

He Must Increase

1936-1938

AFTER the prodigious effort in Amoy, any other man would have felt justified in taking a rest. But, without stopping to consider such a possibility, he went ahead immediately with campaigns in the crowded cities of Canton, Hong Kong and Kowloon before sailing for Singapore en route for Sarawak on the island of Borneo.

As the boat for Borneo was delayed, the Christians in Singapore took advantage of the delay to arrange four days' training classes for the leaders in the Christian Evangelistic League. A second election of officers was also held under Dr. Sung's guidance.

There is a large community of Chinese in Borneo, both in British North Borneo and in what, at the time, was Dutch Borneo. Sibü in Sarawak was the chosen place for Dr. Sung's campaign, in which 1,583 people were brought to repentance and faith in Christ! The meetings began on September 21st and went on until October 1st, and were the sensation of the century in this out-of-the-way place. Very few families in the town or even the neighbouring towns remained untouched by the tremendous preaching. There is a Chinese living in London in whose heart the first seeds were sown at the Sibü campaign. He was then a little boy living with relatives who had no interest in the gospel. But the vivid dramatization of Bible stories and Christian truth made a deep impression on his mind. He grew to manhood and wandered far from God, but the seed eventually bore fruit when "after many days" this godless man found Christ in England!

Besides the many conversions, there were over 100 who dedicated themselves to the Lord's service. Eighty-eight witness bands were formed in Sibü alone, while there were thirty-eight

more in two neighbouring towns. Four young women were sent over to Nanking to be trained for Christian service. The war hit the Christians of Borneo hard. Nevertheless, the preaching bands continued their witness right through the Japanese occupation in face of great dangers and difficulties.

Returning to Singapore, Dr. Sung conducted a ten-day Bible Study Conference from December 11th to 20th. He took Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Joshua and Daniel in the Old Testament and expounded the spiritual significance in the Tabernacle and the Offerings. In the New Testament the books studied were Luke's Gospel, Romans and Jude.

On December 22nd, John Sung boarded the S.S. *Conte Verde* to return to Shanghai. The demonstration of affection and the enormous enthusiasm of the Christians attracted the attention of a reporter of the *Straits Times*. The following account appeared in the issue of December 23rd, 1936:

"A young Chinese stood in the lounge of the Italian liner *Conte Verde* in Singapore last night and brought tears to the eyes of more than 500 people. He was John Sung, the Chinese evangelist, who was returning to China after his second campaign for Christianity in Singapore. He was seen off by more than 1,000 excited Chinese, who paraded on the wharf waving flags and invaded the decks and saloons of the liner. Dr. Sung addressed his followers briefly; they sang hymns and smiled cheerfully, but fully half of them were weeping, some silently and some more emotionally. They were saying goodbye to a man who claims to have made thousands of Chinese converts to Christianity, to a man who was once locked in a mental asylum in the United States and who is now the 'hot gospeller' of China and the Chinese.

"Sung is a man who puts himself and Christianity into the news by his unorthodox ways, which always annoy the orthodox. He has made whirlwind tours of Malaya and everywhere he has left behind bands of converts. I watched him last night aboard the *Conte Verde*. Around him were hundreds of Singapore Chinese—mostly working-class men and women with a fair sprinkling

of young men and good-looking girls—and he turned the liner's lounge into an improvised mission hall.

"His supporters, who wore the badge and waved the flag of the Chinese Christian Evangelistic League, rarely took their eyes off him. He spoke but little and then usually an intimate word to someone near him. Then someone, moved by the occasion, burst into the first line of a hymn in Chinese, which was taken up by everybody. Stewards, travellers, dock officials and ship's officers looked on amazed. And most amazed of all, let it be said, were a number of Roman Catholic priests returning from Rome to their stations in the Far East. I noticed two nuns attracted by the waving of flags bearing the insignia of the Cross go into the lounge; they seemed to wonder what it was all about and certainly never identified the young Dr. Sung, who looked more like a tennis player than an evangelist."

