

All Great Works of God Begin in Secret¹

The Beginnings of the Church Took Place in Secret

THE GREAT NEW TESTAMENT scholar Johannes Weiss, in commenting on the dearth of information we possess about the beginnings of the Christian church, said, “It lies in the nature of things that the first beginnings of a religious movement are obscure, and hid from the eyes of contemporaries.”² Put into theological terms, I would say that it lies in the very nature of God to begin all great works in secret. That is what I want to speak to you about this evening. Throughout the Bible, and also in our own day, we see that great works of God begin quietly, or in astonishing secrecy, with only a very few privy to what is happening, and remain hidden from the eyes of most everyone living at the time, becoming known and made clear in the economy of God only later when the beginnings are seen to bear much fruit.

The psalmist, addressing God about his own beginning, speaks these words:

For you did form my inward parts
you did knit me together in my mother's womb

1. Public Lecture given at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong, October 11, 2010; published in Simon Chow, et al., eds., *Exploring Bible, Church and Life: Essays in Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong*, Theology and Life 36 (Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2013), 289–99.

2. Johannes Weiss, *Earliest Christianity*, vol. 1, trans. Frederick C. Grant (New York: Harper, 1959), 14.

I praise you, for you are fearful and wonderful
wonderful are your works!
You know me right well
my frame was not hidden from you
When I was being made in secret
intricately wrought in the depths of the earth. (Ps 139:13–15)

It used to be that husband and wife, after learning they would have a child, kept it secret for a while, often until the wife began “to show.” Now, when the woman discovers she is pregnant, she wants to spread the news the next day, or maybe call someone on her cell phone from the doctor’s office. The husband, too, is eager to get the news out. And yes, there are the images of ultrasound. Even so, we still have a profound realization that the beginning of human life takes place in secret.

The Bible also tells us that ultimate beginnings, if we may call them that, are known only to God. Other great beginnings on the stage of human history take place quietly, simply, and in secret. Weiss says, “Those immediately concerned are too much wrapt up, at the time, in the marvelous things they are experiencing, to give any thought to a consecutive account of them; while outside observers, who might provide such a narrative, are, as a rule, wholly absent.”³

To this we may add that those individuals experiencing God’s marvelous doings know them only partially, and in faith. Certainty, if and when it comes, is achieved later, often much later. The chosen few have no idea where the beginnings will go. The larger world, which can include family and friends, knows little or nothing about what God is doing. Only on the rarest of occasions is there a Simeon or Anna to raise a voice in thanksgiving for what God is doing and will do (Luke 2:25–38).

Jesus’s Life Began and Developed in Secret

If the beginnings of the early church took place in secret, and they certainly did, what are we to say about the birth, life, and ministry of Jesus? The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are judged by scholars today as being the last to be affixed to gospel tradition, and we may wonder if, during Jesus’s ministry, or even in the years immediately following his death and resurrection, there were any who knew the details about Mary and Joseph’s

3. Ibid.

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journey to Bethlehem, Jesus's birth in a Bethlehem manger, and the flight to Egypt. Luke says after reporting the visit of the angels in Shepherd's Field, and the witness of the shepherds after they found the babe in a manger, that "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19), which speaks volumes!

Our Christmas carols speak of the stillness and silence surrounding Jesus's birth. Phillip Brooks's "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (1868) begins:

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by . . .

It continues:

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heav'n
No ear may hear his coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still
The dear Christ enters in.

I used to think this and other Christmas carols were largely romantic portrayal of the nineteenth century, but now I am not so sure. Things may well have happened that way.

It is common to speak also about the "hidden years" of Jesus's youth. Yes, we read in the Bible about how he stayed behind in the temple when his parents began the journey home after Passover (Luke 2:41–51), and how when he came home he was obedient to them. Then Luke tells us again that "his mother kept all these things in her heart" (v. 51). But what else do we know about Jesus's growing-up years? Sermons are preached about him working as a carpenter beside his father in the Nazareth workshop, and artists have portrayed him as a young boy looking at nature's beauties—the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, the mustard plant, sheaves of wheat, clusters of hanging grapes—all of which turn up in his later teachings,⁴ but

