



A SPECIAL REPORT FROM VOICE OF THE MARTYRS AUSTRALIA

# ILLEGAL CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA



***'I don't agree with the theory that we shouldn't do anything that's illegal. If you took that doctrine to its logical conclusion, much of the world would not have been evangelized!'***

*- David Aikman*

Some question whether or not the persecution of Christians in China is a reality today. There is much talk of increasing religious freedom within the People's Republic of China, and indeed there has been great progress since the dark days of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In those hard times, Christianity was 'brutally suppressed...pastors were imprisoned or...killed...[and] every church in the country was closed'.<sup>2</sup>

The truth today is that there is a great deal of variation in the experience of Christians in China.

While it is true that the Chinese government allows the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) church to meet freely (albeit heavily regulated), it is also true that the house church movement is regularly persecuted by that same government. This persecution ranges from regular monitoring of congregations to pastors being jailed or beaten.

While it is true that the Chinese government approves of the printing and distribution of Bibles through its TSPM bookstores and churches, it is also true that those who print or distribute Bibles through other means face imprisonment for such 'illegal' activities.

One man who has suffered for this 'illegal' distribution of Bibles is bookstore owner Zhou Heng.



Zhou Heng and his daughter.

Heng was arrested by Public Security Officers (PSB) when he collected a three-tonne shipment of Bibles. He was formally charged with 'illegal business operations'. During his detainment, Heng was beaten by guards and fellow inmates. He was subsequently released after the court determined that there was insufficient evidence

to prosecute him. Through his suffering, Heng has received comfort from the Holy Spirit who has filled his heart with peace and light. He now encourages those of us who supported him through his time of trial: 'Let us thank, praise and worship the great, almighty and loving God'.

We at Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Australia applaud any progress being made toward achieving religious freedom in China; however, we must continue to 'remember...those who are ill-treated as if [we ourselves] were suffering'.<sup>3</sup> We must continue to alert the world to the suffering of the Chinese people. We must continue to support our brothers and sisters who are living out illegal Christianity in China, as they are 'still the largest single persecuted community today'.<sup>4</sup>



## Bibles & Literature: The Need

Believers in persecuted nations around the world are hungry for the Word of God. VOM contacts continue to report the call of our brothers and sisters in restricted nations: 'We need more Bibles!' For these believers, Bibles are particularly important. When they suffer for their faith, whether it is harassment, beatings or imprisonment, believers recall the Scriptures to bring hope and comfort to themselves and others. Persecuted Christians treasure the words they read in Scripture beyond anything else. These same words we in Western cultures all too often ignore or take for granted.

Unfortunately, there is an acute lack of Bibles within China. Despite the incredible increases in the number of Bibles distributed to Chinese Christians, most believers do not have a Bible. Our brothers and sisters resort to using handwritten copies of the Bible as the Word of God is so scarce within their nation.

## Amity Press

One organisation addressing the great need for more Bibles in China is Amity Press. Amity Press has been legally printing and distributing Bibles in China since 1987. It is the only body that can legally print Bibles in mainland China.<sup>5</sup> At its current capacity, Amity Press is able to print one million Bibles a month with the Chinese government's permission.<sup>6</sup> This enormous capacity makes Amity Press 'one of the largest Bible printing presses in the world'.<sup>7</sup>

VOM Australia celebrates along with many others that Amity Press recently ran off the press its 50 millionth Bible.<sup>8</sup> We are pleased that they are committed to increasing the availability of the Bible to Chinese believers.



***The Bibles that are printed by Amity Press are limited to distribution through government-approved TSPM bookstores and churches.***

While Amity Press has greatly improved the availability and distribution of Bibles within China, there are still many Chinese Christians who do not have access to the 'living and active' word of God.<sup>9</sup> The Bibles that are printed by Amity Press are limited to distribution through government-approved TSPM bookstores and churches. This limitation poses problems for a number of groups of believers within China:

- house church believers
- those in rural or remote areas
- those in poverty

There is little debate that house church believers make up the largest proportion of Christians in China. Over 23 million Chinese people worship within the official churches. The total number of believers within China is anywhere upwards of 60 million.<sup>10</sup> Thus, using a conservative estimate, house church believers outnumber those within the official churches two to one.

