

The Three Solas: A Summation of the Reformation Theology that Rocked the World and China **撼动世界与中国的“三个唯独 Solas”**

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Abstract:

Protestant missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries spread the distinctive faith of the Protestant Reformation to China and around the world. Three theses tie together what is central to Protestant theology: *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*. These crucial themes revolutionized European Christianity, the West, and now is transforming the world.

Introduction

In 1517 a Portuguese diplomatic mission arrived in China. There were a lot of misunderstandings, but the mission was eventually granted an audience with the Emperor, *Zhengde* 正德, in Nanjing where the Emperor was visiting at the time. The Portuguese diplomatic mission won permission to go on to Beijing, but while they were still waiting for a second audience the Emperor died. Following the death of *Zhengde*, poor relations between Portugal and China followed. The relationship was normalized in the late 1540s, and the Portuguese would establish permanent rule in Macau in 1557. It was not until 1598 that another European would reach the capital of Beijing. It was in 1598 that the Roman Catholic Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci arrived in the Chinese capital.

At the precise moment of the first Portuguese diplomatic mission's arrival in China, in 1517, that a new form of Christianity was born. In 1517 the German Roman Catholic priest, Martin Luther, posted his Ninety-five Theses (九十五条论纲) on his church in Wittenberg. The date October 31, 1517 is the date celebrated annually as Reformation Day. As the Portuguese diplomatic mission was floundering in China at the same moment, it is difficult to imagine how the Christian message might spread to China. After many centuries of heavy-handed imperial control, how might the gospel penetrate China?

But the new form of Christianity, Protestantism, that emerged out of Roman Catholicism after 1517 proved to be particularly adept at crossing cultural barriers. Protestantism provided a powerful message in its home context in Germany in the early 16th century, and from Germany that spread like a wildfire across many parts of Europe. At the heart of the Reformation was story.

Protestant emerged on the scene like a new microorganism. The Reformation message is sometimes thought of as being analogous to a seed, a movement capable of growth along predetermined the lines. That is, the message was destined to take root and flourish wherever it found a suitable environment.

But a better analogy, also from biology, is a microorganism that is “capable of rapid mutation and adaptation in response to changing environments, while still maintaining continuity with its earlier forms.”¹ Protestantism is not so much a movement, but rather a “movement of movements,” that share common aspirations. But the way these aspirations are articulated and attained can be very different from location to location.²

Martin Luther unleashed a movement that was untethered from the traditions and teachings of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. With his doctrines of the “priesthood of all believers, and the “perspicuity of Scriptures” a radical reformation of Christianity was certain. There was no longer a central authority to restrict the reshaping of the church. Ironically, it was not only the European Protestants who opposed the Pope, but the Chinese Emperor himself would soon find himself at loggerheads with the Pope.

Even as the Protestant Reformation was spreading across Europe through the 16th century, the Pope continued to send Roman Catholic missionaries around the world. By the end of the 16th century Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits had been able to establish a small Roman Catholic Church in China. The Jesuits had adopted Chinese garb and they had worked to contextualize the Christian message. One of their controversial attempts to contextualize Roman Catholicism to Chinese culture was to allow Chinese Catholics to continue to practice ancestor rites. Other Roman Catholic missionaries, such as the Franciscans and Dominicans who had followed the Jesuits into China, opposed the ancestor rites. Both sides appealed to the Pope in Rome, and throughout the 17th century the various popes wrestled with the issue of ancestor rites in China. Finally, during the reign of Emperor Kangxi, the Pope in 1705 made the final decision against the ancestor rites. Emperor Kangxi was furious at the Pope, insisting that he obviously did not understand Chinese culture, and he determined that Roman Catholicism should no longer be allowed to spread in China.

At the heart of the Reformation, as articulated by Luther, was a story. It was the story of Jesus Christ. The story of Martin Luther himself, in turn, became an embedded part of the DNA of the Protestant church movement. As the movement spread around the globe, stories continued to be a powerful part of the attraction of Protestantism. Beyond the universal story the story Jesus, an ever-growing number of stories proliferated and spurred both the indigenization of Protestantism, and its growth.

