True Jesus Church

MANNA

ISSUE 73

Employing Our Gifts

Noble Vessels • Walk on the Old Paths •
Once Stiff-necked and Foolish

"The goal of Manna is to inspire believers to live an active faith through mutual encouragement and the study of biblical truths."

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Editorial

Employing Our Gifts

by T. Chen

"As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."
(1 Pet 4:10)

What is your gift?

Some of us can answer this question immediately. Few may not be so sure. Others may even say they do not have any talents.

In fact, all of us have gifts or skills that we employ for our own benefit—be it in our studies, at work or simply for our own enjoyment. But when it comes to offering our gift for the Lord's use, hesitation sets in. I recall an instance where an elderly brother told me, "What can an old man like me do? I don't wish to be bothered. Just let the young people work." But what do the young say? "I'm too busy" or "I don't think I'm suitable. I'm sure there are more talented and experienced people who can do the job."

But is it really true that only the young and strong, the smart and skillful, or the experienced among us can serve God?

In fact, serving God is fundamental to every Christian's life of faith. Just as food is essential to sustain our physical life, serving God is an integral part of our spiritual life. Hence, serving God is something that everyone can and must do. Faith and service complement each other, for in serving God, we experience Him and this, in turn, strengthens our faith. When God created Adam, He had a purpose for man: to tend the Garden of Eden. This shows that we were created to work, not for ourselves, but for God. Our purpose in life is to serve the Lord.

Even Jesus Christ came into this world in the form of a bondservant, setting the most excellent example of lifelong service. His ministry culminated in His sacrifice on the cross for the sins of humanity. Through His death, we have received the hope of eternal life. Shouldn't we repay such great love in return? But what can we do? What can we offer?

"*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." (Rom 12:1)*

In fact, the best gift that we can offer to God is ourselves—our time and our energy. We can devote these to the work of God, be it serving within the church, preaching the gospel to our friends and relatives, or helping those in need. Our church attendance to worship God, and our intercessory prayers for our brethren are also forms of service. In short, there is work for every child of God, for He wants us to share in His work and ultimately, in His glory.

Therefore, we must prepare ourselves to serve God by removing our self-centered concerns. Be willing to heed the Spirit's voice and cultivate a godly disposition. Stay in constant touch with God through His Spirit and His word. Reflect upon what we can do for God—it does not matter how small or insignificant the task, as long as we sanctify ourselves and have the heart to serve Him, He will accept our service.

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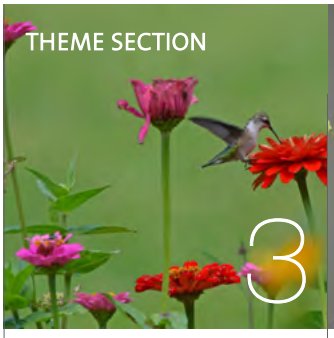

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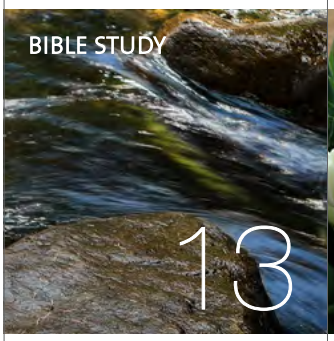

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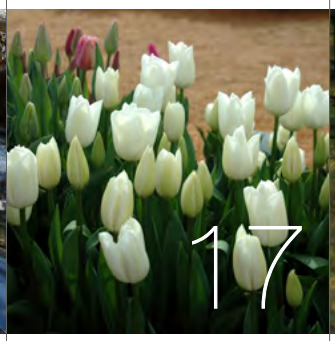

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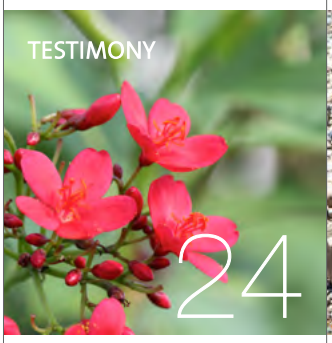

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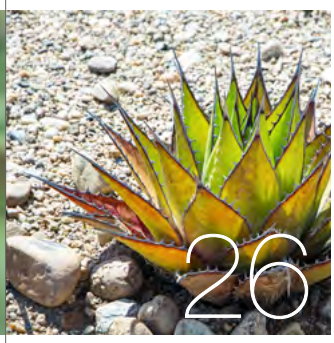

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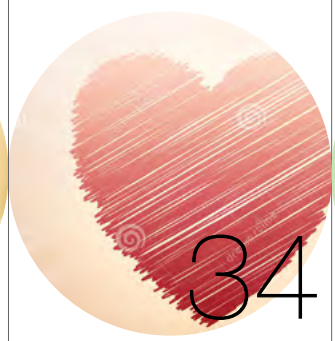

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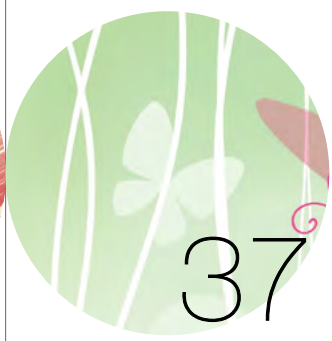

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Employing Our Gifts

The True Gift

K.C. Tsai—Toronto, Canada

GOD'S GIFT

I give your priesthood to you as a gift for service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death. (Num 18:7b)

Just as God gave the priesthood to Aaron and his sons, any opportunity to serve Him is a gift and a privilege bestowed by Him. It is not for man to decide whether he wants to serve the Lord. God has the absolute sovereignty to choose His servants. Therefore, if we are determined to serve God, we should seize the opportunity to cultivate ourselves spiritually and await His calling. If we steadfastly continue in spiritual cultivation and sanctification, God will reveal His purpose for us in His time.

Participating in church work requires time and effort. Many regard it as a sacrifice and a contribution of their talents. They may even claim that a certain task was completed because they had sacrificed much precious family time and contributed their talents. But is this really the case? The God whom we serve is almighty, lacking in nothing. He does not need man to complete His work. On the contrary, His providence surrounds us and it is we who are always in need of Him.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.
He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap;
He lays up the deep in storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the LORD;
Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.
For He spoke, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood fast.
(Ps 33:6–9)

The Lord speaks, and it is done; He commands, and it stands fast. This is why He is worthy of our worship and our trust. His power is absolute and requires no human assistance (Isa 40:12–17). However, out of His love, He is willing to work with His loved ones, allowing them to participate in His salvation plan and to share in His glory.

A SMALL GESTURE OF THANKS

On the third occasion when Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, He performed a miracle by the Sea of Tiberias (Jn 21:1–14). The disciples had fished the entire night without success. Then Jesus appeared and, on His advice, they caught 153 large fish. This miracle immediately strengthened their waning faith. Jesus' crucifixion had left the disciples at a loss so they returned to their previous occupation of fishing. But seeing Jesus immediately brought to mind His promise to them at their initial calling: they would be fishers of men. And when they reached the shore, they saw fish being cooked over a fire, and bread. Jesus then said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught."

We rarely notice this detail but Jesus' choice of pronoun was

meaningful. The disciples had actually not caught anything. The fish in their boat were entirely the result of the Lord's grace. Their professional skills and experience which they applied the whole night had netted them nothing. But Jesus regarded these fish as the fruit of their labor!

Without going out to sea to fish, Jesus already had fish and bread prepared for His loved ones. Yet He asked them to take the fish that they had caught to the fire. It was certainly not because He had not prepared enough nor because He could not have produced some more. Instead, He invited them to contribute because He delights in offerings that come from a sincere and thankful heart. It means much to Him to see a genuine willingness in His beloved people to present part of what He has given them back to Him (1 Chr 29:14). It may be the smallest gesture but to the God who loves us unconditionally, it touches Him to see that we love Him too.

A CLEAN VESSEL, READY FOR THE MASTER'S USE

Moses

Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and mighty in words and deeds (Acts 7:22). Motivated and talented, he decided—at the age of forty—to do something for his people. He presumed that his brethren would understand that God would deliver them by his hand (Acts 7:25).

What possessed Moses to make such a bold assumption?

Moses was young and powerful, possessing great talents and holding a position as Egyptian prince. He thought that he had been given all these to deliver his people. But God's time had not yet come. Besides, God did not need to tap on Moses' talents or connections to save His people. Delivering the people from slavery could not be accomplished by might or by power but only by the Spirit of God.

Hence, God waited another forty years before He called His servant. By that time, Moses had neither eloquence nor self-confidence. In human eyes, Moses was a "has-been." But in God's eyes, this was the right time for God's call and commission—when Moses can take no credit for the deliverance of Israel. From that moment, Moses would go on to become a great spiritual leader, a servant of God and His people, denying himself in total obedience to the word of the true Leader of Israel.

The forty years Moses spent in the wilderness were vital to his complete submission to God's leadership. It was God who paved this way for him. However, the earlier forty years that he had spent in the Egyptian palace were not without God's purpose. It had been a time for Moses to acquire the knowledge of Egypt while learning about his true identity. Although being a part of Israel—a people separate to God—had become more precious to him than the treasures in Egypt (Heb 11:26), Moses studied diligently and became mighty in words and deeds. Eventually, God made use of Moses' knowledge and talents to pass down His ordinances and to compile the Pentateuch, leaving no excuse for man to claim ignorance of His will and His commandments.

Today, we do not have to hail from royalty—as Moses did—in order to be used by God. The Lord called not only priests and scribes, but also shepherds, farmers, tax collectors, fishermen, and others.

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work." (2 Tim 2:20–21)

We do not have to be a vessel of gold or silver to serve God. But we do need to be clean and sanctified to be ready for God's use. The prophet Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" and replied, "Here am I! Send me." But this was after the seraphim had touched his lips with a live coal from the altar and cleansed him (Isa 6:6–8). Isaiah knew it was important to serve but understood that being cleansed with the word of God was even more important.

Paul

Paul was called when he was still completely ignorant of the Lord Jesus. He was on the way to Damascus to persecute those who believed in Jesus, when a light from heaven suddenly shone on him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Paul was caught unprepared. He loved God and thought He had been serving Him. Ironically, it turned out that he had been persecuting the Lord. A sudden blindness made Saul see this reality. In complete darkness for three days, he came to understand the purpose of his calling. Immediately afterwards, he began to preach Christ in the synagogues in Damascus, though without success. Worse, he had to flee for his life, leaving in a basket lowered from the city wall, since the Jews were watching the gates day and night, plotting to kill him.

When he eventually came to Jerusalem, he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus. He debated the Hellenists who responded by

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trying to kill him. Therefore, the brethren had to send him away to Tarsus. It was only later when Barnabas took him to Antioch that the Holy Spirit sent both of them out to spread the gospel to the Gentiles.

Although Paul had the zeal to serve God even before he was called and had studied the Scriptures diligently (Gal 1:14), he did not possess true wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ (2 Tim 3:15). After his calling, he was truly sincere in his desire to serve the Lord Jesus. But before the Holy Spirit commissioned him, God wanted Paul to reflect on all the events in his life and to understand who the Messiah truly was, according to Moses and the prophets. Through all these, he became more humble and learned how to wait on God.