House church believers cannot purchase Bibles from TSPM churches or bookstores because they fear that they might be required to divulge information about their house church membership. That means that at least two thirds of believers in China are missing out on owning the Bible, the book that we consider to have 'the words of eternal life'.<sup>11</sup> As a result, many Christians do not possess the tool that we consider essential for the growth of the church and the spiritual maturity of believers.

Those who live in rural or remote areas also find it difficult to get a Bible. The difficulty here is that they do not live anywhere near a TSPM church or bookstore. Thus, they are unable to purchase a Bible from any of the legal distribution points.

The problem for believers who live in poverty is that they simply cannot purchase an Amity Press Bible as they cannot afford it.

Because Chinese believers treasure Scripture immensely and consume the Word of God so hungrily, the average Bible in China lasts only 5 years. Thus, using the conservative estimates concerning the size of the Chinese church, at least 60 million Bibles must be printed and distributed to Chinese Christians every 5 years in order for every believer to be supplied with a Bible (and this does not factor in the incredible and sustained growth of the Chinese church). This rate of printing and distribution is simply not possible using Amity Press alone.

As well as these problems concerning the availability of Bibles, Chinese believers are asking VOM contacts for Study Bibles and other resources to increase the depth in maturity of the Chinese church. Currently, Amity Press does not print or distribute these resources in China. Thus, believers both within TSPM churches and house churches are left without access to this material that could potentially contribute to a growth in the Chinese church even greater than that which we are currently witnessing.



***The bottom line is that there remains an acute shortage of Bibles within China.***

The bottom line is that there remains an acute shortage of Bibles within China. The pressing need has been demonstrated above. Amity Press, although it is doing commendable work, simply cannot meet this need for Bibles within China. Both the quantity and rate of printing and distribution fall well below what is required to put a Bible in the hands of every Chinese believer.<sup>12</sup>

## **Smuggling Bibles**

***‘Christianity is certainly growing in parts of China where the Amity Press isn’t represented. [Thus] using other means of getting Bibles to these communities is quite a reasonable thing to do’.***

VOM Australia, whilst congratulating Amity Press on their successes, believes strongly that we must continue to supply all Chinese believers with the word of God using whatever means we have at our disposal. We do not want to replace the great work that Amity Press is currently doing, but we insist that there is a pressing need to supplement their efforts. David Aikman, former Time magazine Beijing bureau chief, has stated that ‘Christianity is certainly growing in parts of China where the Amity Press isn’t represented. [Thus] using other means of getting Bibles to these communities is quite a reasonable thing to do’.<sup>13</sup> VOM Australia is committed to providing Bibles and Christian Literature to all believers in persecuted countries. One method that we believe is necessary in order to supply Chinese believers with Bibles is to smuggle the literature into the country.

People often have much difficulty with the word ‘smuggling’. The word has such negative connotations. When we hear it we think of the smuggling of drugs across our borders or weapons into the hands of rebel armies. We think of an evil, illegal activity that should rightly be condemned.

But is the smuggling of Bibles an evil, illegal activity that should be condemned? How ought we to think about the smuggling of Bibles into restricted nations such as China? We are presented with a dilemma. On the one hand, Christians affirm the command of Christ to ‘be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’.<sup>14</sup> We want to see all people come to faith in Christ. We long to see all believers equipped with the powerful, life-giving Word of God. On the other hand, however, we are presented with such texts as Romans 13:1: ‘everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities’. In the case of China and many other restricted nations, the government has declared that the distribution of Bibles is an illegal activity. The proclamation of our faith is an illegal activity.

Under these circumstances, we must ask ourselves, is it permissible to ‘break the law’? Would God approve of our undercover efforts to illegally distribute Bibles to

believers in China? Or, should we abide by these anti-Christian Chinese laws?

In Romans 13, the apostle Paul goes on to assert that ‘there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God’.<sup>15</sup> This means that every government or civil authority, whether good or bad, has been put in place by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> Government is created by God for good purposes. Government is supposed to restrain evil and promote justice. Thus, government is ideally an institution to which it ought to be easy to submit.

However, many say that Romans 13:1-5 demands obedience to the state ‘insofar as the state is God’s servant to execute justice...but where the state becomes an instrument of evil, it is to be opposed’.<sup>17</sup> Whilst God has ordained civil authorities, they often perpetrate acts of evil.