4. So Warner Sallman in his painting *The Boy Christ* (1944), where the boy Jesus is sitting outside Nazareth in the surrounds of his Father's world. In the upper left is Nazareth, "a city set on a hill that cannot be hid" (Matt 5:14); overhead are the "birds of the air," below which are the "lilies of the field" (Matt 6:26, 28); flowers at right include

what do we really know about Jesus's youth? Practically nothing. Did he ever have a girlfriend? Did he ever get into innocent mischief with other boys? Did he throw stones at a distant tree trying to hit it? Did he make his mother something of wood, worked on in the carpentry shop, and give it to her as a gift? He doubtless went to synagogue with his father, maybe also his mother, but what do we know about family life on the Sabbath? Nothing. In these hidden years, so called, God was working out in secret an act of salvation for the whole world.

During Jesus's years of public ministry, particularly in Galilee, when large crowds began to gather about him to hear him preach, there remained a great secret about who this man really was. William Wrede called it "the messianic secret," which appears prominently in the Gospel of Mark.⁵ Jesus conceals his messianship, calling himself "Son of man," and in Wrede's view, this secret antedates the Gospels in which it appears. To Peter and the other disciples he reveals himself at Caesarea Philippi as the Messiah, but Mark follows up this confession by saying, "he charged them to tell no one about him" (Mark 8:27–30). Only at the end of his ministry does Jesus admit to the High Priest that he is the Messiah (Mark 14:61–62), but he refuses to tell Pilate he is "King of the Jews" (Mark 15:2–5). Wrede points out, too, how Jesus concealed his teaching by speaking in parables, explaining things only to his disciples in private (cf. Mark 4:11–12, 33–34; Matt 13:10–13; Luke 8:9–10).⁶

There was a secrecy in the garden before Jesus's arrest, according to John Henry Newman (1801–1890), who wrote the Anglican hymn "Praise to the Holiest in the Height." One verse goes,

And in the garden secretly
And on the cross on high
Should teach his brethren and inspire
To suffer and to die.

More nineteenth-century romanticism? Probably not.

blossoms of a mustard plant (Matt 13:31–32; 17:20); sheaves of wheat grow amidst thorns and thistles (Matt 13:7, 24–30); and clusters of grapes hang from an overhead vine (Matt 20:1–15; 21:28–32, 33–41; John 15:1–2). The picture is intended to illuminate the "hidden years" of Jesus's youth; see Jack R. Lundbom, *Master Painter: Warner E. Sallman* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 90–91.

5. William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Greig, Library of Theological Translations (Cambridge: James Clark, 1971).

6. Ibid., 211

Our God Is a Hidden God

The reason God begins all his great works in secret is that our God remains a hidden God. In Christianity, as in Judaism, we put the emphasis on our religion being a revealed religion, and so it is. But we need to remember that the reason for this emphasis is that our God also continues to be a hidden God. Paul Ricoeur says,

The idea of revelation is a twofold idea. The God who reveals himself is a hidden God and hidden things belong to him . . . The one who reveals himself is also the one who conceals himself. And in this regard nothing is as significant as the episode of the burning bush in Exodus 3. Tradition has quite rightly named this episode the revelation of the divine name. For this name is precisely unnameable.⁷

So while we affirm that our God has chosen to make himself known to people of the world, preeminently in the person of Jesus Christ, we must not forget that God continues nevertheless to be hidden. Revelation and hiddenness must be kept in tandem in any doctrine of God. It is a paradoxical tension, never one without the other.

I should now like to go into the Old Testament and have us look at five texts, each of which shows in its own way how God begins great works in secret: 1) the creation of the world, 2) the call of Abraham and covenant with Abraham, 3) the election of Israel, 4) the call of Jeremiah and 5) the promise to Israel after its inglorious end of nationhood. I will then close with a great work begun in secret over a century ago in central China.

The Creation of the World Began in Secret

In Genesis we have not one but two accounts of creation (Gen 1–2). They are beautiful stories, but nevertheless stories, not telling us how the creation of heaven and earth and man and woman actually took place. Modern science today is revealing bits of this great secret, but there is still much we do not know.