In the first part of this essay I will focus first on the dramatic story of Martin Luther, the powerful story of transformation that sets the stage for the rest of Protestantism. Within the story of Luther, I will also highlight Luther’s insight into the story of Jesus Christ and the explosive power of the Gospel. In the second part of the essay, I will tell three stories from the Protestant churches in China. These stories demonstrate the explosive impact the Reformation message has had on China.

Three key doctrines provide an effective summation of the theology of the Reformation. These three points are *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*. That is, “faith alone,” “grace alone,” and “scripture alone.” While a dictionary definition could be given of each of these three doctrines, the true dynamism

¹ Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution: A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London: SPCK, 2007), 4.

² Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution: A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London: SPCK, 2007), 9.

of the doctrines can be seen best through story. The stories from the second part of the essay will illustrate the continuing power of each of these Reformation ideals on the Protestant churches in China. The first story of John Song will illustrate faith alone, the second story of Robert Morrison and the 2003 China Mission Conference in Chicago will illustrate grace alone, and the third story from history of Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping Rebellion will provide an opportunity to highlight the proper Protestant understanding of Scripture alone. At each point, the Roman Catholic teaching will be contrasted with the Protestant Reformation teaching. With the Reformation, a new power was unleashed, a movement that is always incarnating and transforming.

Part 1 Story of Martin Luther

Martin Luther was not born into a wealthy family, but his father was ambitious and desired for young Martin to become a lawyer.³ However at the age of 22, in 1505, during a frightening lightning storm Martin made a vow to become a monk. Against his father's wishes, Martin dropped out of school and entered St. Augustine's Monastery in Erfurt on July 17, 1505.

Luther dedicated himself to both academic study and moral cultivation. He subjected himself to endless hours of spiritual disciplines, such as fasting, prayer, confession, and pilgrimage. But the more that Luther strived to purify himself, the further he felt separated from God. Even as he was successfully pursuing philosophical and biblical studies, culminating with his Doctor of Theology degree in 1512, he was falling into deeper spiritual despair.

Luther was frustrated with the wisdom he had inherited from his traditions. In philosophy, the goal of human life is happiness and the way to happiness is virtue. But Martin Luther was increasingly convinced that he could not become a good person, that he could not achieve the virtue that would lead to happiness. Luther, therefore, would need to challenge the inherited wisdom of his traditions and layout a new vision for achieving virtue and a happy life.

Luther was in a desperate situation. He was learning from the Bible that God is righteous, and at the same time he was ever more conscious of his own sin. No matter how hard he struggled, the Law of God was teaching him that he could not achieve the righteousness of God. He became convinced that even his own striving, even his best efforts at "virtue," were only filthy rags in the sight of God. He was only deserving of hell.

He found a solution to his dilemma in the gospel. In the gospel there is a story, a story that is summarized within the ancient Christian creeds. For instance, from the Nicene Creed of 381 Luther read:

*For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.*

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day*

³ For a classic telling of the story of Martin Luther, see Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*.

in accordance with the Scriptures.

In those words he read the story of Jesus who came down from heaven and was crucified, dead, and yet he rose again on the third day. In that story, there is also embedded a promise. The promise is that the story is “for us.” Luther recognized that the promise “for us” included a promise for “me.”

The terror of God that Luther felt as an anxious monk dissolved. When Luther asked the question of how a person could achieve the righteousness of God, the answer was crystal clear. Moral striving is not the answer; we simply must trust what God has promised in the gospel. By faith we must accept what Christ has done for us. There are no works we can do, justification is by faith alone.

At the core of the Reformation launched by Martin Luther was a revolutionary break from the burden of moral striving. When Luther preached this Gospel to anxious people who were terrified of hell and damnation, he offered a breath of fresh air. This Gospel spread from Germany like a wildfire into Europe and eventually around the world.

