvin are beginning to be published in China, too, above all on the political, social, judicial, commercial, and ethical themes.

One of these themes deserves particular attention: the encounter of the Calvinian Protestant ethic and the Chinese traditional ethic is a hot topic which has arisen in dealing with the urgent challenges which China should take up in this transitional period towards modernisation. The historical traces point to the interpretations and understanding of the terms and words used in the pertinent discussions and debates. In China, there are already some resources about Calvin which encourage us to reform, or at least change, the old existing structure in the political and economic fields. Calvin plays a tangible role in this process along with other Western thinkers who have exercised profound influences on modern China.

2.2.3 The Revival Theology in Chinese Protestantism with reference to the ecclesiology in line with Calvinian legacy

Calvin never regarded himself as a figurehead of the Reformation. His name appears only as a "label" of a confessing Church when he was leading the Reformation in Geneva. Historically speaking, the Church in the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition has pursued on a global scale the methods and ideas created and established by Calvin without his name being mentioned as a founder as is the case with the Lutheran Church. Over the past five centuries, Calvin has been exercising his influence through his works and legacy. His spiritual and religious ideas have left an ineffable impact on the direction of the history of Western civilisation as well as on the Christian history of missiology.

Our observation of the current state of Protestantism in China shows that Calvin's influence experienced a shift during the 19th century by means of the Reformed-Presbyterian missionary activities coming from Europe and the United States. They left their marks in the pastoral and diaconal forms at the parish level within the Chinese Church. Its synodal

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system is typical of the administrative methods of the Calvinist tradition. The principle of democracy within the Church comes from this tradition, too. His fundamental stance on the ecclesiastical ministry shaped the Church in many places in pre-1949 China. Luther's idea of universal priesthood was further developed by Calvin in the field of the institutional functioning of the Church. Duties and responsibilities of Christian people are linked with the calling of each and every individual in the secular world. By virtue of the four ministries as defined in accordance with the strict disciplines within the Church, the ministry of pastor was bestowed a particular status during the Geneva-based Reformation in the 16th century.⁶ Thanks to Calvinian ideas and practices, the Presbyterian tradition was the missionary force stronger than any other missionary forces in China. A large number of institutions such as hospitals, primary and secondary schools, diaconal relief centres for the poor and the elderly, and other charity services have been established and administered in China by Presbyterian missionaries. Christian groups or communities of the Calvinist tradition all over the world are characterised by their active and vigorous commitment in their socio-political activities, a lot more so than other Protestant traditions. It is to this tradition that we owe the initiatives taken in the fields of justice, responsibility, resistance in defence of human dignity and human rights, most of all for the protection of freedom of the press, of opinion and expression, and finally of conscience.

For the Protestant Church in China, a systematic introduction to Calvin's thoughts is still in an embryonic state despite the fact that the Parish basis of the Church has been organised all over China during the past two centuries under the influence of the Presbyterian tradition. The encounter of Calvin and Confucius will be one of the most important

⁶ *Calvin-Studienausgabe*, Band 2, *Gestalt und Ordnung der Kirche*, Herausgegeben von Eberhard Busch, Alasdair Heron, Christian Link, Peter Opitz, Ernst Sauer, Hans Scholl, 1997, Neukirchener, pp. 238-279.

themes for the Protestant Church in China, with the dominant ideas in China's national mentality and tradition still inspired by Confucianism, just as Western history is by the antique Greek spirit. The contact point between these two great spiritual systems is the interpretation of human nature and individual responsibility in the socio-political world. Calvin developed a highly fertile ethical and political system of thoughts drawing on biblical and ecclesiastical texts. The Chinese theologians will have to begin with this difficult task of simultaneously introducing in the Chinese mentality both Calvin's fundamental theories and ideas and the academic research works on Calvin's legacy.

The Nanjing Theological Review is the only theological journal in China which has published academic articles and interpretations of Western theologians and their thoughts in the past eighty years. Since 2006, we have been eager to publish the articles in time for the Jubilee 09. "Institutes of the Christian Religion" was partly translated by a Nankin-based Chinese pastor in the 1960s from an English version. It was subsequently published in Hong Kong in classical Chinese. The China Christian Council re-published it in simplified Chinese characters despite the insufficient quality of translation with a non-academic register. We acknowledge that we need time to carry out research on Calvin's legacy in the fields of bibliography, dogmas, ethics, sociology, economics, etc. in order to discover and interpret its historical significance.