So far as what God was doing before creation, the Bible tells us nothing. When the biblical stories are compared with stories much older, stories upon which the biblical accounts draw, we see that all precreation ideas

7. Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *HTR* 70 (1977) 17–18.

have been eliminated by the biblical writers. Gone are the commingling of fresh and sea waters, and the birth of the gods, and gone is the primordial battle with forces of chaos. In the Babylonian story of creation, Marduk has combat with Tiamat, and after defeating her, cuts her body in pieces to do “artful works” of creation.⁸ Second Isaiah, it is true, does resurrect an ancient story about Yahweh doing battle with Rahab the dragon (Isa 51:9), but there is no trace of any primordial battle in Genesis. Gen 1:1 simply begins: “In the beginning God created the heaven(s) and the earth” (KJV; RSV), or as many now translate: “When God began to create the heaven and the earth . . .” (NJV; cf. NRSV). The story in Gen 2 begins similarly: “In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens . . .” (Gen 2:4b, NRSV).

Martin Luther understood the Bible’s silence about what took place before creation. When someone asked him the schoolboy question as to what God was doing before creation, he is reported to have said, “He went into the woods to cut rods from which to punish good-for-nothing questioners.”⁹

The Call of Abraham and Covenant with Abraham Began in Secret

Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldeans, the southernmost part of ancient Babylonia and today the southernmost portion of Iraq (Basra). At the beginning of recorded history it was called Sumer. Abraham’s family emigrated north to Haran, which is in Syria, where they settled for a time (Gen 11:27–32). Then Abraham received a call from God to go to a strange land that God would show him, and God promised to bless him and make him a blessing to all families of the earth (Gen 12:1–3). So Abraham journeyed down into the land of Canaan.

The departure from Chaldea, a busy, populated area in the ancient world, the sojourn in Haran, and the journey to Canaan were doubtless events that went unnoticed in the world at the time. Even the few who did know about them could not have anticipated that a great work of God was in the making. For Abraham it was a journey of faith, as the writer of Hebrews rightly says (Heb 11:8–9). The covenant God made with Abraham (Gen 15) was another great act planned and carried out in secret, and here

8. “The Creation Epic,” Tablets IV–VI, *ANET*³, 61–68.

9. James Muilenburg, “The Biblical View of Time,” *HTR* 54 (1961) 251.

the writer of Hebrews names Sarah as the great woman of faith in seeing this promise fulfilled by the birth of a son (Heb 11:11).

We may, of course, attribute this seeming obscurity to the literary genre in which the events are preserved. The patriarchal stories, after all, are legends,¹⁰ and in legends generally the field of vision is limited to two—maybe three—persons at one time.¹¹ There is little or no background; everything is foreground.¹² And yet, I would aver that God's dealings with Abraham were still a great secret hidden from most all his contemporaries.

Israel's Election Was and Still Is a Secret in the Mind of God

The question has been asked many times: why did God choose the Jews as his special people? A student asked me this just recently. It is reported in Deuteronomy, chapter 7, where Moses tells the children of Israel:

For you are a people holy to Yahweh your God; Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that Yahweh set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because Yahweh loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers . . . (Deut 7:6–8)

The love of God, like the covenant made with the fathers, is an act of pure grace, and we learn from the Bible that God's grace never needs a reason. God's judgments yes; but not God's grace, which can come for a reason or not for a reason.¹³ Most of the time, and certainly here in

10. Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History*, trans. W. H. Carruth (New York: Schocken, 1964).

11. Axel Olrik, "Episke Love i Folkedigtningen," *Danske Studier* 5 (1908) 69–89. English: "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative," in Alan Dundes, ed., *The Study in Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 129–41.

12. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Princeton Paperbacks 124 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 3–23, 70–75, 99–122; cf. Jack R. Lundbom, "Parataxis, Rhetorical Structure, and the Dialogue over Sodom in Genesis 18," in Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The World of Genesis*, JSOTSup 257 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 136–38.

13. Jack R. Lundbom, "God's Use of the *Idem per Idem* to Terminate Debate," *HTR* 71 (1978) 201; Lundbom, "God in Your Grace Transform the World," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34 (2007) 278–81.

God's choice of Israel as his holy (i.e., set-apart) people, no reason is given. G. Ernest Wright says that this election was "a secret of God which Israel did not know."¹⁴ Paul understands this fully in Rom 11, where he can only exclaim after talking about a great mystery:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his
ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been
his counselor?" (Rom 11:33–34, RSV)

The election of Israel remains a secret even today—to the Jewish people, to Christians, to everyone.