Luther does go on to say that Christians are to do good works, but works are not part of salvation. And further, Christians will do better works once they believe the gospel. Since good works are not part of salvation, Luther goes on to argue that the good works are for a very different purpose. Good works are for the neighbor of the Christian. The neighbor needs the good works of Christians, that is, the neighbor needs their kindness, charity, and preaching the gospel. Therefore, in addition to preaching the gospel, Protestants are often known for their prolific charity around the world.

The story of Martin Luther, and his profound insight into the story of Jesus Christ, became the foundation of the Protestant missionary movement, and has become the root of stories that have sprung up around the world.

Part 2 Three *solas* and Three Stories from China

Story 1 *Sola fide* and John Song in China

The first central doctrine of the Reformation is justification by faith alone, a fundamental tenant for Luther, Calvin, and all the Reformers. This doctrine contrasts with the Roman Catholic formulation which argues that faith must be accompanied by works. Martin Luther insisted that a person receives the promise of salvation simply by believing. There is nothing a person can do to earn the right to be adopted into the family of the King.

Like the story of Martin Luther in Germany, the story of John Song has become legendary in China. His conversion narrative is well known and often cited by Chinese Christians. His story is one of the best known of a myriad of stories that reflect the power of Reformation Christianity to have impact on Chinese individuals and China.

John Song (1901-1944)

John Song was born in 1901 in Fujian province, and his father was a Methodist pastor. John was nominally converted in 1910, and he began to preach in his father's church. The young boy was recognized for his powerful preaching and his keen intelligence. In 1920, before his twentieth birthday, was sent to the United States to study at Ohio Wesleyan University.

His work ethic throughout his life was unrivalled, as can be seen from his seven years in the United States. Even while he was still struggling to learn English, he completed first his undergraduate Bachelor degree at Ohio Wesleyan University, and then he went on to complete his Masters and PhD in chemistry from Ohio State University. He apparently accomplished all of this while he was also working a full-time job.

The years of study and rigorous schedule, unfortunately, seemed to undermine his childlike faith in Christ. Nonetheless, in 1926 he did decide to go to Union Theological Seminary in New York City to work as a postgraduate student translating some Chinese religious classics such as the Dao De Jing. Union Theological Seminary at the time was a center of modernist theology, under the leadership of the well-known theologian Harry Emerson Fosdick. John Song's dramatic conversion narrative occurs in this broader context.

John Song was out on the streets of New York one evening when he heard the sounds of a young woman speaking Chinese. He stopped to listen and he witnessed a young teenage girl speaking simply and powerfully about the gospel and Jesus Christ. He was intrigued, and he determined to return to continue to listen. The simple telling of the story of the gospel was penetrating the heart of the young intellectual, Dr. John Song.

After several months of fervent prayer and wrestling with God, on February 10, 1927 Dr. Song experienced a thorough and personal conversion. In his diary he wrote,

As days passed, my spirit was weighed down that I felt no peace. On the night of 10 February, I wept and prayed in desperation. Then my sinful life was played out before me scene after scene, even those secret ones... I felt as though my spirit had floated out of my body and I was following Jesus, cross on back as he walked towards Golgotha. I could also feel the weight of my sins almost crushing me to death.

There was the Lord, hanging high up on the Cross and blood was oozing from His hands. I dropped to my knees, and pleaded with the Lord to cleanse me with His precious blood. Then the Lord said, "Son, your sins are forgiven!" ... He added, "You must change your name to John." Now John the Baptist was the one who had prepared the way for the Lord... When the Lord would choose me as His herald, I was to proclaim the message, "The Kingdom of God is at hand, and of the Lord is coming."⁴

John Song began his evangelistic career by returning immediately to Union Theological Seminary and preaching the gospel to classmates and faculty. With characteristic energy and dedication, John Song tirelessly preached day and night, apparently without much sleep or slowing down for eating. Those who witnessed him feared that he might have gone mad, and so they had him committed to an insane asylum. Once confined, he despised the institution and especially the bloodcurdling screams at night of

⁴ John Song (Compiled by Levi). *The Diary of John Sung: Extracts from his journals and notes* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2012), 31-32.

the other patients, and so he tried to escape. He did not get far, and he was dragged back to the institution where he would remain incarcerated 193 days.