Was Paul's exceeding zeal for the Jewish laws and traditions in his youth all in vain? Had he studied the Scriptures for nothing? No. His knowledge of Moses and the prophets came in very useful when he witnessed for Christ and expounded the truth of salvation. Well-equipped with the knowledge of the Jews when God called him, Paul went on to be an indispensable vessel in the house of God.

Analogously, we do not know when God will deem us ready for His use. But we know that we can only be called to serve if we persevere in learning the truth and transforming ourselves into a useful vessel. There are various vessels in the house of God, each with its unique function. Most importantly, a vessel has to be clean in the eyes of the Master and dedicated to its unique usage.

OUR GIFT TO GOD

With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? (Mic 6:6)

When we come before God, we naturally want to present an offering to Him. But if everything comes from Him, what can we offer to show our gratitude and praise? We have only ourselves to present to Him. Therefore, Paul says, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom 12:1).

The examples of Moses and Paul remind us that the journey of faith begins with an encounter with the Lord and concludes with a living sacrifice. In between, we are to equip ourselves with the truth, identify God's purpose for our lives, and watchfully wait for His calling.

Once God calls us to serve, it is for life. Serving Him is a life-long process that gradually transforms our lives. And this is the true gift from Him. Hence, we ought to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice—the true gift that we can present to God in return for all His goodness to us. ★

Employing Our Gifts—Fulfilling Our Purpose

Philip Shee—Jakarta, Indonesia

I have food to eat of which you do not know.… My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work. (Jn 4:32,34)

Jesus' disciples had just returned from buying food in the city while He rested by the well and preached to the Samaritan woman. His response as the disciples urged Him to eat reflects an important and fundamental Christian philosophy of life.

Food is a basic necessity that keeps one physically alive and provides nutrition for growth. In a similar vein, Jesus' response highlights the principle that serving God and accomplishing His work is a fundamental element of our spiritual lives. Serving God is not reserved for the veterans in faith, but is meant for one and all in their journey of faith. It is akin to taking spiritual food, which enables our spiritual life to grow. When we appreciate that faith and service complement each other, we can reflect how we can start serving God:

1. What is God's calling and purpose for us?
2. What are the gifts and talents that God has bestowed upon us?
3. What environment or circumstances has God placed us in?

Paul wrote to the church in Rome that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). This was to highlight that God, being faithful, will not turn His back on the Israelites forever; ultimately, they are His chosen people. But while the Israelites remained unreceptive of God's grace, salvation reached the Gentiles, for God's intention was to "have mercy on all" (Rom 11:32). As we start to appreciate God's faithfulness and the special grace bestowed on us, it is only fair that we respond to Paul's plea and reciprocate by serving God: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom 12:1).

GOD HAS CALLED US FOR A PURPOSE

As we embark on our journey of faith and service, it is useful to consider God's calling and purpose for us. Apart from calling us for salvation, what exactly does God want us to accomplish? For Joseph, it was to keep many people alive, of which the preservation of Jacob's family was key (Gen 50:20). For Moses, it was to spend the last forty years of his life to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. For Peter, it was to minister to the Jews, and for Paul, it was to minister to the Gentiles (Gal 2:7–8).

In continuing with his message to the church in Rome, Paul used the analogy of a body with many members to illustrate that each of us is called to a different purpose and function. Although we have been called into one body, the church, we are still "individually members of one another." We have each been blessed with "gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us." We have each been dealt "a measure of faith," and we should serve "in proportion to our faith" (Rom 12:3–8).

This concept was also reinforced in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians:

For in fact the body is not one member but many.… If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the

members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body.

(1 Cor 12:14,17–20)

Paul extended this analogy, translating each part of the body into real roles and functions within the ministry: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" (1 Cor 3:6), concluding that "God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers" (1 Cor 12:28).

These passages show the interplay between God's grace and our faith, and therefore, the compelling reason for an integrated response from us to consider our individual function in His church and our individual role in His ministry. What is His calling for us? What is the purpose He wants us to fulfill?

GOD HAS BLESSED US WITH SPECIAL GIFTS AND TALENTS

One way to learn about God's calling for us is by considering the special gifts and talents He has blessed us with. This is reinforced in the following passage:

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.… And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

(Eph 4:7, 11–13)

In the previous section, we saw how God called different people to be apostles, prophets or teachers by "appointing" them. In this passage, we see that each is given "a measure of Christ's gift" and God Himself "gave some to be" apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, or pastors. We see, therefore, that God aligns His calling of people to serve in various functions based on the gifts and talents He bestows. In addition, He lines them up in different functions to complement one another for the purpose of edifying the church, the body of Christ. This is done so that the church can progress towards perfection and mature in the stature of the fullness of Christ.

This approach is very similar to the building of the tabernacle, a pre-figuration of the church. After God had instructed Moses to build the tabernacle and had given him the detailed specifications, God Himself prepared a team of gifted artisans to work with Moses to accomplish the task. God filled the artisans with His spirit, with wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and skills to design and work on multiple aspects, including working in gold, silver, bronze, jewels, wood, and tapestry (Ex 31:1–11; 35:30–35).

As we recognize the special gifts and talents that God has blessed us with, our hearts must be stirred up to employ these gifts in His service, just as Paul reminded Timothy: "Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Tim 1:6). The reason becomes clear when we appreciate the parable of the talents spoken by Jesus, of how the servants who employed their talents to make a profit of five talents and two talents respectively were rewarded for being good and faithful, while the servant who buried his talent in the ground was punished for being wicked and lazy (Mt 25:14–30).

Similarly, we should be reminded of the parable of the fig tree planted in the vineyard. The fig tree, which could have been just growing by the wayside, was given the special grace of being planted and tended to in a vineyard, which ordinarily, would have been reserved for vine. Yet the fig tree did not bear any fruit for three consecutive years and hence, the master wanted to cut it down. Though the master finally relented after the vineyard keeper pleaded for grace, it was the final chance, which meant that it would still be cut down the following year if it continued to occupy the ground without bearing any fruits (Lk 13:6–9).

GOD HAS PUT US INTO A SPECIFIC PLACE TO GIVE US THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE

Another clue that will help us to recognize our calling is to consider where God has placed us and what circumstances or environment He has subjected us to. Why have we been brought to a particular place, to this school, to this company, to this country? Why has God put us among these people? Why has God allowed us to meet with these incidents? As we go about our lives, we must be sensitive to these clues.

The story of Esther is a good illustration of this concept. By some twist of events, Queen Vashti was removed from her position and Esther, a Jewish commoner, was thrust into the position as queen of Persia and Media. As the story unfolds, it seemed coincidental that the Jews were plunged into a crisis at about that same time, in the same place, where the evil Haman almost succeeded in exterminating them.

If these circumstances were considered in isolation, they would have served a different purpose or even no purpose at all. However, Mordecai was able to see the interplay between the events. He sent messengers to ask Esther to use her position as queen to petition before the king on behalf of her people. Initially, Esther was reluctant

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as she was well aware of the law. No one would be able to see the king unless he had sent for them and in fact, those who appear before the king without being summoned would be put to death. Yet when Mordecai learned of her reservations, he responded by reminding her, "For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Est 4:14)

Finally, Esther concluded, "And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!" (Est 4:16). She had finally realized her calling. That was her purpose in life. She was placed there "for such a time as this." Although it was against the law, she knew that God could open a way for her. But if not, that would have still been the right thing to do, and her purpose in life, for which she was prepared to perish. To her, there was no meaning in living without finally accomplishing her calling.

Indeed, like Esther, we need to appreciate not just our talents, but also the positions and places God has put us in, and the circumstances that God may subject us to. While it may not be easy, we need to consider if we have been placed there to accomplish God's will. If we fail to do what is needed, God can still accomplish His will through other means and other people, but we would have missed the opportunity and failed in our purpose.

If we are able to look for the clues in our lives and integrate our gifts with our positions, the places we operate in, and the circumstances we face, we will get closer to understanding God's calling and purpose for us. As we then seek to do the will of God and accomplish His work, our lives will surely be even more fulfilling and meaningful. ⋆

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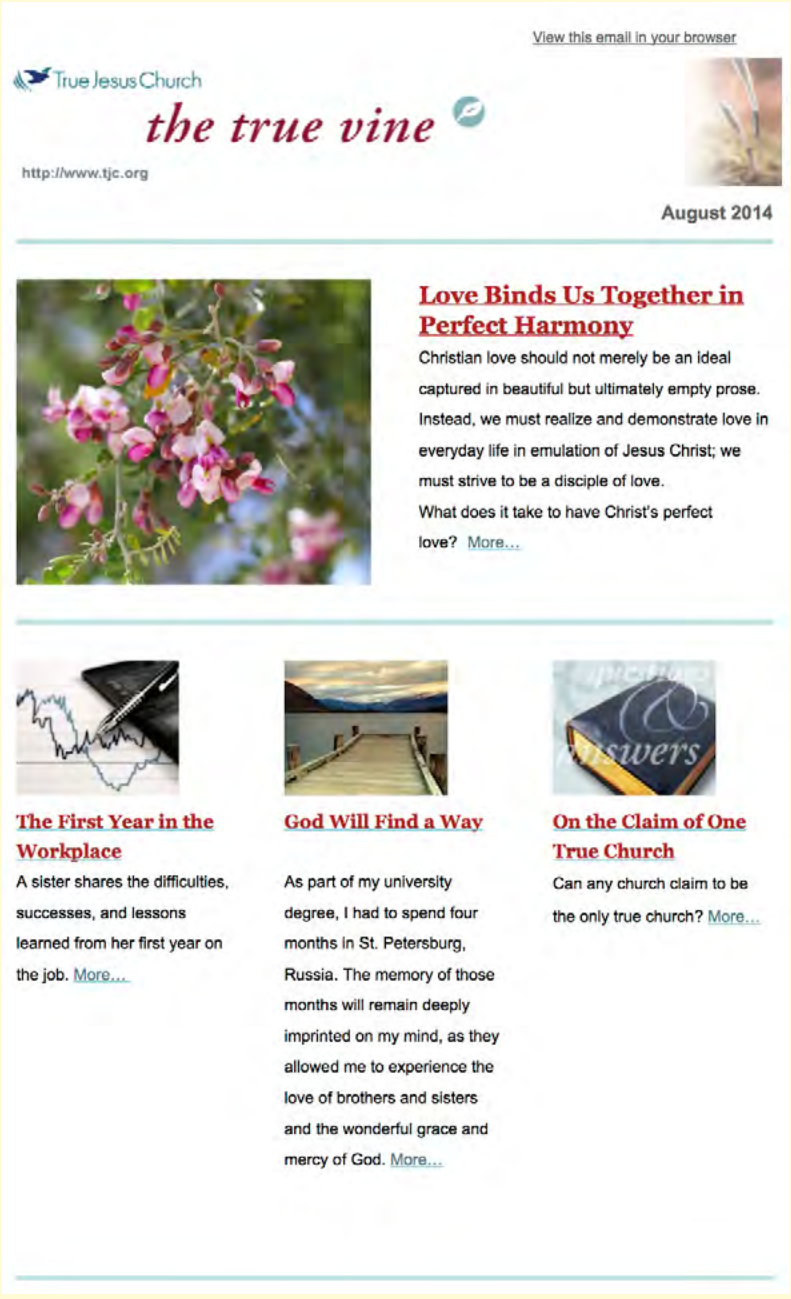

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Noble Vessels

Audrey Chan—Leicester, UK

God's will is that we live a useful life, to serve Him by carrying out the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18) and shepherding His household (Acts 20:28). These two things are, in a nutshell, the key works appointed by God for His church. They are mammoth responsibilities, requiring obedience and reliance on God. For this reason, He needs a special workforce—one where the workers have prepared themselves for service through a process of emptying themselves and cultivating the right spiritual disposition. Through His Holy Spirit, God equips these workers by giving them the power, spiritual gifts, and guidance that they need.