The Call of Jeremiah Was Made in Secret

The Lord informed Jeremiah of his call to be a prophet while he was still a young boy, walking about in an almond orchard. The call was not being made just now, however; it had been made long ago. The Lord says to Jeremiah:

Before I formed you in the belly I knew you
and before you came forth from the womb I declared you holy
a prophet to the nations I made you. (Jer 1:5)

Some have suggested that Jeremiah was called from the time he was in his mother's womb, like the Servant of Second Isaiah (Isa 49:5), or like John the Baptist (Luke 1:15), but the text will not yield this interpretation. God is telling the young Jeremiah that his call took place *before* he was formed in the womb, which means it took place at a time known only to God. Hence, another divine secret, and the young Jeremiah is the first to hear about it.

A Secret for Israel after the Loss of Nationhood

Later in Jeremiah's life, when the prophet was confined to the court of the guard and his nation was spiraling toward inglorious defeat, this word came to the prophet:

14. G. Ernest Wright, "Deuteronomy," *IB* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953), 2:380–81.

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Thus said Yahweh, who made it
Yahweh who formed it to establish it
Yahweh is his name!
Call to me and I will answer you
and let me tell you great things and hidden things
you have not known. (Jer 33:2–3)

Nationhood for Israel will end; people will die by the sword, from hunger, or from disease; and most of those who survive will have to make the long walk to Babylon, where they will be exiles. But, wonder of wonders, the Lord tells Jeremiah that he has in store for Israel great and hidden things. The Hebrew can also be translated “great and secret things.” What are they? We are not sure, but they are probably the promises in the following oracle: the healing of the people, the sweet smell of peace and security, the restoration of fortunes lost to the Babylonians, the building up of the people, the cleansing of sin, and, most important of all, the forgiveness of sin (Jer 33:6–9).

A Great Work in Central China Began in Secret

Peter Matson was born in Dalarna, Sweden, on March 27, 1868. His family emigrated to America in 1879, settling on a farm in Alexandria, Minnesota. On a summer day in 1887, or 1888, Matson knelt by a haystack and promised the Lord he would give half his income to missions or become himself a missionary. After schooling in Minneapolis and at the Chicago Theological Seminary, he was called by the American Mission Covenant (Missionsförbundet i Amerika) for missionary service to China. In the fall of 1890 he sailed for China, arriving in Shanghai on October 28.

Matson sailed up the Yangtze (Chang Jiang) to Hankow, and found his way over to the China Inland Mission (CIM) headquarters on Woosung Road. He recalled: “I was all alone, nobody knew of my coming, I did not even have a letter of introduction. Fortunately I had my certificate of ordination and, of course, my passport.”¹⁵ After talking with the CIM director, it was decided that he should study Chinese at the CIM language school in Ganking. Matson was also advised to shave the front part of his head, and shed Western dress for Chinese dress, which he did. So Matson went the

15. Peter Matson, “Chinese Reminiscences,” *Our Covenant* 15 (1940) 19.

three hundred miles up the Yangtze to the CIM school, and there spent four months learning Chinese.

Then Matson received a letter from Chicago suggesting that he locate in the neighborhood of newly arrived Swedish missionaries, who subsequently established a station at Wuchang in the winter of 1891. But he did not envision a cooperative union with the Mission Covenant of Sweden, deciding rather to enter new territory where the gospel had not been preached.¹⁶ The summer of 1891 was “the summer of the Yangtze riots,” a time when much antforeign agitation was going on, but Matson spent his time traveling up and down the Yangtze in search of a suitable field for mission work. His search led him to Hupeh (Hubei) Province. In November, on a boat trip up the Han River in the company of Dr. Howard Taylor, son of J. Hudson Taylor, Matson was led to consider the need for mission work in Fancheng, a city on the Han in northern Hupeh. The province as a whole was new to Christian missions. The CIM had worked in Siangyang and Fancheng for two or three years, but now the site was vacant. Matson wrote to Hudson Taylor, founder of the CIM, and after an exchange of letters Taylor wrote to Matson on April 16, 1892, saying that the CIM had decided to retire from Fancheng, and that he would be glad if Matson took over their premises.¹⁷ This decided the matter for Matson. He wrote home and told the Covenant Board he was opening a mission station in Fancheng.