Dr. Song considered those months his time of biblical training. He did not just read his Bible once during that time, but he read it relentlessly from cover to cover 40 times. Learning of John's plight, his pastor from Ohio traveled to New York to arrange his release. The agreement was made that Song would be released if he would return to China. After taking the train to the West Coast, John Song sailed to China.

While still on the ship in the harbor at Shanghai, John Song stood and looked at the teeming masses of Chinese people on the shore. He dedicated himself to preaching the gospel to the masses. In a powerful gesture of dedication, Dr. Song gathered together all his awards and accomplishments from the United States. He carried all those hard-earned mementos to the edge of the ship and dumped them into the ocean. (In a marvelous bit of Chinese contextualization, where filial piety is a cardinal virtue, he did hold on to one certificate. Whereas in the West a person called to ministry might throw everything into the ocean, Dr. John Song preserved his PhD certificate to present to his mother!)

In China, John Song began an unparalleled preaching ministry, preaching in many parts of China and Southeast Asia. He preached with a dramatic style, perhaps mirroring the preaching style of the American Billy Sunday, the former professional baseball player turned evangelist. Many thousands of people were converted at the John Song evangelistic meetings, and the stories of those conversions are often passed down in Christian families. Perhaps because of overwork, Dr. Song became very sick by the early 1940s and he passed away in 1944 while still in his early 40s. He has been called the "Icebreaker" and the "John Wesley of China." Although in a world and context far away from 16th century Germany, the simple message of the gospel and justification by faith alone resonated in 20th century Republican China.

Story 2 Sola gratia and Robert Morrison

The second *sola*, grace alone, is closely related to the first. In faith "alone," it is good works that are excluded. Here, the emphasis is that grace excludes merit. Merit is the notion that grace can be earned or deserved. *Sola gratia* stresses that Christians are saved by God through his unmerited mercy and favor. Protestants, when they break away from the Roman Catholics, insist that Christians can do nothing to earn God's kindness.

Martin Luther and John Calvin, as do Protestants following them, have a large degree of agreement on this point. Luther and Calvin would have the Christian imagine themselves standing on the judgment day before the throne of God. They envision a conversation like this:

God, the Judge, first asks them, "Why should I let you into my heaven?"

The Christian, will say, "Look, Lord, at my merits!"

Luther and Calvin both say that Christians cannot approach God with that claim, and all the Christian can do is beg for mercy. Before the judgment seat, the Christian cannot approach the throne and point to their own merits because, as Luther argued, all the good works of a Christian are filthy rags. It is all sin.

The Christian then, must beg for mercy and the avenue to gain mercy is by faith in Jesus Christ. When standing before the judgment throne of God, the Christian can do nothing but claim the blood of Christ. Catholics of course also stress grace, but they reject the idea of grace “alone.” Roman Catholics will continue to maintain that both grace and merit is necessary for salvation.

Robert Morrison and Protestants in China, 1807 and 2003

Robert Morrison (1782-1834) was a Scottish Protestant missionary to China who translated the Bible into Chinese and baptized some of the early Protestant believers such as Liang Fa 梁发 and Cai Gao 蔡高.⁵ Because Christianity was still illegal from the time of Emperor Kangxi, Morrison was forced to remain in the Portuguese colony of Macau. To maintain his legal status in the colony, he worked for the East India Company. He was in constant conflict with the Chinese authorities, the British political authorities, and the Portuguese colonial authorities. For instance, because of British resistance to his desire to serve as a missionary in China, to book passage to sail to China he had to first travel to America. Although the doors of China never opened during his lifetime, he was successful translating and ministering among the Chinese and Macau and on the outskirts of the nation.

The story of Robert Morrison’s arrival in China on September 4, 1807 is familiar to many people in missionary circles. As Morrison arrived on the American ship to the harbor in China, an American businessman looked at him with a smirk, and, with some contempt, asked him, “Now Mr. Morrison do you really expect that you will make an impression on the idolatry of the Chinese Empire?” Indeed, if one remembers the tight grip of the Chinese Emperor and Chinese culturalism over the nation at the height of the Qing Dynasty in 1807, it might be hard to imagine that Christianity could penetrate China.