EMPTYING OURSELVES

In the Bible, we see a commonality among God's faithful workers: they were invariably people who emptied themselves, making room for God to use them. And they conducted their lives in a way that demonstrated this higher purpose. We see this attitude in Noah's obedience to God's commission to build the ark; Abraham's willingness to depart from Ur for Canaan; Moses heeding God to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt and leading them on an epic forty-year journey through the wilderness; and Joseph's patient and silent wait for God to show His hand while incarcerated in an Egyptian prison. All these examples stem from a clear understanding of their relationship with God and a willingness to submit to His will—what He wanted them to do and where He wanted them to go. They were truly able to walk humbly with their God (Mic 6:8–9).

With the right mindset, God's workers see life for what it really is—a short and temporary journey to a better place (Heb 11:9–10). Hence, they have a discerning attitude towards the personal assets they may or may not have in this lifetime—be it learning, wealth, or social standing. They understand that these are of little or no consequence in the grand scheme of things, and, certainly, they are not defined by them.

Paul was once a learned Pharisee with standing and authority in the Jewish community, but he put all this aside once he came to know Christ and began to serve Him.

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ. (Phil 3:8)

Such was Paul's conviction that he was willing to pay a high price to serve His master: sufferings, persecution, imprisonments, beatings, and dangers to his life (2 Cor 11:23–28). In the end, as history indicates, he even died for Christ. Paul's life was one of total submission and dedication.

The ultimate example, however, is Jesus Christ:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

(Phil 2:5–8)

Jesus purposely emptied Himself of His divine privileges to come to this world as a man to bring salvation.

Today, many believers are blessed with a high standard of education, income, living, social standing, and so forth. However, when we are called to serve God, can we empty ourselves to work humbly?

He swapped His heavenly glory for a lowly upbringing in a carpenter's household; a ministry filled with toil, tribulation and ultimately, death on a cross. He did this obediently to accomplish the ministry of reconciliation for the heavenly Father.

Emptying ourselves entails self-denial, something that is counter-intuitive in this age where the emphasis is on personal needs and wishes. However, this is the secret to serving God well and a pre-requisite for obedience and submission. When we put ourselves to one side, we remove barriers and open ourselves to God, letting Him use us as He sees fit. This can be difficult to do, and perhaps even more so when we feel we have a lot to give up (Mk 10:21–23).

Today, many believers are blessed with a high standard of education, income, living, social standing, and so forth. However, when we are called to serve God, can we empty ourselves to work humbly? Are we willing to serve others, or do we desire to be served? Do we undertake whatever tasks come our way, or do we pick and choose? Do we listen to others, or do we demand to be listened to? Do we set the agenda, or do we allow God to guide instead?

Emptying ourselves also entails shifting our focus away from ourselves on to God. By the time that God chose Moses to deliver the Israelites, the once impetuous Egyptian prince was living as a refugee in the wilderness, with only the livestock in his care for company. The years had turned Moses into a person who could only see his inadequacies and who felt unequal to God's great commission to lead Israel out of Egypt (cf. Ex 4:10). He thought that he would have to rely on his own ability, but God explained otherwise: God would be with him and empower him (Ex 3:11–12). From then on, Moses learned to truly empty himself—to look away from himself and on to God. As a result, God was able to use him mightily to change the fortune of a whole nation.

Today, when we fail to empty ourselves, we will make the mistake of assessing our own ability (or lack thereof) to undertake God's work. We forget that the work belongs to God, and that He is the one who will equip the workers.

CULTIVATE THE CHARACTER OF A GOOD SERVANT

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. (2 Tim 2:20–21)

God has high standards: He requires vessels of honor, fit for His purpose. According to Paul, we can actively strive to be vessels of honor through spiritual cultivation, by removing lusts and pursuing righteousness, faith, love, peace, and by avoiding arguments and strife (2 Tim 2:21–24). Paul adds that a good servant is one who is gentle and humble.

The best way to reach God's standard is through consistent and proactive spiritual cultivation. This is how we can attain to the character and mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). This is essential for the growth of the church, as it enables the workers to see and approach church work as Jesus would.

On a personal level, cultivation enables us to be in a state of readiness for doing God's work. And even if trials should come our way, as they often do—be it an adverse environment or opposition—we will be in a better spiritual state to overcome them. Conversely, if we fail to do the groundwork, even a minor difficulty will become a painful challenge, discouraging us from continuing to serve.

We all know what cultivation entails; it is really a matter of whether we have the resolve and self-discipline to do it consistently. Sometimes, we become so busy juggling life and church work that we compromise our spiritual cultivation. We devote less time to prayers, we skip daily Bible reading, and in church, we become so distracted by a myriad of tasks that we barely have time to sit through a service or give the sermon our full attention. And if this persists over a period of time, it will impact our spiritual well-being, and this will show in our behavior.

How many of us have the experience of being more impatient and short-tempered with others when we fail to allow God's word and the Holy Spirit to cleanse and renew us? The carnal nature has a way of surfacing insidiously. This is bad for us, and if we continue down this slippery slope, our very salvation may be jeopardized. Hence, Paul speaks of the need to discipline ourselves in the course of working for God (1 Cor 9:27).

Furthermore, the emergence of the carnal nature is bad for our working relationships with others. Indeed, it underpins a host of problems. Arguments, murmurings, divisions, jealousies, and power struggles are all symptoms of a failure to curb the carnal nature (Gal 5:16–21). Instead of building up the church, our attitude and behavior may unwittingly create problems. Hence, Paul exhorts us to put off the old nature and to be renewed, that is, to have a new mindset that is righteous and holy (Eph 4:22–32), by relying on the Holy Spirit.

GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

God is gracious and does not leave His workers to be without help. When God instructed Moses to build the tabernacle with all its ornate furnishings, God selected His workers and equipped them for the work:

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 'See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold, in silver, in bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of workmanship. And I, indeed I, have appointed with him Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have put wisdom in the hearts of all the gifted artisans, that they may make all that I have commanded you.'

(Ex 31:1–6)

The interesting point is how God's Spirit built up His workforce. Bezalel, Aholiab, and the artisans already had the basic skills for the work God had in mind (Ex 28:3–4; 35:10–11; 36:1–2)—the raw materials, as it were. But for this monumental task, God knew they needed spiritual gifts. Therefore, He filled these workers with His Spirit so that they had special wisdom, knowledge, and enhanced skills. For Bezalel and Aholiab, God's Spirit also endowed them with the ability to teach the rest of the artisans so that, together, they could implement God's intricate design (Ex 35:34). This was important as the work had to be done to exact standards and in a coordinated way.

In God's church today, which is the body of Christ, God's arrangement is no different.

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.

(1 Cor 12:4-11)

The gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned here are not meant to be an exhaustive list, for we see that Paul goes on to talk about other gifts and roles in the church (see for example, 1 Cor 12:28). However, once again, we should take note of the gifts of wisdom and knowledge mentioned and their importance for church work.

Today, the church will more than likely have at her disposal, workers with diverse skills acquired through the education system, the world of work, and life experiences. They may be skillful in administration, planning and management, finance, pedagogy, customer service, cooking, and so forth. Some of these skills can be useful for church work, but not all, as God's work is different from secular work. Importantly, God knows His church best, including what she needs in order to grow. Therefore, if God wills, He can choose to work with whatever human talent there is in the church and to enhance it by the power of His Spirit, adding wisdom, knowledge, and faith. Or else, if God decides that the church would benefit from different skills, He has the prerogative to bestow new gifts to the workers. In this way, God can equip and grow His church in any way that He sees fit.

It is not surprising, then, that Jesus told His disciples to wait for the power from on high prior to the establishment of the church:

And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me. (Acts 1:4)

The work of preaching the gospel, baptizing people, and caring for the members could not be accomplished or sustained by human effort and raw talent alone: the commission and challenges facing the early church were greater than the sum of her workers. God's work had need of members who were adequately equipped by the wisdom, power, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. God would be their guiding, driving, and sustaining force. With man's effort and resources alone, the work would be in danger of digressing or fizzling out.

It is with good reason that the key requirements for God's servants are to be filled with the Holy Spirit and with wisdom (Acts 6:3). God's principles do not change: in the Old Testament time, God filled the workers commissioned to build the tabernacle with His Spirit and wisdom; today, God does the same for those who are building His church. Through the Holy Spirit, God bestows all manner of spiritual gifts, apportioning them as He sees fit (1 Cor 12:11). He does this for the "profit of all" (1 Cor 12:7)—that is, for the benefit of the church as a whole. Hence, when we

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look around, we see this wonderful arrangement: God provides us with a talented workforce that is just right for our church at a local, national, and even international level. That is God's good planning and design.

To do the work, we need a heart that is willing and motivated to do God's work, just like the artisans in the time of Moses (Ex 36:2). God will then grant us the spiritual gifts we need while we faithfully serve. Amazingly, the Bible reveals that the more we do and the more faithful we are, the more spiritual gifts God will bestow upon us (Mt 25:29). However, we need to remember, it is never for our own glory and embellishment but for God's glory.

HEEDING THE HOLY SPIRIT

In the True Jesus Church, we are blessed with the abidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who guides and directs us in the way we should serve. However, we need to be close to God in order to hear His voice. For this reason, Paul exhorts us to pray unceasingly in the Spirit (Eph 6:18) and to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18). In this way, the Spirit can speak to us as we prepare to serve and whilst we serve. Sometimes, God's voice is gentle, coaxing us to do His bidding. At other times, it can be like a fire burning in our hearts until we have accomplished the assignment.

Many years ago, I attended a Bible camp overseas with several brethren from the UK. We were in a foreign place with members who were strangers. I still remember the emotions: nervousness and excitement mixed with trepidation of what lay ahead. Would I be able to cope with the schedule, and would I understand the lectures?