Websites are beginning to play an important role for China's evangelisation. Calvin and the Reformation tradition have become highly attractive themes on Chinese websites.

3. Conclusion: Calvin's legacy must be brought to light in my Church

The Calvinian discipline of ministry is an important reference for Chinese theologians in their efforts to solve the problems provoked by

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emotionally-laden radicalism and fundamentalism which often oppose order within the Church.

According to François Wendel, "The role played by discipline should be first and foremost a pedagogical one. It is nonetheless noticed that, whatever vital importance Calvin may have attributed to the ecclesiastical discipline, he avoided making it one of the main features of the true Church. [...] For Calvin, discipline is no less important, neither is it the very essence of the notion of the Church; it is simply a measure of defence and means of sanctification, and as such belongs to the realm of organisation, not the definition of the Church."⁷

As early as 1538, Calvin ascribed a special importance to discipline for three different and complementary purposes. The first purpose is to honour God's name against heretics and schismatics who stood for an open rebellion against the Word of God, risking to ruin the Church itself. He said, "For seeing that the Church is the body of Christ, she cannot be defiled by such fetid and putrid members, without bringing some disgrace on her Head. Therefore, that there may be nothing in the Church to bring disgrace on His sacred name, those whose turpitude might throw infamy on the name must be expelled from His family."⁸

"The second purpose of discipline is that the good may not, as usually happens, be corrupted by constant communication with the wicked. For such is our proneness to go astray, that nothing is easier than to seduce us from the right course by bad example. To this use of discipline the apostle referred when he commanded the Corinthians to discard the incestuous man from their society: a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." (Inst., IV, 12, 5.)

"The third purpose of discipline is that those who are chastised by excommunication and become ashamed of it and begin to repent of his

⁷ François Wendel, *Calvin, sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse*, Labor et Fides, Genève, 1985, p. 228.

⁸ *Inst.*, IV, 12, 5.

turpitude, may come for penitence. Hence it is also for their interest that their iniquity should be chastised that whereas they would have become more obstinate by indulgence, they may be aroused by the rod of the Church." (Inst., IV, 12,5.)

François Wendel observes, "It is nevertheless well understood that, contrary to the worldly jurisdiction, penitentiary discipline is not, to Calvin's mind, of a jurisdictional character in the proper sense of the word. It is not purely repressive, nor designed for the sole purpose of safeguarding the public order."⁹ According to Philip Benedict, "Calvin resorted to three principal instruments of transforming the customs and manners of Genevan people. The first instrument was preaching. The ecclesiastical ordinances of 1541 prescribed twenty-six sermons per week, to be distributed among three parishes and ministries of the city. [...] His second instrument was the consistory. This disciplinary instance comprising some twenty members, in which pastors and experienced lay members were represented in roughly equal proportions, was elected every year from the lists prepared by the *Petit Conseil* (Senate). Its responsibility as conceived by Calvin was wide-ranging: maintaining the purity of the eucharistic community, bringing the sinners to shame and repentance, keeping the good from being corrupted by bad companies. [...] The third instrument was by-laws of which Calvin made use in order to reform the manners and behaviours of Genevans, for he made a clear distinction between worldly and heavenly governments. He held the view that each of these two governments should have its own jurisdiction and these two 'kingdoms' should be linked to each other. The civil authorities were God's lieutenants on earth and were hence supposed to defend the true religion."¹⁰

⁹ Wendel, François, *Calvin, sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse*, Genève : Labor et Fides, 1985, p. 228.