The story has been told and retold in missionary circles in the West for over 100 years. I, personally, had always loved this story, and I had heard it many times before, but more recently I got a new perspective on it. The year 2003 was a turning point for the House Churches in China, a year that they emerged on the global stage as a powerful Christian movement.⁶ In December 2003 I attended the China Mission Conference in Chicago, a conference that featured numerous prominent speakers from the House Church movement in China. For many of these well-known Chinese Christian leaders, it was the first time they had ever appeared publicly outside of China. After decades of secrecy and silence, by 2003 the story of the miraculous growth of the churches in China was becoming public around the world. The church leaders themselves had the courage to stand up in public in Chicago. The numerous testimonies they told, repeated for the current generation the same story of the power of the doctrines of justification by faith alone and grace alone in China.

Yes, through the power of the gospel and the stories of people like Robert Morrison and John Song, God had made an impression on the idolatry in China. After the 2003 conference, I heard one of the organizers also tell the story of Robert Morrison arriving in 1807 at the port in China. She told the story in the same way I had heard it numerous times before, recounting the question from the American businessman before she provided Morrison’s memorable response. But coming from the lips of a Chinese believer in Jesus, it made Morrison’s celebrated quip all the more prophetic and powerful. “No

⁵ See Richard R. Cook. "Overcoming Missions Guilt: Robert Morrison, Liang Fa, and the Opium Wars." In *After Imperialism: Christian Identity in China and the Global Evangelical Movement*, edited by Richard R. Cook and David W. Pao, 35-45. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011.

⁶ Richard R Cook. "Windows of opportunity in China," *Christianity Today*, Volume 49, Number 2, February 7, 2005.

sir," said Morrison, "but I expect that God will." And indeed, while the American businessman is forgotten, God is making an impression on China through the Chinese Christians who continue to tell and re-tell this story.

Story 3 Sola scriptura and Hong Xiuquan

The third core Reformation doctrine is Scripture alone. All three of the Reformation doctrines stand in contrast with Roman Catholicism. The three doctrines or theses that tie together the Reformation can be summarized:

sola fide = faith alone 惟独信心 (excludes good works 不包括的好行为)

sola gratia = grace alone 唯独恩典 (excludes merit 不包括功德)

sola scriptura = scripture alone 唯独圣经 (excludes tradition 不包括教会传统)

The Protestant doctrine of Scripture alone means that everything is to be judged by the Scriptures, including popes, councils, traditions, and all human thought. Reason, as humans are reasonable beings, still has a function. A key component of Scripture alone is the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scriptures. The Scriptures can be understood through careful and reasonable reading. The Roman Catholic Church has long criticized the Protestant doctrine of Scripture alone, but in some cases they misunderstand and misrepresent the doctrine.⁷ Roman Catholics have sometimes accused the Protestants of holding a doctrine of "private interpretation," allowing every individual equal authority to interpret the Scriptures as they please. Protestants respond to this criticism by arguing that the church does have a certain kind of authority, but it is an authority that is only under the Scriptures. The authority of the church and of Christian traditions are not equal to Scripture, but must be interpreted under Scripture.

Hong Xiuquan and his use of the Bible

The story of Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping rebellion provide a cautionary tale concerning the Protestant use of Scripture. When Robert Morrison arrived in China, the first Protestant missionary, he immediately began the translation of the Bible. With a strong belief in the perspicuity of Scripture, Martin Luther had worked hard to translate the Bible into vernacular German. He was disappointed with the Latin translation of the Scripture because it could not be understood in 16th century Germany. In contrast to Robert Morrison and the Protestants, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci had not made the translation of Scripture a priority. Although he was a brilliant linguist and a master in writing Chinese, the Roman Catholics did not generally translate the Scriptures into vernacular languages. The Catholics did not believe that the Bible should be translated and indiscriminately distributed on a mission field. The case of Hong Xiuquan, and the violent Taiping Rebellion, seemed to confirm their understanding of the dangerous nature of Bible translation. For Protestants, the story of the Taiping Rebellion does provide some cautionary reminders, but it also demonstrates the tremendous potential power in the Scriptures.