Faced with a class from different backgrounds and language needs, the lecturer had to speak in Chinese and then interpret the message into English by himself on the first day. I began to wonder how long he could sustain this, but there was obviously no other arrangement planned. During one of the prayers, I interceded for the lecturer, asking God to sustain him. Suddenly a thought came to my mind that I should offer to help. In the next prayer, the feeling became stronger—I knew it was the Holy Spirit urging me. At that point, I experienced a great internal struggle: I felt I was in no position to help with my limited interpreting experience; I felt there were better qualified brethren in the room; it did not feel appropriate, as I was not from the hosting church. It was such a dilemma, but the Holy Spirit continued to stir my heart. In the end, I decided I could not ignore the Spirit's prompting and offered my help. I could only imagine that the lecturer must have been somewhat taken aback; in truth, so was I. As it transpired, God mercifully opened my ears and mouth to do the work. Best of all, after I volunteered, others came forward to do likewise. In this way, different members pulled together to make the Bible camp run smoothly. In hindsight, that must surely have been God's will all along. Hallelujah, praise God!

NOBLE VESSELS

The church is a spiritual entity entrusted with spiritual work. Hence, her workers need spiritual qualities: the ability to remove personal barriers to make room for God to work; a godly disposition for the sake of their own salvation and for the benefit of the church; the gifts of the Holy Spirit to enrich the church and prosper God's work; and a willingness to heed the Spirit's voice. When we all strive together to pursue these virtues, God will have the use of noble vessels in His house. ★

DOCTRINAL & BIBLE STUDIES

Conquest of Canaan: Crossing the Jordan

Caleb Lee—Singapore

BACKGROUND

A nation is defined as a community of people possessing their own territory and government. However, the Israelite nation did not have its own territory until they conquered Canaan. But before the Israelites conquered the Promised Land, they had to cross the Jordan River. This crossing—done right at the beginning of the conquest—was critical in strengthening the people's faith for the battles ahead.

Before crossing the Jordan, the Israelites had encamped east of the river. Led by Moses, they had defeated two kings, Sihon and Og. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh received their share of land on the east side of the Jordan under the condition that their men would still cross the Jordan to help their brethren conquer Canaan. Soon afterwards, Moses died and Joshua became the leader. Joshua then sent two spies to the city of Jericho, who returned with the favorable report that the Lord would deliver the land to them (Josh 2:24).

The good news motivated Joshua and his men to cross the Jordan. However, coming to the river, they were greeted by the sight of overflowing banks, for it was the time of harvest (Josh 3:15). So they stayed by the Jordan and waited for three days, before the officers (directed by Joshua) gave instructions to the people (Josh 3:2).

PLACE THE ARK IN FRONT AND IN PLAIN SIGHT

[A]nd they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before." (Josh 3:3–4)

Carrying out Joshua's instruction, the officers then commanded the people to set out when they saw the Levites carrying the ark of the covenant towards the Jordan. They were to follow at a distance of about 2,000 cubits, which would allow

them to see where the ark was going. This was critical because the people had never passed that way before.

In our daily life, we may face a seemingly impossible task, just like the Israelites who had to cross an overflowing river. Such a task may be a bad habit that we have not been able to shake off or a grudge that we have been harboring. Although we know that we have to change, it is very difficult to overcome these weaknesses.

There is only one way to complete this "mission impossible"—place the ark in front where we can see it. The ark represents God's presence. With Him in front of us, we will be able to see where He is leading. Unfortunately, we often put God behind us. We may not realize that we are doing this. But whenever we fail to exercise self-control and give in to our desire to sin, or we deliberately shut our minds to God's prompting, we have put God far behind us.

Putting God in front of us should be done not just in difficult times but every day. We can do this in various ways such as praying first to start off the day, reflecting on God and God's words through the day, using His teachings to guide us in what we do and so on. When we do this, we are looking to and following the ark of the covenant in front of us. We can proceed confidently because God is guiding us, even if we did not know where we are going.

I don't know about tomorrow, …
But His presence goes before me, …
And I know who holds my hand.

(I Know Who Holds Tomorrow by Ira F. Stanphill)

SANCTIFY OURSELVES

And Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." (Josh 3:5)

An ancient general would have told his troops to ensure that their weapons were sharpened and their shields ready before sending them into battle. Joshua, however, told the people to sanctify themselves, because God would do wonders for them. His instruction shows that victory is not achieved through military might or the brilliance of the commander but through faith, obedience, and consecration to God. This is a common theme that runs through all the battles recorded in the book of Joshua.

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UNDERSTAND GOD'S PURPOSE

Then Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over before the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people. And the LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. You shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, saying, 'When you have come to the edge of the water of the Jordan, you shall stand in the Jordan.'" So Joshua said to the children of Israel, "Come here, and hear the words of the LORD your God." And Joshua said, "By this you shall know that the living God is among you, and that He will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Hivites and the Perizzites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Jebusites."

(Josh 3:6–10)

The people of Israel were about to see a great miracle and experience God's great power. However, Joshua, ever the educator, first pointed out the purpose of this miracle. He wanted the people to realize that God abided with them and that He would surely drive out all the inhabitants of Canaan before them. Joshua wanted the people to understand that God was using this miracle to strengthen Israel's faith in Him.

Likewise, when God performs miracles in a person's life, His main purpose is to increase the faith of the person and those around him or her. This is why He promised that miracles, signs, and wonders would follow those who preach the gospel. This is to confirm the message preached and to prompt people to believe in Jesus so that their souls would be saved.

CROSSING JORDAN RIVER: FAITH AND MIRACLE

Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is crossing over before you into the Jordan. Now therefore, take for yourselves twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man from every tribe. And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, the waters that come down from upstream, and they shall stand as a heap.

(Josh 3:11–13)

This was Joshua's final set of instructions to the people. At that point, the people had yet to cross the Jordan River, and the priests had yet to dip a single toe into the river. However, Joshua had utter faith in what would happen next. Indeed, the water from upstream stopped as soon as the feet of the priests who bore the ark came into contact with the water edge of the Jordan River! The priests then stood firm on the dry ground right in the middle of the

river until all Israel had crossed the river (Josh 3:14–17).

Imagine being in the shoes of one of the priests, bearing the ark and marching in unison with the other priests toward the Jordan. What would we be thinking? What would we be feeling? The ark is upon our shoulders; God's presence is with us. Will we continue to move forward with absolute trust? Or will we start to harbor doubts, wondering whether the waters will really part? Our God is the Lord of creation. Nothing is impossible for Him. We know this cognitively, but when put to the test, will we step forward with faith, believing that God's presence is enough, or will we start to shrink back? The priests with their resolute faith continued forward and grew in faith with each step. They were rewarded with being part of a great miracle.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STONES

To Remember God's Deliverance

The account of this miracle does not end with the successful crossing of the river. There were two more tasks:

And it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over the Jordan, that the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying, "Take for yourselves twelve stones from here, out of the midst of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood firm. You shall carry them over with you and leave them in the lodging place where you lodge tonight." (Josh 4:1–3)

And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the LORD had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the ark of the covenant stood; and they are there to this day. (Josh 4:8–9)

One set of stones was taken from the riverbed to dry land, while the second set of stones was placed in the riverbed. What was the purpose of undertaking these two activities?

The first set of stones was set up in Gilgal as a monument to remind the people that God had led them across the Jordan River by drying up the river's water (Josh 4:19–24). Gilgal was Israel's base camp. When the men went forth to fight their enemies, the women and children remained in Gilgal. The twelve stones would be seen by the men each time they set out. Any worries about the battle ahead or about the wives and children left behind could be dispelled by the sight of the twelve stones. After all, the Almighty God who can dam an overflowing river had already promised them victory over their enemies. They had nothing to fear. Then, if they returned victorious, the twelve stones would remind them that the battle had not been won with their own hands, but through the hand of God. This would thus keep pride from them.

There was a second set of stones placed in the Jordan River. What purpose were these stones meant to serve? Once the people of Israel had crossed the Jordan River and the priests stepped out of the river, the river would immediately resume its flow. These twelve stones would be just quickly submerged. How would these stones act as memory aid to the people of Israel?

One possibility is that these stones' strategic location ensured that they would only resurface during a drought, when the waters of the Jordan receded. On such an occasion, seeing the stones would bring back to mind God's almightiness—if He is able to "turn" the river into dry land, He can also transform arid land into an overflowing river. It would be a solid reassurance to the people of Israel that in their most dire state, God would continue to take care of them.

As spiritual Israelites, we too must set up these memorial stones. How do we do this?

First, we must remember God's grace. When things are going well for us in life, we must not forget God and His blessings (cf. Ps 103:2). We must also tell our children all the good things that God has done for us (cf. Ps 105:2,5–6).

Second, we must remember that it is God who gives us the power to accomplish everything. Since God will strengthen our hand, we need not fear difficult tasks ahead (2 Thess 3:3). He may not pluck us out of the dire situation, but He will be there with us and enable us to come through that safely. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are literally living proof of this (cf. Dan 3).

Third, we must never be puffed up over our spiritual accomplishments. Some of us may plant brilliantly, and others water assiduously, but ultimately it is God who gives the growth. We are only God's humble instruments (cf. Gal 6:14) who must always remember the words of Jesus, perfect exemplar of meekness, "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

To Bury the Old Self

There is another signification to the location of the second set of stones. Rocks in a river are eroded over time, yet God wanted one male representative from each tribe to place a stone in the riverbed.

Safely crossing the rivers in our life of faith requires us to place God in front of us—just as Israel placed the ark of the covenant in front of them—so that we can always see and follow God.

Each stone represented one tribe of Israel. After all Israel had crossed the river and the river resumed its flow, the stones would be "buried" underwater.

The crossing of the Jordan River signifies that we put to death our carnal self and truly become a renewed person.

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Col 3:1–3)

The submerged stones reinforce Paul's exhortation. Through water baptism, we have died and have been raised, so we should no longer set our mind on secular things. Instead, we ought to focus on things above.

LEADING A NEW LIFE

After Israel had crossed the Jordan, they were a new people. It was quite a contrast to the time when Israel crossed the Red Sea. After the crossing of the Red Sea, the people's spiritual immaturity was clearly evident. They had just witnessed an unprecedented event—God's miraculous parting of the Red Sea. But within a few days, they already started grumbling about the lack of water. When that problem had been resolved, they complained that they did not have any meat to eat. Their wilderness journey was characterized by repeated disobedience to and lack of faith in God (Heb 3:15–19).

In contrast, after crossing the Jordan River, the Israelites obediently submitted to the commandment of God (Josh 5). When God commanded them to circumcise themselves, instead of complaining, they obeyed. This was quite risky for them because they had crossed into enemy territory and were coming to Jericho, a well-fortified enemy city. Circumcision would put them in a vulnerable position because they would not be able to fight during the healing process. Despite this risk, they still obeyed God.

Crossing the Red Sea symbolizes baptism. But a Christian who behaves like the immature Israel is one who, although reborn through water baptism, continues to lead his own life, disobey God, sin, and fall. We must take a leaf from the book of the Israelites who crossed the Jordan River. We must enter a new and obedient phase of life.

A second contrast can be seen in how they obtained their food.

Now the children of Israel camped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight on the plains of Jericho. And they ate of the produce of the land on the day after the Passover, unleavened bread and parched grain, on the very same day. Then the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten the produce of the land; and the children of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate the food of the land of Canaan that year.