Early in 1937, Dr. Sung carried out yet another tour of North China. War with Japan was looming ever more menacingly, while the Government of China was being threatened and goaded to action by the Communist Party. Signs followed the preaching of the Word in Chefoo, Tientsin, Peking, Paoting, Taiyuan and many another city. In Chefoo, nearly all the remaining unconverted girls in a Christian high school accepted Christ, and many of them are serving Christ in widely scattered places to-day. In Taiyuan, the capital of Shansi, no church building was big enough to hold the crowds that gathered from all over the province. A tent to hold a thousand was erected. At the opening meeting on June 27th, Dr. Sung recognized some of the Christians from Pingyao, the city to the south where he had held a campaign in May, 1933. His memory was phenomenal. In spite of the real work of the Holy Spirit witnessed at those meetings, not a few had taken offence at Dr. Sung's brusque manners. Now he apologized:

"When I was with you in 1933, I was very carnal! But I hope you will see a change for the better in me now and find me rather more spiritual!"

Six days of meetings resulted in over 300 people seeking

spiritual help, and there were many who testified to physical healing.

The meetings ended on July 5th, just two days before the infamous "Double Seventh", when the shooting incident took place at the Marco Polo Bridge outside Peking—the event which touched off the Sino-Japanese War. With the tense atmosphere existing at the end of the meetings and with war already inevitable, Dr. Sung decided not to go to Peking to fulfil an engagement there, but hurried back instead to join his family in Shanghai.

Mr. A. T. F. Reynolds of the China Inland Mission, who had attended the Taiyuan conference, travelled by the same train. He had gone early to the station to secure a good seat. Later a party of Christians boarded the train to secure a seat for Dr. Sung. A place was found in the very section of the coach in which Mr. Reynolds was seated. Knowing that John Sung hated effusiveness and was not particularly cordial towards foreigners, Mr. Reynolds deliberately paid no attention to his fellow traveller and engaged in conversation with other Christians. The conversation turned to the subject of the "Team of Christian Workers", a band of Chinese Christians labouring successfully in Shansi under the leadership of the Rev. David Yang. Dr. Sung had evidently never heard of this work before and, after listening for a long time, he leaned across and asked Mr. Reynolds to tell him about it. There followed a long and profitable conversation, which was continued the next day after both men had tried to snatch a few fitful hours' sleep. Dr. Sung had had an arduous campaign and he could easily have travelled in comfort in a first-class sleeping berth. But he elected to travel third class and to take what sleep he could with head and hands resting on the table.

On arrival at their destination, Dr. Sung invited Mr. Reynolds to accompany him on a visit to a local church and asked him to a meal at a restaurant. They accepted the hot cloth offered them to wash their faces and hands and sat down to sip tea and wait for the evening meal to be served. But Dr. Sung was not one to waste a minute. He produced his diary and in the minute and fine handwriting he always used he began to write up his journal.

This experience suggests an explanation of Dr. Sung's brusqueness. One of the great temptations of a popular and successful preacher is to allow himself to be over-exalted and over-esteemed by his admirers. Was Dr. Sung's brusqueness and aloofness in part his protective mechanism?—a pose to ward off flattery and adulation, especially when faced with expressions of gratitude or commendation? It may have been.

There appears to have been a Third Bible Institute at Foochow starting in late July, 1937. It followed the same lines as its predecessor, but was not on the same scale, owing to the fact that the country was now at war. Dr. Sung arrived back in Shanghai on August 13th, the very day that the Japanese Navy launched its attack on that city.

Undeterred by the ever-growing proportions of the war, Dr. Sung decided to go ahead with his schedule in the North and North-west. In October, at Sian, the Shensi capital, the usual heavy programme was undertaken. Dr. Sung led the singing himself and a chorus for the day frequently punctuated each address, a practice which made it hard to doze for long! The sermons were his old favourites: the Lost Sheep, the Sermon on the Mount, the Rich Man and Lazarus and the Corinthian Hymn of Love—all of them dramatically illustrated with an energy amazing for so slight a frame. One day, preaching on Saul and the Amalekites, he stripped off the simple, white long gown which he always wore, rolled it up, and stuffed it inside his shirt, letting the audience know that the bulge was unconfessed sin! As confession of one sin after another was made, the gown was pulled out bit by bit until every sin had been fully confessed. Then the whole gown was torn out with a shout of "Hallelujah!" And the great crowd rose to sing "O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee!"