Hong Xiuquan was born in 1813 in southern China to a poor Hakka family. Although poor, he was able to get an education and in 1828 attempted the lowest level civil service examination. He failed, and tried a

⁷ As the Protestant churches have proliferated, there are numerous doctrines that have emerged. In some cases, Protestants have advocated a "private interpretation" of Scripture. But that interpretation is not the classic sixteenth century Reformation formulation of *sola scriptura*.

second time in 1836. Coming from the examination hall one day, home scratch that Hong Xiuquan came across the missionary Edwin Stevens and the Chinese interpreter. Hong listened to them and on the second day he saw them he accepted a set of nine Christian tracts titled, "Good Words to Exhort the Age." The nine tracts had been authored by Liang Fa, the first ordained Protestant. Hong glanced at the books and then put them on his bookshelf. In 1837 Hong made his third attempt to pass the exam. Again he failed, but the disappointment overwhelmed him causing a nervous collapse. At home in his room he spent a month falling in and out of deep trances and thrashing out at devils.

He finally awoke with memories of visions of having ascended into Heaven where he was led into a throne room where an old man with a black robe and a golden beard handed him a sword to slay demons. He also witnessed the black robed man scolding Confucius, who was made to confess his guilt. Hong believed through the dreams that he had been given divine authority to rule China, and, according to his contemporaries, he changed into a fiercely self-confident leader who spoke with newfound authority.

He did try to take the exam one more time, six years later in 1843, but he again failed. He made an angry vow to overthrow the Manchus who controlled both the examination process and China. Later that year Hong found the tracts by Liang Fa on his bookshelf and he believed the writings collaborated his dreams. The figure in the black robe was God, his father, and his older brother was Jesus Christ. Hong believed he was God's Chinese Son. He believed God was calling him to overthrow the Qing Dynasty and to "restore" Christianity to China. He believed that he could overthrow the Manchu rulers of the Qing Dynasty he could usher in an age of great peace (*taiping*) uniting the world in harmony and brotherhood.⁸

Home was persecuted by the authorities when he began to smash the Confucian tablets in his home town. He left home in search of a base where he could launch his rebellion and continue to preach his new Christian ideology of revolution. He quickly won a number of followers and by 1847 he had two thousand converts. He continued to win followers as he began to conquer territory in southern China and in 1851 he declared the Taiping Tianguo (太平天国). Continuing to meet with astonishing success, he captured the southern capital of China, Nanjing, in 1853. Their advance was stopped by the Qing government in Beijing when they tried to move further north, but for about ten years they ruled nearly half of China from Nanjing. And Hong Xiuquan served as their emperor.

The movement was finally suppressed in 1864. The Qing government which had been reeling in the 1850s in the aftermath of the First Opium War, began to experience a major restoration in the early 1860s. Under the leadership of Zeng Guofan 曾国藩 the Hunan Army (湘军) put down the Taiping Rebellion and Hong Xiuquan was killed.

Hong Xiuquan and the Taipings were influenced by a number of currents at the time, but clearly one of the primary factors was Christianity. The Christian influences on Hong Xiuquan start with the writings of Liang Fa. The Christian tracts were designed as evangelistic tools, not as a comprehensive source of Christian doctrine. They did not provide Hong Xiuquan with a solid foundation for his theology or ideology. In any case, Hong only adopted from Liang Fa the ideas he liked and he disregarded the rest.

The next contact Hong had with Christianity was in February of 1847 when he travelled to Canton to seek out the American Baptist missionary Issachar Roberts. The drama of meeting is intriguing. The

⁸ Frederick Wakeman. *Strangers at the Gate* (Berkeley: University of California, 1966) 144.