The civil authorities in restricted nations actively oppose Christianity by harassing, beating and imprisoning those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ. As God’s people, we are called upon to oppose these evils acts committed by unjust governments. For persecuted believers, this might often mean “breaking the law” in order to ‘obey God rather than men’.<sup>18</sup>



## ‘Breaking the law’ in the Bible

We needn’t look far to see biblical examples of this kind of civil disobedience. Recall the daring of Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who stood in defiance against the laws of the Babylonian Kings. Daniel embarked upon an illegal prayer campaign; his friends refused to obey the decree to worship the false gods of Babylon.<sup>19</sup>

Remember the Hebrew midwives who defied the decree of the Egyptians to slaughter all boys born to Israelites.<sup>20</sup> As a result Moses was smuggled out alive along the river. The Lord used this “illegal” act for the eventual deliverance of Israel from the hands of their Egyptian oppressors.

Consider the cunning of Rahab who lied to the civil authority of Jericho in order to hide some Jewish spies.<sup>21</sup> God used even this act of disobedience to accomplish his purposes.

Examples such as these abound throughout the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. We are to learn from them that when the government that God has placed in authority over us uses its power to accomplish evil rather than good, civil disobedience may be required to obey God and accomplish his purposes.

We at VOM Australia believe that this same civil disobedience ought to be employed in restricted nations where the printing and distribution of Bibles has been deemed illegal. We long to see the growth of the church and the maturity of believers in persecuted countries. The Bible is an essential tool for this growth. We are thus committed to translating, publishing, and printing Bibles, doing whatever is necessary to get the Word of God into the hands of persecuted believers around the world.

***Because of your support we are able to continue this great work of equipping our persecuted brothers and sisters with the Scriptures. Thanks to you we have the joy of putting Bibles into the hands believers who have never owned their own personal Bible.***



Because of your support we are able to continue this great work of equipping our persecuted brothers and sisters with the Scriptures. Thanks to you we have the joy of putting Bibles into the hands believers who have never owned their own personal Bible. VOM workers are helping to translate, print and distribute the Word of God

to Christians in China and other restricted nations. These Bibles remind persecuted Christians of God’s great love for them. They are greatly encouraged by your support.

Please continue to remember those who are persecuted for our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember them in prayer, asking God to strengthen our brothers and sisters so that they might endure through their hardships to the praise and glory of our Lord. Remember them also by partnering with us to continue our efforts of supplying Bibles into the hands of every believer in restricted nations.

Be encouraged by the passion and courage of Chinese believers who continue to stand firm in their faith through incredible trials. I pray that their faithfulness might inspire you in your walk with Jesus in Australia.

**Thank you for your generous support of the persecuted church.**

1. Quoted in Zylstra. ‘Smuggling Debate’.
2. Luke Wesley. 2005. *Stories From China: Fried Rice For The Soul*. London: Authentic Media, p. xii.
3. New International Version, Hebrews 13:3.
4. Open Doors Australia. *The Truth About Bibles in China*.
5. Francis Wong. 2008. China Bible Plant reaches monthly printing capacity of one million. Presbyterian News Service, June 12.
6. Wong. China Bible Plant.
7. Wong. China Bible Plant.
8. Wong. China Bible Plant.
9. NIV. Hebrews 4:12.
10. Open Doors Australia. *The Truth About Bibles in China*.
11. NIV. John 6:68-69.
12. Another difficulty is that the average life span of a Bible is only 5 years, as believers use their Bibles so regularly. Thus the need is upwards of 60 million Bibles to be printed and distributed every 5 years.
13. Quoted in Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra. 2009. ‘Smuggling Debate: Ministries disagree on how best to provide Bibles to Chinese Christians’. *Christianity Today*, February. Accessed via: [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com)
14. NIV, Acts 1:8.
15. NIV Romans 13:1.
16. This raises the stimulating question of God’s sovereignty over these matters. How/why would a good God allow an evil ruler to govern his people? A helpful resource for dealing with the issue of evil and God’s sovereignty is D. A. Carson. 2006. *How Long, O Lord?* (Second Edition). Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, pp. 177-203.
17. D. A. Carson. 2006. *How Long, O Lord?* (Second Edition). Nottingham: Intervarsity Press, p. 50.
18. NIV. Acts 5:29.
19. Daniel 6:6-10 and Daniel 3:9-18, respectively.
20. Exodus 1:15-20.
21. Joshua 2:1-7.