(Josh 5:10–12)

When the people of Israel were in the wilderness, God sent manna to feed them. But after crossing the Jordan River, the provision of manna from heaven stopped. Although God provides the sunshine and rain that allow crops to grow, or herds and flocks to survive, the people now had to put in more effort to plant, reap, and tend. This represents a more mature stage of a Christian's life. God is always there to help us, but we must ourselves strive to the utmost to overcome our weaknesses or temptations.

Third, after crossing the Jordan, the Israelites began and completed their successful conquest of Canaan, the Promised Land (Josh 6–13). By obeying God's instructions given through Joshua, they achieved many victories. As Christians, we must always have a "crossing" mindset. In other words, we must be resolved to not continue falling (and falling back) into sin. We must make a concerted effort to cross over to the next phase and focus on the things above instead of worldly matters. Then, the "new man" would truly be expressed in our lives.

CONCLUSION

God uses adverse scenarios to do great things in a Christian's life. When Israel wanted to cross the Jordan, it was the worst time to cross the river because it was overflowing. Yet God chose that specific time for the people to cross. The miracle that God performed during the crossing strengthened the people's faith, enabling them to follow Joshua wholeheartedly.

Safely crossing the rivers in our life of faith requires us to place God in front of us—just as Israel placed the ark of the covenant in front of them—so that we can always see and follow God. Having crossed safely, we should then set up stones of remembrance, always reminding ourselves of God's grace and power.

Have we crossed the Jordan River? If we truly have, we will lead victorious lives. ★

Philemon: Appeal for Forgiveness and Acceptance

Based on the Bible Study Guide on Philemon and Hebrews

Published by True Jesus Church

BACKGROUND

Around 58 to 61 AD, while imprisoned in Rome, Paul wrote a letter to Philemon, a wealthy Greek believer who lived within the vicinity of Colosse (in present-day Turkey). The letter concerns Onesimus, Philemon's slave who has left his master.

The epistle is silent on the reason behind Onesimus' departure from Philemon. The traditional belief is that Onesimus is a runaway slave, and that, according to Roman law, is an offence punishable by flogging or even death. But recent investigations on slavery during Roman times present a different picture; one where racial, religious, or cultural factors play no role; and where many slaves are educated (with some even better educated than their owners). Slaves also perform social functions; they can own properties and assemble in public, and, above all, the majority of urban and domestic slaves can legitimately be free by the age of thirty.

Onesimus has believed in Jesus during his stay with Paul. Now Paul, intending to send him back to Philemon, decides to also make an appeal on his behalf. Thus Paul writes to Philemon, urging him to forgive and receive Onesimus, and to consider this former slave as a dear brother in the Lord. His letter of tactful persuasion follows the conventional structure found in the genre of Greek rhetoric: commendation, appeal to reason, and appeal to emotion. And in this letter, Paul uses more terms of endearment than in all his other epistles, to strengthen his appeal "for love's sake."

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S GRACE AND GOODNESS

I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. (Phm 4–6)

Paul begins his letter with a salutation, followed by a prayer. Having heard of Philemon's exemplary love and faith (Phm 5), Paul prays for Philemon, that the sharing of his faith may become effective through his good deeds. Paul's salutation, with the emphasis on "all the saints" remind us, the modern-day reader, of the need to love every brother and sister, without any bias or prejudice. Paul also reminds us to share our faith by testifying of God's goodness (cf. Phm 6). Therefore, we need to truly know God and personally experience His grace. Our life of faith needs to be dynamic and vibrant, a testimony of His goodness.

CHOOSE THE WAY OF LOVE

Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you--being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—(Phm 8–9)

Although Paul has the authority in Christ to command Philemon (Phm 8) and expect his obedience (cf. Phm 21), he opts to appeal instead. He asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul. In taking this step, Paul relinquishes his apostolic authority and humbly

Choosing appeal over command teaches us that the motivation behind our actions ought to be love. Like Paul, we encourage others out of love. And like Philemon, we discharge our duty out of love.

identifies himself as "aged" and as a "prisoner." Given their close rapport, Paul just has to make a personal request, and he trusts that Philemon will accede. And because Philemon is an exemplary believer who loves all the saints, Paul does not need to command him to display the same level of love to Onesimus. Instead of making Philemon act out of compulsion, Paul wants him to accept Onesimus out of freewill.

While a command or instruction may temporarily force someone to act superficially and grudgingly, an appeal can touch the heart of a person and enable him to gladly and willingly do what is right. Such approach is most effective when we know that the person has always acted with love and faith and only needs a simple reminder to continue to do what is right.

As fellow servants of Christ, we may sometimes argue over who is right and who should have the final say. Worse, we may insist on our views and expect others to follow. But this approach usually results in disunity, and even when others give in to our demands, these are not done willingly. A preferred approach is to choose the way of love and gently share our views with others, believing that they will have the wisdom and willingness to do what is right.

Choosing appeal over command teaches us that the motivation behind our actions ought to be love. Like Paul, we encourage others out of love. And like Philemon, we discharge our duty out of love.

LOVE WITHOUT BIAS

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart …. (Phm 10–12)

Paul's appeal to Philemon is not merely an appeal to receive Onesimus back as a slave—he hopes that Philemon will receive Onesimus the same way he receives Paul, as a beloved brother in Christ. Before, Onesimus was valuable to Philemon for economic reasons. But now, he is valuable to him in a spiritual sense, having become a dear brother in Christ. Paul asks Philemon to look beyond Onesimus' social status and to regard his spiritual status to be of greater worth. Now, not only has Philemon gained a profitable employee, he has gained a beloved brother in the Lord (Phm 16).

Similarly, as we relate to our fellow brethren, we ought not assess them based on their social standing or economic worth. Instead, we ought to regard them as our beloved brethren and love them simply because they are members of Christ's family. As the Bible states, "for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:26–28).

FORGIVE AS GOD FORGAVE YOU

If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay--not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. (Phm 17–19)

Here, Paul reiterates his appeal. In verse 17, Paul identifies himself with Onesimus. In verse 18, he volunteers to settle the wrongs and debts of Onesimus. At the same time, he reminds Philemon of his own indebtedness to Paul. As Philemon is probably converted by Paul, Paul reminds him that if he, Paul, does not expect repayment from Philemon, Philemon should, likewise, forgive Onesimus over a debt which is of much less worth.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has also identified Himself with us (Heb 2:11–18; 4:15). He took our sins upon Himself and paid for them with His own life (Isa 53:4–6; 1 Cor 5:3; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 1:3–4; 1 Jn 2:2). Since He removed our heavy debt of sin, who are we not to forgive those who have offended us (cf. Mt 18:21–35)?

BE WILLING

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. (Phm 21)

Before Paul concludes, he appeals to Philemon's good Christian character once again by highlighting Philemon's obedience, love, and willingness to serve and please God (Phm 20–22). He trusts that Philemon would obey and do beyond what was asked. Trust is essential in our interactions within the family of Christ. At times, we may be too quick to correct and admonish our brethren, without trusting that they

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will do the right thing. But if we learn to trust, we may only need to gently encourage rather than sharply rebuke.

It would seem that Philemon is someone who will do more than what is asked of him. We are likely go the extra mile willingly for someone we love. Love is a strong motivating force. In our service to the Lord, the same principle applies. If we serve out of love, this love will motivate us to do the best for Him. Our service will be one of constant joy, discharged with a willingness that is without prompting and without complaint.

GOD'S GRACE EMPOWERS US

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (Phm 25)

Apostle Paul ends his letter to Philemon with a benediction and prayer for God's grace to be with Philemon. Through His grace, we have received God's generous provision of salvation and heavenly blessings. And through His grace, we are able to fulfill His will in our lives (1 Cor 15:10; Eph 2:10; Phil 2:13; 4:13; 2 Tim 2:1). In the same way, it is by God's grace that Philemon could continue his deeds of love and do beyond what Paul has asked. Indeed, this benediction aptly concludes Paul's appeal in this epistle.

CONCLUSION

For the modern reader, Paul's letter to Philemon continues to serve as an appeal to Christian love. The "players" in this epistle are themselves a symbol of our unity in Christ. Slavery may no longer be around, but we may still assess and receive others based on their social standing. We know that we are of one body in Christ, but do we look down on someone because of his social status, physical appearance, income, or intellect? Or do we consider every believer a dear brother or sister?

Paul's letter also teaches the spirit of reconciliation. Is anyone indebted to us? Or has he wronged us in some way? Do we continue to bear grudges or do we forgive and overlook these wrongs? If two members of Christ's body are at odds, will we be the mediator to reconcile them?

These are questions that we can ask ourselves if we want to manifest the life of a true Christian, one who is renewed and created in the image of God, in true righteousness and holiness.

… and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. … Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

(Eph 4:23–24, 31–32) ★

Walk on the Old Paths

Based on a sermon from Singapore

Thus says the Lord: "Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it;" (Jer 6:16a)

Why did the Lord urge the Israelites to walk the old paths? Aren't new ways better? God answers, "Then you will find rest for your souls" (Jer 6:16b). We will find rest if we walk the old paths. We may then ask, what are these old paths? Do all old paths lead to the good way?

Sometimes, these old paths may be good, but we can no longer return to them. As we age, physically, we can only do a fraction of the things we used to do in the past, and we know that whilst we can reminisce over the good old days, we cannot return to those bygone years. Then there are other old paths that may not necessarily be the good way. A person who worships idols may say "My grandfather worshipped these idols. My father worshipped these idols. We have been worshipping these idols as long as I can remember!" Obviously, this old path is not where the good way is. What then are these old paths where the good way is?

Thus says the Lord: "I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown." (Jer 2:2b)

Which period of the wilderness journey was God referring to when He said "You went after me in the wilderness"? After all, countless Israelites had fallen there because they lacked faith. In fact, God was referring to the time when they left Egypt. Exodus 24 beautifully depicts how Israel gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, with Moses instructing them on the words of the Lord (Ex 24:3), and how they responded, "All that the Lord has said, we will do and be obedient" (Ex 24:7). God made a blood covenant with them (Ex 24:8–10), and the leaders ascended the mountain where they saw God and ate and drank with Him (Ex 24:9–11).

This was the beginning of their covenant with God. This was unadulterated, undefiled, and pure faith, which God described as Israel's first love (Jer 2:2). Some say that first love is a time when everything around you is transformed to become beautiful. Such was the faith of the Israelites; although they had nothing in the wilderness, in "a land not sown," their eyes were fixed on God, and their hearts belonged to God.

Today, God wants us to return to the old paths, where the good way of our faith is. It could be the faith of the early believers in the Bible, the faith of our predecessors, or even the beginning of our personal faith. When we first believed, we had nothing, and yet, we had everything because our eyes were fixed only on God. With this in mind, let us explore three areas of faith where we ought to walk on the old paths where the good way is.

THE OLD PATHS OF TRUTH

First, we must walk on the old paths of the truth. What are the old paths of the truth, and why is there an urgent need to return to these paths? During the time of Prophet Jeremiah, the Israelites did not realize that they were about to be invaded by the Babylonians. False prophets were still preaching messages of peace so God urgently called out to them to return to the old paths, to the law that God had given them in the first covenant.

