

2008 Olympics in China

Audio Blog by Gregg Harris, President - FEBC

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The 2008 Olympics are underway and for those of us who follow and serve Jesus Christ, there is an important storyline beyond the medal count for each country and how well China is performing in their role as host. You see, dozens of Christian ministries will be involved in evangelistic outreach, against the wishes of the Chinese government, which has banned all foreign missionaries from the games. In fact, an online Christian news service reported that in preparation for the games, the government compiled a list of potential "troublemakers". This list included human rights activists, non-governmental organizations, and evangelical Christians.

The question of whether it is right for Christians to evangelize in the face of government opposition is as old as the New Testament. In Acts chapter 5, Peter and the apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin and told not to teach in Jesus' name. Acts 5:29 records their famous response: "We must obey God rather than men!" And so many would say that the matter is quite simple...Christians from the West must obey God and preach Christ at the Olympics.

But like so many things related to China, the issue is not that simple. The situation has given rise to varying viewpoints among highly respected Christian leaders. Franklin Graham stirred up the debate when he publicly called on Christians to refrain from illegally sharing the gospel during the Olympics. Yet, many other reputable ministries report that they intend to defy the order and evangelize at the games. How are we to reconcile these conflicting points of view?

Well, the ministry I serve, Far East Broadcasting Company, has broadcast the Gospel to China every day for the past 60 years. And in that time, we have learned some important lessons about ministry in and to China. One of the greatest lessons we've learned is to let the Chinese Christians guide our efforts.

While Western Christians have a strong sense of calling to share the Gospel in such a fruitful venue, we must consider the effect that such actions may have on the Chinese Christians after we leave. On my first visit to mainland China in 1993, I smuggled in some Bibles and letters to our radio listeners. I was told by my Chinese hosts, that if I got caught, the worst case scenario for me, would be 3 or 4 days in jail and then I would be sent back to the U.S. It was very sobering to learn that a Chinese Christian caught with the same materials I was carrying would probably spend years in jail for the offense.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of meeting James Hudson Taylor the 3rd, descendant of the great pioneering missionary, and a highly respected missionary statesman to China. During that meeting, he told a group of mission leaders that he attributes the explosive growth of the Chinese Church to three key factors: first, the translation of the Bible into Chinese, second, the advent of European printing technology that allowed for mass distribution of the Bible, and third, the daily Christian radio broadcasts that have made the Gospel accessible to millions in China.

Each of these factors involved Western Christians empowering and equipping Chinese believers to spread the Gospel in their own country. And so it is my prayer, that all evangelistic efforts at the Olympics this year in China will be used by God to benefit the long-term growth of the church in China.

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