Rev. H. W. Burdett of the English Baptist Mission who attended the meetings and was fully aware of the criticisms levelled by many at Dr. Sung gave his impressions of the preacher:

"To me this was New Testament Christianity—vibrating, vital, compelling, the Holy Spirit given unto us! There were scores

of decisions at every service. . . . It was very moving. . . . At the close of the meetings, witness bands were organized and so the influence spread all over the Sian plain. It is evident now that the ministry of such evangelists was God's gracious gift to His people in China to prepare them for the fiery trial of the Japanese War and the fiercer testing under Communist rule."

One woman who had been a nominal Christian and a heavy smoker met with God at these meetings, dedicated her life to His service and later became the Bible-woman of the church in Lanchow, the provincial capital of Kansu.

The outbreak of war with Japan prevented any further visits abroad until the spring of 1938, when Dr. Sung travelled to Bangkok on a first visit to Thailand (Siam). The visit was by private invitation and not sponsored officially by the churches.

Miss Margaret McCord of the American Presbyterian Mission recalls how she stood with a group of members of the Chinese Church in Thailand awaiting his arrival at the church. A delegation had gone to meet Dr. Sung on the ship. When he arrived, Miss McCord was impressed by the slender figure with the smiling black eyes and the shock of hair dropping over his forehead.

The Bangkok meetings were held in the large Baptist church built by Dr. Grosbeck. Reports of this sensational evangelist had not impressed the missionaries and John Sung was regarded with mixed feelings by most of them. But the Chinese gave him a warm welcome and he was the guest of the Rev. Boon Mark Getesarn. For a whole month he preached twice a day: to the Christians in the mornings and to the outsiders in the evenings. A thousand or so people attended the mission and there were about 700 professed conversions, among them the present pastor of the church and his wife. A dozen or so Christians surrendered their lives for whole-time service and about 200 joined themselves into seventy evangelistic bands pledged to go out witnessing at least once a week. They were to meet once a month to report their experiences, and there were to be regular united evangelistic and devotional meetings. Reports from Thailand show that these evangelistic bands are still active in 1954.

Miss McCord recalls that never before had she seen the Chinese Christians in Thailand so aroused. This was the answer to the prayer of thirty years, "Lord, send a revival!"

From Siam, Dr. Sung's itinerary took him for a month to Indo-China. Fifteen years later missionaries and Chinese Christians still wax enthusiastic as they recall those weeks of blessing. Everyone was unanimous in the opinion that his visit brought the greatest spiritual impact and the best results of any similar visit from an outsider, foreign or Oriental. Both Chinese and Vietnamese attended the meetings and as usual, Dr. Sung used an interpreter, speaking rapidly, sometimes in English, sometimes in Mandarin. There was a Cantonese-speaking pastor who was indisposed and really unfit to undertake the task of interpretation. Others were available, but Dr. Sung insisted on having this man or none at all. "Don't be afraid to die!" he told him. He himself, weak in body, drove himself mercilessly and expected others to keep up with his pace.

Those who were meeting the great evangelist for the first time were struck by his simplicity in dress and absence of any desire to make a good platform appearance. He was even inclined to be careless in this respect. There was no outward indication that here was a scholar and a preacher. He was impatient with anything that looked like pride or self in others and studiously avoided anything in the way of pretension in his own conduct. Small talk he abhorred. His apparent lack of graciousness would have been offensive had his preaching not demonstrated his unusual spiritual power. Between the meetings he could never relax. The burden of his ministry rested heavily upon him and he remained at a high pitch of tension all the time.