American missionary, called by God to travel to China to preach the message of Jesus Christ to the pagan Chinese people came face to face with Hong Xiuquan, the man who claimed to be God's Chinese Son! Hong only stayed with Roberts for about two months. At that time Hong asked Roberts to baptize him, but Roberts was uncomfortable with Hong's urgency. Hong also asked for financial support, and after consulting with some of the other Chinese he decided to delay Hong's baptism and to not provide the financial support. Hong returned home, and those two months were the only formal Christian training Hong would ever receive.

Critical to Hong's Christian doctrines were his dreams. He believed the dreams confirmed the books by Liang Fa, and the books confirmed his dreams. He wrote,

"These books ... are certainly sent purposely by heaven to me, to confirm the truth of my former experiences; if I had received the books without having gone through the sickness, I should not have dared to believe in them, and on my own account to oppose the customs of the whole world; if I had merely been sick but not also received the books, I should have had no further evidence as to the truth of my visions, which might also have been considered as mere productions of a diseased imagination."⁹

Hong also had access to the Christian bible. The Taiping version of the bible was published in 1853. It was published in two volumes, and there was no title given to the Bible as a whole. Rather, the first volume was titled the Old Testament and the second volume was the New Testament. A missionary analysis concluded that the volumes were virtually identical to the translation completed in the 1840s from the missionary Karl Gutzlaff 郭士立. Thus there was no problem with the translation.

The problem was that Hong Xiuquan, as God's Chinese Son, seemed to feel authorized to pick and choose the parts of the bible that he agreed with and to alter doctrines that he did not agree with. In around 1860 an American missionary sent a letter to Hong in Nanjing suggesting that some of the Taiping Christian beliefs were not consistent with Christian orthodoxy. A copy of the letter shows where Hong decided to correct the missionary written letter. For instance, at one point where the missionary insists that God has only one Son, Jesus, Hong uses his imperial red pen to cross out the words "only one Son" because, believing he was God's second son, those words did not match his interpretation of the faith!¹⁰

Hong's heretical interpretation of Scripture led the Roman Catholics to claim that Hong and the violent Rebellion proved that the bible should not be translated and distributed into China or any mission field. A Roman Catholic book from 1909 provides this vigorous and searching criticism of the indiscriminate use of the Bible in evangelical work in China:

*"There can be no doubt that the indiscriminate circulation of the Bible, aided by the 'inalienable right of private interpretation' thereof, is capable of producing the most disastrous material results. Of such nature was the Taiping Rebellion... We also see in this movement the effect of distribution in the country of Bibles and Christian tracts."*¹¹

⁹ Jen, Yu-wen, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 21.

¹⁰ Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*, (New York: Norton, 1996), Inside front and back cover.

¹¹ Bertram Wolfertan, *The Catholic Church in China from 1860 to 1907*, (London: Sands & Company, 1909), 105.

The criticism is biting in the context of the Taiping Rebellion, but it also misrepresents the Protestant position on *sola scriptura*. Protestants do not hold to the “inalienable right of private interpretation,” but rather to the authority of scriptures over popes, councils, traditions and all human thought. The church does have a kind of authority to interpret and teach the Bible, but only under the final authority of the bible.

The Taiping Rebellion did show the potential impact of the scriptures if unleashed in the context of an indigenous church movement. The Rebellion also showed the potential danger of unleashing the power of the bible among the laity, and power that was not only unleashed in China, but all the way back in 1525 with the Peasant Revolt in Germany. Luther himself wrote against the Peasant Revolt, fearing that the hard won gains of the Reformation might be lost in the chaos of a political war.

Conclusion

The story of the Taiping rebellion is a cautionary tale. The forces unleashed by the Reformation were radical and potentially revolutionary. The radical doctrines of Martin Luther spread quickly through Germany and Europe, taking root eventually also in Great Britain and the United States. In the nineteenth century a mighty missionary force, propelled by William Carey, fanned the flames of the Reformation and propelled the three *solas* to all corners of the globe. Like a microorganism, Protestant Christianity has mutated and adapted in response to changing environments, and at the same time, maintaining continuity with the teachings of its earlier forms.

The diplomatic mission that arrived in China from Portugal in 1517 could never have imagined the religious revolution launched by the German Roman Catholic priest, Martin Luther, would change both Europe and, eventually, China.