Today, we are facing urgent times

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as well. Apostle Paul has forewarned us that in the last days, there will be people who corrupt and resist the truth. They will not endure sound doctrine but will gather up for themselves teachers to soothe their itching ears. It is important that we are not influenced by them.

Now, how do we determine what the old paths of the truth are?

Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. (Eph 2:20)

Paul reminds us that the church of God is founded on the apostles and on Jesus Christ who is the chief cornerstone, as He is the central message of the entire Bible. Hence, the apostle provides us with the answer to our question: it is from the very Scriptures that we can see the old paths of truth.

Yet today, many doubt the Bible. Some say that the New Testament is merely a commentary of the apostles, while others claim the Old Testament is merely a shadow of the things to come and hence, need not be read. But we believe that the Bible is the measure with which we judge any doctrine. We have to return to the Bible as the basis for all doctrines.

In Jeremiah 6:16, God calls out to His people to seek out the old paths very carefully. First, they must stand in the ways and see, because they should not set out first, and ask for the right way later. Then, they should ask where the good way is, for the old paths may have been neglected or even forgotten. These paths may be difficult to find, being covered by weeds. The people have to search diligently before walking in these paths. Otherwise, they risk taking the wrong road.

The apostolic church had great passion for the truth. Acts 2 relates how the first believers congregated daily at the temple to listen to the apostles' doctrine. Our predecessors in the True Jesus Church were just as diligent with the truth; their motto was to return to the old paths, to return to the apostolic church. According to the records of an early worker, the True Jesus Church was already practicing all five basic doctrines: water baptism, footwashing, Holy Communion, Holy Spirit, and Sabbath-keeping, even before 1920. Although our early workers' understanding of these doctrines might not have been comprehensive, they recognized that these were the teachings of the apostles, essential for salvation. They were also very particular about the truth. Like the Bereans, they searched the Scriptures to examine whether what was preached was according to the Bible. In fact, these are the traditions we have received:

Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. (2 Thess 2:15)

Although we did not receive these traditions directly by word of mouth from the apostles, we have received these teachings through their epistles in the New Testament. Sadly, we have believers today who no longer accept these teachings. They openly challenge and question these beliefs.

In Matthew 13, Jesus spoke the parable of a man who found a treasure in the field and sold everything he had to buy the field. When we first believed, we were like this man; we treated the truth we had received as treasure. We were very passionate and eager to verify whether these teachings were biblically sound. But do we still see the treasure in the field now, or do we only see a field of grass? We have to continue to hold fast to the doctrines that we were taught.

THE OLD PATHS OF EVANGELISM

Second, we need to walk on the old paths of evangelism. Before the Lord Jesus ascended to heaven, He commissioned His disciples to preach the gospel. The early apostolic church responded to this commission: the apostles preached the word with all boldness (Acts 4:13), and the believers, despite persecution, traveled far and wide to preach the word (Acts 8:4). They preached throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Antioch and even as far as Rome. The church father, Tertullian, once said, "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church," testifying how the church was established on the blood of those who bore witness and gave their lives for the Lord Jesus Christ.

The same zeal was found in the early days of the True Jesus Church. During that time, our church's growth was phenomenal. Our believers traveled by foot or by ship, sometimes having to go without food and shelter. Wherever they went, they preached the gospel and established churches. An article depicting a nine-month journey in 1920 details how our members established a total of forty-two churches.

When we first believed, we were just as eager to preach the gospel, be it to our friends, schoolmates, parents, colleagues, or to anyone who was willing to listen. However, when no one believed, our initial zeal took a beating. We were like Prophet Jeremiah who felt discouraged to speak the word of God. The Lord sent him to warn the people, but nobody listened and believed him. Instead, they mocked and laughed at him. Jeremiah was so dejected that he decided to keep his mouth shut and not preach to them anymore. "Then I said, 'I will not make mention of Him, nor speak anymore

in His name'" (Jer 20:9a). Perhaps Jeremiah thought: "Why should I continue to warn them? I am just a laughingstock before them." Yet did he stop speaking as a result? "But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not" (Jer 20:9b).

Even though Jeremiah resolved to stop speaking to the people, he could not contain the word of God inside him.

O my soul, my soul! I am pained in my very heart! My heart makes a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace, because you have heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. (Jer 4:19)

The Babylonians had yet to be at their doorsteps, but Jeremiah could hear the sound of the trumpet and the alarm of the impending war in his soul. He knew the people would perish if he remained silent. How could he withhold God's word from them?

During the Second World War, there was a German Christian congregation who attended services in a small church. A railway rack ran behind that church. Each Sunday morning, this congregation would hear the whistle from passing trains. One Sunday, they noticed something different: cries were coming out from the train as it passed by. Later, they realized that the train was transporting Jews to the concentration camps. Week after week, that train whistle would blow. Everyone dreaded to hear the sound of the whistle because the Jews would cry out to them, "Help us! Help us!" Since these church goers could not help these poor people, they decided to stop their ears from listening. So whenever the train went by, they would sing at the top of their voices to drown the cries of the Jews.

Like these German Christians, we have heard the cries of the people of the world. Are we, like them, going to mask out the cries of the lost souls? Or are we going to be like Jeremiah, unable to hold back the word of God? Paul encouraged Timothy in this manner: "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2a).

Quite often, the gospel is out of season with the people of the world, especially in our modern society where everyone is busy. Not only are we busy, the people around us are also very busy, and it is difficult to even find someone with the time to listen to the gospel. But, if we do not preach the word in and out of season, we will easily miss the opportunity to preach.

Recently, I went to a computer lab at my office to do some work. I had not been there for quite some time. I met a colleague who initiated a conversation with me. In the past, I thought that he probably would not be interested in Christianity. To my surprise, he told me that he had started to read the Bible recently and found it very good. He even asked me, "Where is your church?" and so I invited him to attend our evangelistic service.

Circumstances do change, and so does the state of mind of those to whom we have preached. People who were uninterested in the gospel in the past might be receptive to the gospel today. The more pertinent question is whether we are there to preach to them when they are ready to listen. Therefore, let us reignite our evangelistic zeal to preach to our friends, and invite them to our church.

THE OLD PATHS OF PRAYER

Third, we need to walk on the old paths of prayer. The apostolic church always esteemed and emphasized on prayers, especially prayers for the Holy Spirit. The apostles waited and prayed for the Holy Spirit before they embarked on God's work. When the believers in Samaria had not received the Holy Spirit, the church sent the apostles to pray for them. In Ephesus, the first question that Paul asked the believers was, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you first believed?" To the early believers, receiving the Holy Spirit was the most important thing in their Christian journey.

In Isaiah 60:17, God says, "Instead of bronze I will bring gold, instead of iron I will bring silver, instead of wood, bronze, and instead of stones, iron." God tells us that He makes superior what is inferior and hence, God gives us the Holy Spirit to help us become a better person.

We believe that praying for the Holy Spirit is of utmost importance. But as time passes, it becomes increasingly difficult to focus and pray with the same urgency. Sometimes, we comfort ourselves by thinking that God will eventually give us the Holy Spirit before we die. Whilst it is true that there are testimonies of brethren who received the Holy Spirit just before they died, there are also countless others of whom no one knows whether they received the Holy Spirit before they died. We who are still alive should not leave such an important matter to chance and procrastinate in praying for the Holy Spirit.

If we recalled the time when we first believed, we remember how we used to pray with persistence and earnestness. Then, we only had one thing on our mind: receiving the Holy Spirit. What about now? Let us return to the old paths of prayer where the good way is. Let us rekindle our initial fervor, and pray earnestly for the promised Holy Spirit. Hebrews 10:35–36 exhorts us: "Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise."

In the United Kingdom, there is a society known as "Ramblers," and their aim is to promote walking to preserve the country's footpath network. They realize that these footpaths would become overgrown with grass, and over time, fall into oblivion if they are not being cared for. Let us strive to be like these ramblers and return to the old paths where the good way is. Let us be a rambler for the truth, for evangelism, and for prayer. ★

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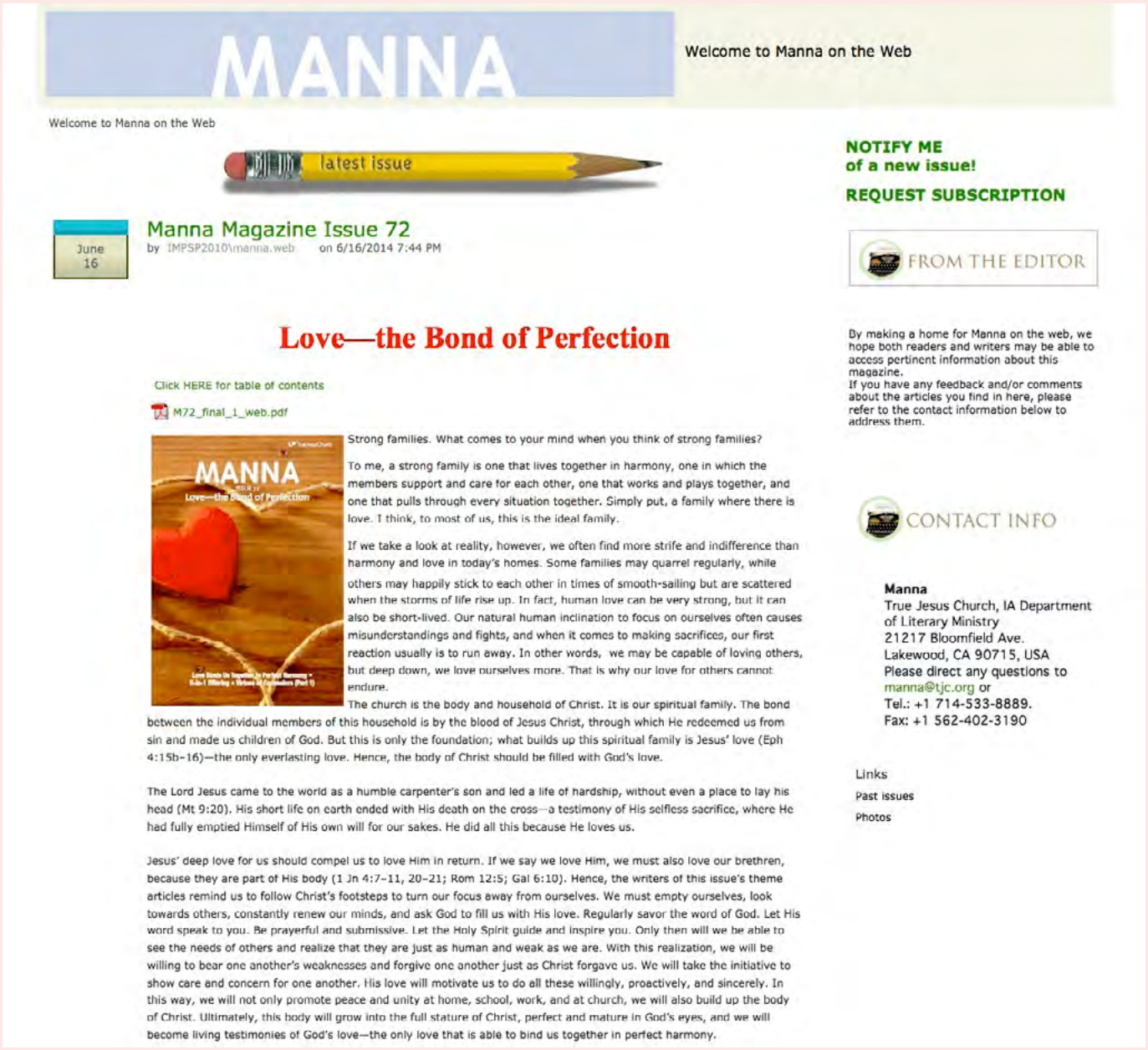

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FROM THE EDITOR

Love—the Bond of Perfection

By making a home for Manna on the web, we hope both readers and writers may be able to access pertinent information about this magazine.
If you have any feedback and/or comments about the articles you find in here, please refer to the contact information below to address them.