Matson then decided to visit J. Hudson Taylor in Shanghai. They had a warm encounter, kneeling and praying together in Taylor’s office just before midnight. Taylor laid his hands on Matson’s head and asked for God’s blessing upon him.¹⁸

Matson picked up his few belongings, and on May 11, 1892, sailed up the Han in a houseboat with three Norwegian Lutherans: Halvor Ronning of the Hauge Synod, Daniel Nelson of the Norwegian-American Lutheran Church, and J. B. Brandtzaeg of the Norwegian China Mission Society,¹⁹ on

16. Matson gives his account of the choice of a field in “The Siang Fan District,” in Peter Matson et al., eds., *Half a Century of Covenant Foreign Missions* (Chicago: Evangelical Covenant Church of America, 1940), 20–21; see also Matson, *Sowing in Tears, Reaping in Joy* (Chicago: Covenant Book Concern, 1923), 17.

17. Matson, *Sowing in Tears, Reaping in Joy*, 21.

18. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

19. Kenneth Scott Latourette refers to Norwegian Lutherans, organized into the Norwegian Lutheran China Mission Association in Bergen in 1890, as being in the area; see Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 400.

a tour of investigation.²⁰ The Norwegians, too, were interested at the time in opening a mission in Hupeh.²¹ All dressed in Chinese clothes to make themselves less conspicuous. James Scherer, Professor of Missions at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, reports:

Coming to the twin cities of Fancheng and Siangyang, the men climbed a small mountain for a spectacular overview and for a time of prayer. They were filled with thanks for God's guidance, and joyous in their anticipation of the work which could be done in spreading the gospel in this unevangelized area. According to one account, they heaped together some stones as a memorial to their first visit to the place of their future labors. Matson chose Siangyang for the Mission Covenant; Brandtzaeg decided on Lao-hokow; Nelson and Ronning selected Fancheng and its surrounding territory, taking over the work already begun in a small way by the China Inland Mission.²²

An agreement with Hudson Taylor allowed Matson to take over the rented CIM premises at Fancheng, and in that spring he took up residence in the city.²³ A decision had been reached that the Lutherans would work north of Fancheng, and the Mission Covenant would work south. Both would carry on work in Fancheng, but the Mission Covenant would have its main station across the river in Siangyang.

For the next fifty years Matson gave leadership to Covenant missionary work in Hupeh Province. He was married in 1893 and joined in the missionary enterprise by his wife Kristina, who transferred over from the Swedish Covenant Mission. They worked together from 1893 until 1922, when Kristina died. She had been in poor health ever since the murder of close missionary friends and the death of her firstborn son. She also put a second son into the grave. Yet despite poor health and these personal tragedies, Kristina endeared herself to the Chinese, and had a particularly profound impact among Chinese women. She was a pioneer of school work for girls in Hupeh Province.²⁴ Peter's second wife, Edla, was also a good partner in the work, working as an evangelistic and educational missionary

20. Matson refers to this in "China Reminiscences," 28.

21. Rolf A. Syrdal, "American Lutheran Mission Work in China" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Drew Theological Seminary, Drew University, 1942), 31–32.

22. James A Scherer, "The Lutheran Missionary Pioneers: Who Were They?" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 17 (1990) 352.

23. Matson, "The Siang Fan District," 22.

24. Leonard Larson, "Educational Work in China," *Our Covenant* 1 (1927) 49.

in Siangyang. They were married in 1924. I had the privilege of knowing Edla Matson in my growing-up years in Chicago, and remember her as a wonderfully warm and gifted woman. Peter Matson died on May 30, 1943, and was buried in Ridgewood Cemetery in Des Plaines, just north of Chicago. He was seventy-five years of age.

The work of these pioneer missionaries bore fruit. After a decade of labor, in 1903, the Covenant Missionary Society of China had eight missionaries on the field, assisted by sixteen Chinese workers.²⁵ A number of schools had been started, and a dispensary in Siangyang had treated 1400 patients. There were twenty-nine converts to Christianity, and by 1905 the number increased to 167. By 1908 the total adult membership was 534, in 1912 it was 1000, and in 1915 it was 1500.²⁶ The autumn of 1910 saw a great revival.²⁷ By this time the Covenant had head stations at Fancheng, Siangyang, Nanchang, Icheng, and Kingmen, and thirty outstations operated by a staff of twenty-five missionaries and eighty-five Chinese workers. Covenant Mission work reached its high-water mark in 1925, a year before the Communists were expelled from the Chinese National People's Party (KMT), and much unrest came to central China. In 1925 the Covenant China Mission had fifty-two missionaries on its staff, 175 Chinese workers, forty-six outstations, and 2,255 students in the various schools. In its churches were approximately 2500 adult members.²⁸