¹⁰ Benedict, Philippe, *Calvin et la transformation de Genève*, traduit de l'anglais par Nelly Lasserre-Jomini, *Calvin et le calvinisme, Cinq siècles d'influences sur*

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It is the third use of the law that has become a historical theme for the Church in China since it undertook to understand Calvin's legacy. For the Reformer of Geneva, "the third use of the law is its principal use which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law. The third use of the law is reserved to believers in whose heart the Spirit of God already lives and reigns."¹¹

Denis Müller comments on the third use of the law as follows: "For Calvin, this use of the law is connected to the vision which he had for the worldly growth in faith; by virtue of the 'daily doctrine of the law', a Christian may advance in his knowledge of God's will and in his daily practice of that knowledge. However, its pedagogical use does not match at all the idyllic image of obeisance; its sole function is to obstruct the laziness and sloppiness of flesh, in other words the rebellious will; the law acts like a whip or eternal sting to keep Christians awake"¹²

The principle of democracy, one of Calvin's most important issues, is the secret behind the advantages of the Reformed tradition for regulating the relationship between Church and State, between the two civil and ecclesiastical authorities respectively.

The Calvinian freedom of conscience must be interpreted with particular attention to the context of the Chinese traditional Confucianism in line with the current socio-political situation.

According to Calvin, "Christian liberty consists of three parts. First, the conscience of the believers, in their eagerness to seek the assurance of their justification in Christ, renounces and transcends the righteousness of the law. [...] The second part of Christian liberty, which depends on the first, is that the conscience, thus freed from the yoke of the law constrained by the necessity of the law, voluntarily obeys the will of God. [...] The third part of Christian liberty is that we are not bound be-

l'Eglise et la Société, éd. par Martin Ernst Hirzel et Martin Sallmann, Genève : Labor et Fides, 2008, pp. 21-23.

¹¹ *Inst.*, II, 7,12.

¹² Denis Müller, *La morale*, Genève : Labor et Fides, 1999, p. 33.

fore God to any observance of external things which are in themselves indifferent, but that we are now at full liberty either to use or omit them. The knowledge of this part of liberty is to us very necessary.”¹³

We have to interpret the theories concerning the ministry and responsibility of Christians living in a civil society in accordance with Calvin's political and ethical thought. Correct interpretations of the doctrine of TULIP (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints) relating to the theology of predestination are necessary for a correct comprehension of Protestant theology in China.¹⁴

The Protestant Church in China was strongly influenced by American missionaries from the 19th century onwards. For this reason, Calvinism in China has been mixed and often confused with Evangelicalism or modern Puritanism which involves radical disciplines for individual moral and spiritual life. It sometimes looks as if Calvinism in China shows its fundamentalist side without including in its thinking the responsibility towards society as the Reformed Church does in the West.

The Protestant Church in China will cautiously study Calvin's legacy, including the experiences and testimonies of various forms of Calvinism, Puritanism and Presbyterianism accumulated over the past five centuries in the whole world. Protestant missionaries had not really discovered the possibilities and means of introducing Christian dogmas and doctrine into the Chinese world before the advent of the People's Republic. They showed conformist attitudes without taking account of the milieu into which they were thrown. Subsequently, chased away from China as early as 1950, they left behind them a Church still in need of formation and theological reflection. Since 1980, a large number of them have led many Chinese to Christianity all over China. At present, I

¹³ *Institution*, III, 19, 2-7, p.312, 313, 315-316.

¹⁴ Sur l'histoire du dogme de la prédestination, cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, Réginald, *La prédestination des saints et la grâce*, Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 1936 ; Deluz, G., *Prédestination et liberté*, Neuchâtel : Delcahux & Niestlé, 1942.

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estimate the number of Chinese Christians at around 60 million in the Protestant Church in China with only two thousand pastors fully trained to theological faculty level.

The Protestant Church in China has to be prepared to commit itself to the process of China's modernisation, by resorting to Calvin's legacy. First of all, I would wish to organise Chinese research on Calvin's works and examine the significance of the principles of the Geneva-based Reformation. Then I would like to encourage Chinese theology to tackle the political and social issues in Chinese society by drawing its inspiration from Calvin's ideas for his own time. Thirdly, I would like to affirm that the Church in China must play the role of the national conscience, firmly based on the Bible and the principles of the Reformation. I am convinced that, in consideration of the present Chinese tradition, Calvin's fundamentals will have a value of universal truth for the Chinese people to the same extent as those of other universally recognised thinkers.