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Strong families. What comes to your mind when you think of strong families?

To me, a strong family is one that lives together in harmony, one in which the members support and care for each other, one that works and plays together, and one that pulls through every situation together. Simply put, a family where there is love. I think, to most of us, this is the ideal family.

If we take a look at reality, however, we often find more strife and indifference than harmony and love in today's homes. Some families may quarrel regularly, while others may happily stick to each other in times of smooth-sailing but are scattered when the storms of life rise up. In fact, human love can be very strong, but it can also be short-lived. Our natural human inclination to focus on ourselves often causes misunderstandings and fights, and when it comes to making sacrifices, our first reaction usually is to run away. In other words, we may be capable of loving others, but deep down, we love ourselves more. That is why our love for others cannot endure.

The church is the body and household of Christ. It is our spiritual family. The bond between the individual members of this household is by the blood of Jesus Christ, through which He redeemed us from sin and made us children of God. But this is only the foundation; what builds up this spiritual family is Jesus' love (Eph 4:15b-16)—the only everlasting love. Hence, the body of Christ should be filled with God's love.

The Lord Jesus came to the world as a humble carpenter's son and led a life of hardship, without even a place to lay his head (Mt 9:20). His short life on earth ended with His death on the cross—a testimony of His selfless sacrifice, where He had fully emptied Himself of His own will for our sakes. He did all this because He loves us.

Jesus' deep love for us should compel us to love Him in return. If we say we love Him, we must also love our brethren, because they are part of His body (1 Jn 4:7-11, 20-21; Rom 12:5; Gal 6:10). Hence, the writers of this issue's theme articles remind us to follow Christ's footsteps to turn our focus away from ourselves. We must empty ourselves, look towards others, constantly renew our minds, and ask God to fill us with His love. Regularly savor the word of God. Let His word speak to you. Be prayerful and submissive. Let the Holy Spirit guide and inspire you. Only then will we be able to see the needs of others and realize that they are just as human and weak as we are. With this realization, we will be willing to bear one another's weaknesses and forgive one another just as Christ forgave us. We will take the initiative to show care and concern for one another. His love will motivate us to do all these willingly, proactively, and sincerely. In this way, we will not only promote peace and unity at home, school, work, and at church, we will also build up the body of Christ. Ultimately, this body will grow into the full stature of Christ, perfect and mature in God's eyes, and we will become living testimonies of God's love—the only love that is able to bind us together in perfect harmony.

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God Is Our Refuge

Fui Khin Wong—Singapore

Sis. Wong Fui Khin was born in Sabah, East Malaysia into a family of True Jesus Church believers. Her paternal grandmother, together with her siblings and her son (Sis. Wong's father), were baptized into the church in the late 1920s. Besides enjoying the grace of salvation, Sis. Wong has experienced abundant blessings from the Lord. She shares two of these with us.

PUSHED TO SAFETY

In the 1960s, I was a secondary school student in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. My family lived in a place called Signal Hill, which is about a twenty-minute walk from Kota Kinabalu town center. Back then, there were only a few rickety buses, which operated few and far in between. School for us began at 8:15 a.m. in the morning, and if we missed the 7:30 to 7:45 a.m. bus, we would definitely be late for school and most probably be punished. So every day, my younger sister and I would rush to the main bus station to catch the bus to school.

One fine morning, we were hurrying to the bus station as usual. We had to cross a busy road in order to get to the bus station. My sister who was ahead of me had already crossed the road. In my haste to catch up with her, I dashed across the road without checking whether the road was clear. Only halfway across the road did I realized that a car was speeding towards me. I was so shocked, I did not know how to react. I was rooted to the spot and my legs felt as if they had turned to jelly. It did not even occur to me to run. All I could remember was to say, "Hallelujah, hallelujah!"

Suddenly, I felt a force shoving me right over and onto the pavement on the other side of the road. After I had landed there, I looked back, just in time to see the car whiz past me. The driver of the car turned and looked at me with his eyes and mouth wide open in shock. He must have thought that I was a ghost because I had moved from the middle of the road onto the pavement in an instant.

Indeed, we worship a faithful Lord who rescues us in times of danger. I cannot imagine what would have happened, had He not stretched out His hand to save me. Thank God for His grace and mercy!

INTERNAL AND INTENSIVE BLEEDING STOPPED

By the 1970s, I was married and staying in another town in Sabah, Malaysia, called Tawau. My second son, Guo Hwa, suffers from hemophilia, a hereditary blood disease. Human blood consists of red blood cells, white blood cells, and blood plasma. Within blood plasma, there is something known as factor VIII, which helps the blood to clot when we hurt ourselves so that we do not continue to bleed. To function normally, a person would need to have between 50 to 100 percent of factor VIII. Hemophiliacs have very little of this clotting factor in their blood. In particular, Guo Hua has a mere 0.5 percent of factor VIII. The slightest knock or cut will cause him to bleed. Internal bleeding would be especially dangerous for him. In addition, he could suffer spontaneous bleeding.

Guo Hua was diagnosed with this illness in Singapore when he was just a few months old. We went to Singapore to have him checked because back then, there were no medical facilities in Sabah to diagnose his sickness. The usual treatment for hemophiliacs was to give them a transfusion of blood plasma extract or a factor VIII precipitate injection. Unfortunately, these were not available in Sabah at that time. So whenever Guo Hua had a bleed, we would let him rest for a few days; the bleeding usually settled and he would recover.

When Guo Hua was two years old, he bumped into a cupboard in the house. He hurt his left temple where there are big blood vessels. While we did pray for him, we did not pay particular attention, thinking that the bleeding would stop after a few days as it usually did. However, on that occasion, after two days, the bleeding intensified. Both his eyes were affected and he could not see. He began to drift in and out of consciousness.

We immediately took him to the hospital. The doctor who attended to him told us there was internal bleeding into one-third of his brain, and that there was very severe bleeding into both his eyes. The doctor commented, "Mrs. Chong, I am no God." In fact, he repeated himself, "I am no God, I am no God, why did you bring your son to me in such a condition? You know about your son's illness. Why did you not bring him to me immediately after the accident? It is too late now."

I knew the doctor was trying to tell me there was no hope for Guo Hua. Although the doctor said he would give Guo Hua regular transfusions of fresh blood, the doctor also hinted that he thought such transfusions useless, and he warned us of the possibility of brain damage.

At that moment, I could only pray silently, saying, "Lord, if it is Your will to take my son, I will accept it. May it be done according to Your will." I entrusted everything to God, resigning myself to the fact that the Lord might take my son from us. In fact, I reminded myself that we would definitely meet again in our Lord's heavenly kingdom.

After my prayer, I felt a great peace and calm. Words cannot describe this feeling of serenity within me. It was as if a whole burden had been removed from me. Thank God for His mercy and grace!

We were very touched when many of our brethren and family members gathered in the church especially to pray for Guo Hua. With their loving intercession and God's wondrous grace, he miraculously recovered within one week.

On Guo Hua's third day in the hospital, an eye specialist who had come from Kota Kinabalu examined him. He told me that due to the heavy bleeding into the eyes, the weight of the bleeding would cause the eyeballs to burst, and Guo Hua may become blind. However, by the gracious mercy of our Lord Jesus, Guo Hua neither suffered any brain damage nor became blind.

Praise the Lord for His mercy—the two-year-old who hurt himself so seriously is now in his late thirties. All of us are living on borrowed time from the Lord Jesus. But Guo Hua appreciates this even more keenly. For him, every new day is additional grace from the Lord Jesus.

A VERY PRESENT HELP

No words will ever suffice to express our deep gratitude to Jesus for His mercies upon us. There is no way I can ever repay the Lord for the wonderful grace and love He has continually showered on my family and me. He saved me from certain death, He preserved my son.

As the Psalmist says in Psalms 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

May all glory be given to the Lord Jesus. Hallelujah. ⋆

At that moment, I could only pray silently, saying, "Lord, if it is Your will to take my son, I will accept it. May it be done according to Your will." ... After my prayer, I felt a great peace and calm. Words cannot describe this feeling of serenity within me. It was as if a whole burden had been removed from me.

Once Stiff-necked and Foolish

Peter Wong—Malacca, Malaysia

In the name of Jesus, I testify. My father came to believe in the Lord when he was in his thirties. He used to gamble and, even after his conversion, he did not stop until God personally reminded and moved Him through a series of events. Like my father, I am also a rather stiff-necked person.

REFUSING GOD'S CALLING

In 2008, a few preachers proposed to the board of ministers at my local church to ordain me as a deacon. When I heard the news, I was shocked. I was extremely unwilling to serve as a deacon; I felt that a person with my character would not be suitable. I rejected the proposal.

When a few ministers reprimanded me on my rejection, I believed I was in the right and I even became upset with them. I felt that it was good enough to be active in the church without being a deacon. I had a very good career, and I enjoyed my personal and church life. Moreover, I thought that this was my life and the church had no right to decide what I should do. I was wrong. From the moment we are baptized, our life does not belong to us because it has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus; our life belongs to Jesus Christ and we are members of His body—the church.

A STRANGE CONDITION

Not long afterwards, however, something happened to me. One night in 2008 at 3 a.m., I suddenly felt a sharp pain in my back, as if somebody had just punched me very hard. I woke up and asked my wife for a massage. But that did not help. I walked up and down the stairs in my house, trying to relieve the pain. Suddenly, I lost all motor functions and could not stand. Before I collapsed, I called to my wife, "I'm going to fall!" Lying on the living room floor, I could only move my head. The rest of my body felt completely numb. I was shocked but I tried to calm myself. After my wife and I prayed together for about an hour, amazingly, there was a soothing feeling in my neck and suddenly, I could move again. Deep in my heart, I knew something was wrong, but I suppressed the feelings of my conscience.