In 1909 the Covenant of America joined hands with the Covenant of Sweden to launch a preparatory school and a seminary at Kingchow, a city at the southern end of Hupeh Province where the two fields met.²⁹ The theological seminary was dedicated on December 4, 1909, with many people in attendance, including Chinese authorities. One of the first teachers was Marcus Cheng, who went on to become a well-known evangelist, and even after the Revolution of 1949 he was pressed into service as an interpreter for Chou En-lai.

At Siangyang the dispensary was treating an ever increasing number of people. In 1908 it had 5,522 outpatients, and 263 inpatients.

25. Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1962), 447.

26. *Ibid.*, 448.

27. Matson, "The Siang Fan District," 27.

28. Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 450.

29. Matson, "The Siang Fan District," 26; John Peterson, "Kingchow and Shasi," in Matson et al., eds., *Half a Century of Covenant Foreign Missions*, 53-54; Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 448-49.

Dispensary work was carried on there until 1914, when Bethesda Union Hospital opened. This hospital, although built by the Covenant Mission, was a joint venture with the Lutherans, who had doctors and nurses on the staff. The joint venture lasted until 1933,³⁰ when the Covenant took over the work entirely. Bethesda Hospital was a substantial two-storey brick building with light and airy wards, eighty-five white-enameled comfortable iron beds, and by 1927 it had electric lights and x-ray capability. It was the only institution of its kind in northwest Hupeh Province. About seven hundred patients were treated annually in the hospital, and approximately ten thousand treatments were given in the dispensary. Patients came from the twin cities of Siangyang and Fancheng, and from villages and towns within a radius of fifty to two hundred miles.³¹ The Covenant Mission had also opened dispensaries in other parts of the province.

Mission work in Hupeh Province continued during the difficult years of Japanese bombing and occupation, also during the civil war that ended with the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. By this time all but a very few missionaries had left China, and for the next thirty-plus years the Chinese Church struggled and lived incognito under Communist rule, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). But God's work that began simply, and in secret, has borne much fruit.

I visited Hubei Province in the summer of 2008 and was gladdened at what I saw in the five cities where the Covenant Mission had head stations: Xiangyang (Siangyang), Yicheng (Icheng), Nanzhang (Nanchang), Jingmen (Kingmen), and Jingzhou (Kingchow). I was accompanied by my student Dr. Cao Jing and her husband. In all these cities we found vibrant churches. In Yicheng a smaller congregation was meeting in rented facilities, hoping to get land to build a new church; but in all the other cities were new, large church buildings, in which, I was told, between five hundred and one thousand people gather for worship each Sunday. The churches had Sunday schools and activities during the week, and when we were there, money was being raised for victims of the Chengdu earthquake in Sichuan Province.

30. Rolf A. Syrdal, "American Lutheran Mission Work in China," 215.

31. K. M. Nelson, "Glimpses from Our Medical Work in Siangyang," *Our Covenant* 1 (1927) 26.

What Great Works of God Are Beginning Today in Secret?

I often wonder, as I teach my classes here at LTS, and sit with students around the table at lunch and dinner, what great works of God are perhaps beginning now in secret. Do you wonder about that? You should, because extraordinary beginnings are doubtless taking place in our midst, hidden largely from our eyes and the eyes of people around us. I think, too, that we should pray for such things to happen, for the Bible teaches that “the prayer of a righteous person has great power in its effects” (Jas 5:16, RSV). Abraham was called a prophet because he was a man of prayer (Gen 20:7). Jeremiah was a great man of prayer. Peter Matson knelt in prayer at a Minnesota haystack, later with Hudson Taylor in Shanghai, and still later with his Lutheran missionary comrades on a mountain in Hupeh, asking for God’s direction in the work they were beginning. He prayed many other times, as did all the missionaries. People in churches back home prayed. Chinese Christians prayed. May we be doing the same today, remembering that all great works of God begin in secret, and the God who begins them will bring them to glorious flower in a way no one can imagine.