Dr. Sung's foibles and uncanny qualities came out during his campaign in Saigon. In acting out one of his Gospel stories he completely threw his interpreter off his balance by actually spitting at him, an act which is as insulting in China as in the West. Once, noticing that one of the deacons showed no response to any of the invitations to confess specific needs for prayer, Dr. Sung named him and, with supreme disregard for the "face" to

which Chinese attach such importance, sarcastically suggested that, as the deacon evidently had arrived at victory in all points, it was time that he came out to give his testimony! On another occasion, he invited all preachers who desired special prayer to hand in their names on a slip of paper. One of these he immediately rejected, declaring the writer to be a hypocrite without even a glance at the name. In actual fact, the writer was a back-slidden Christian. John Sung would tolerate no hypocrisy, no pride, and was a bitter enemy of any compromise with the "flesh". No one could escape coming under condemnation. Those who yielded to the Spirit made progress but those who resisted became hardened. The Chinese church in Cholon, a suburb of Saigon, remembers Dr. Sung's visit with thanksgiving. Many were permanently blessed at that time and the church still witnesses to the lasting results. The preaching bands formed are still actively at work to-day. For a time there were many would-be imitators of Dr. Sung's methods and even his mannerisms, but they soon found that they lacked his power without which the manner was useless.

Dr. Sung's only visit to the South-west of China was in the summer of 1938. Mr. G. E. Metcalf of the China Inland Mission reported on this visit in these terms:

"The churches of Kunming, the Yunnan capital, have been stirred up as they never have been before. Three tribal Christians belonging to the Lisu attended the meetings and on their return have been used to stir up the Lisu church. The Spirit is working and there has been much confession of sin followed by a new zeal for the salvation of the lost."

In the lovely city of Tali, in the midst of the "Switzerland of China", where tribal peoples and Tibetans frequently rub shoulders with the Chinese at the markets, Dr. Sung's visit resulted in preaching bands being formed to evangelize the surrounding countryside.

The South-west, however, was not ready for revival and the campaigns there were not so successful as elsewhere, but Dr. Sung was made aware that there were others besides himself who

were labouring for God with great self-sacrifice: Chinese and missionaries. This seems to have had the effect of producing a greater humility of spirit. Friends in Shanghai remarked on his return there:

"He's much more humble now! He even talks about becoming a country preacher himself!"

Once while chatting to a friend, he is reported to have said:

"There are many people better than I! For exposition of the Scriptures, I am not equal to Watchman Nee! As a preacher, I am not up to Wang Ming-tao! As a writer, I cannot compare with Marcus Cheng! As a musician, I am far short of Timothy Dzao! I have not the patience of Alfred Chow! As a public figure, I do not have the social graces of Andrew Gih! There is only one thing in which I excel them all: that is in serving God with every ounce of my strength!" All these men were raised up for this generation as witnesses.

Mr. Newman Shih also found John greatly changed. Calling on him soon after his return to Shanghai in August, 1938, he was greatly touched by his humble, quiet attitude.

"I no longer care to rebuke people from the pulpit," John told him. "I prefer now to preach on subjects which edify and bring comfort to people. You see, the times have changed. . . ."

Words like these made a deep impression on one who had known him well over a long period of years.

So evidently full of power by the Spirit was John Sung that the idiosyncrasies, the impatience, the apparent lack of graciousness and the uncompromising denunciation of evil-doers had been unable to detract from the great affection in which he was held by thousands to whom he had been a voice crying in the wilderness, a messenger sent from God. His name became a household word wherever Chinese was spoken, and is still a "sweet memory to multiplied thousands". One who was born again in one of his meetings in China fifteen years ago and is now serving the Lord in the Philippines was asked to tell something about Dr. Sung.

Her voice softened and her eyes lit up as she said, in tones of deep affection "*Ai-ya! Sung Por-sir!*" ("Ah me! Dr. Sung!"). And deep in the heart of Chinese Christians everywhere is a grateful memory of the Chinese John the Baptist raised up to call the Chinese Church to repentance.