After the incident, I went for an MRI scan but the results showed that there were no problems. I was relieved and continued my life as usual. About one year later, in 2009, the symptoms reoccurred, and I collapsed another three times—twice at home and once at church. Each time, after prayer, I recovered. Clearly, God was trying to tell me something. My wife even asked me, "Have you done something wrong? Do you need to repent?" I answered, "Of course not." However, deep in my heart, fear began to build up. I knew that God was trying to teach me a lesson, but I kept suppressing that feeling. I was stubborn and foolish.

After these incidences, we consulted various doctors. All of them said that there was nothing wrong with me. One physician wanted to refer me to a psychiatrist, and another doctor even asked me to see a medium. I also went to see a Chinese physician for acupuncture. I almost died in that clinic. About five minutes after the physician had started the acupuncture and had left the room, I lost all my motor functions yet again. In addition, I could barely breathe and I felt as if I was going into a seizure. It was terrible. I was shaking, and I shouted

for help but no one came. Then I prayed and struggled to reach out to grab my mobile phone. Thank God, I managed to call my wife, who then rushed into the treatment room with the physician.

They were shocked when they saw me. At first, I couldn't move but after about an hour, I regained mobility and went home. The Chinese physician urged me to see a surgeon immediately.

REMAINING STUBBORN

The next morning, on June 14, 2009, I went to the hospital and was admitted straight away. For that whole day I just lay in bed, without anyone coming to check on me. The surgeon checked my MRI scans, which had been performed one year earlier without revealing any problems, and he thought that it would be impossible for anything to happen to me in such a short time.

However at 7 p.m. that night, my pain returned and I endured it until midnight. I was given painkillers but to no avail. The pain reached a point where my body couldn't handle the stress and I went into a seizure. I started convulsing horribly on the bed. I don't even remember what happened afterwards, but it was as though I had completely lost all my senses. According to my wife and my sister, I began randomly shouting at people.

Apart from the pain, my whole body felt numb and I could not breathe. The doctor came with some nurses and they pricked my body with needles to test my sense of touch—I could no longer feel anything. I truly thought that I was not going to survive. Yet, even at this agonizing moment, I remained stubborn. Other people would have started to repent and ask God for forgiveness, but I did not. I did not want to promise God anything.

That night, I went through another MRI scan and CT scan before the doctor finally found bleeding behind my neck. I had to undergo life-saving emergency surgery. The doctor was still uncertain over the cause of the bleeding and told me that the surgery would be very dangerous. He also said that if I did survive, I might lose some of my motor functions. Deep within me, I knew that I would not die, yet I told my wife that I loved her, just in case I did not wake up.

From the moment we are baptized, our life does not belong to us because it has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus; our life belongs to Jesus Christ and we are members of His body—the church.

The next morning, I underwent the surgery. Thank God, I did wake up afterwards, and I recovered within the week, despite having three vertebrae removed from my neck. I also thank God that I did not have any side effects from the surgery apart from some memory loss.

SERVING GOD STARTS WITH SUBMISSION

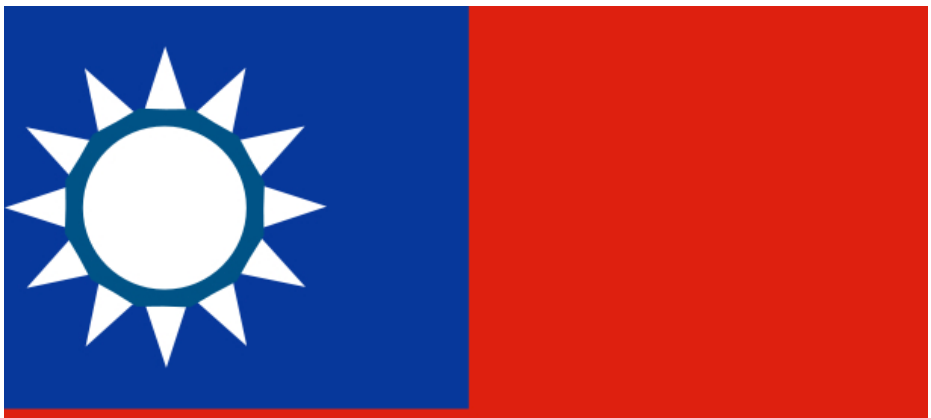
After this incident, I started to think about why this had happened. I started to pray to God. I knew that I was not submissive and that a deacon who is not submissive would cause much trouble in the church. I told the Lord: "God, if you want to use me, you have to change me." Later on, I realized that God had indeed changed me through this experience. He left a very deep scar on my neck, which would always remind me not to be stiff-necked.

In 2013, local church board members once again approached me regarding deaconship and this time, I accepted the calling. Ever since, my views regarding divine work have changed significantly. In the past, I was quite self-centered and I would only do divine work that I liked. However, I came to realize that church work is not a hobby; it is our service to God. So when we humbly carry out divine work that we do not like, we are submitting to and truly serving God.

After my ordination as a deacon, God continued to change me. Today, I always pray to God to mold, change, and help me to do things according to His will instead of my own will. Sometimes, I still have negative or stubborn thoughts. Whenever that happens, I reach out and touch my neck. I truly thank God for the second chance to serve Him according to His will and for teaching, molding, and changing me the hard way.

If we are stiff-necked and try to challenge the Lord, we will find that we have already lost the battle, because we will never win against God. However, if we submit ourselves completely to God, we will find peace and joy in our service to Him.

May all glory be to our beloved Lord Jesus. Amen. ⋆



The True Jesus Church General Assembly in Taiwan: An Introduction

General Assembly of Taiwan

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Between March and April 1926, the True Jesus Church established its first three churches in Taiwan—Xianxi Church, Niutao Bay Church, and Qingshui Church in the Mid-west of Taiwan. In October of the same year, Taichung Church was established, followed by Tainan Church in April 1927. Almost immediately afterwards, many churches sprang up in the mid-southern region of Taiwan. Gradually, the gospel also spread to Erlin (mid-west), Luodong (north-east), Hualien (mid-east), and Taipei (north). Church membership was predominantly made up of Han Chinese until 1939 when the gospel also reached the indigenous Taiwanese.

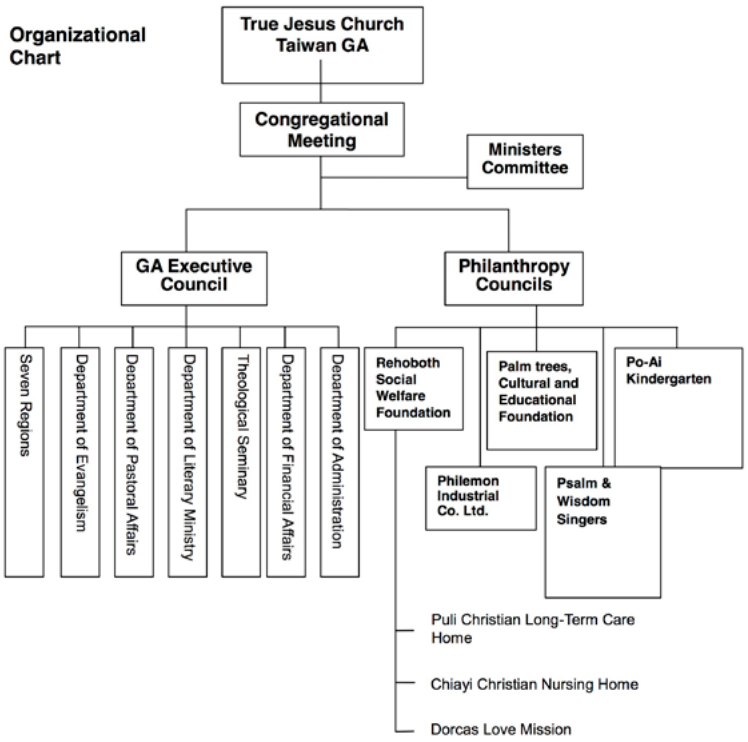
CURRENT SITUATION

The True Jesus Church in Taiwan has been established for nearly ninety years. There are currently a total of 248 Churches, 47 Houses of Prayer (HOP) and 52,578 members. To pastor the churches, the Taiwan ministry is divided into seven regions.

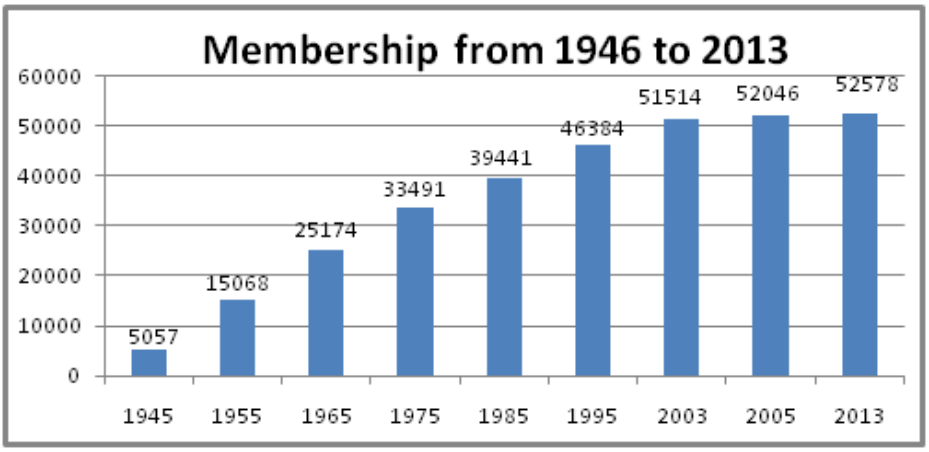
Churches, ministers and members in Taiwan as of 2013:

Region	Churches	HOPs	Preachers	Elders	Deacons	Retired Preachers	Members
Northern	48	6	27	10	123	3	14,570
Central	31	3	16	15	72	3	7,876
Mid-southern	27	4	15	14	50	2	5,071
Southern	27	7	15	10	40	3	6,773
Northeastern	29	7	13	3	19	2	5,013
Southeastern	43	7	14	3	48	2	6,957
Western	43	13	14	1	44	3	6,318
Assigned to Taiwan GA			13				
Assigned to other countries			8				
Total	248	47	135	56	396	18	52,578

To support the Taiwanese government's initiative of encouraging greater participation in charitable activities by religious organizations, the Taiwan General Assembly (GA) established philanthropy councils on March 1, 2001. The councils include the Rehoboth Social Welfare Foundation, Palm Trees Cultural and Educational Foundation, Po-Ai Kindergarten, Philemon Industrial Co. Ltd., and the Psalm & Wisdom Singers. The Rehoboth Social Welfare Foundation covers three entities: the Puli Christian Long-Term Care Home,[1] the Chiayi Christian Nursing Home,[2] and the Dorcas Love Mission.[3]



The graph below illustrates membership growth in Taiwan. From 1945 to 1975, membership grew by as much as 8,000 to 10,000 per decade. From 1975 to 2005, membership grew by around 5,000 per decade. However, most recently, from 2003 to 2013, membership has grown by only 1,000 per decade, which is of concern.



OBJECTIVES

The Taiwan GA has set various objectives and a strategic direction for 2014. Through these initiatives, the church hopes to carry out the Lord's great commission that has been entrusted to her. Below is an introduction to these initiatives with specific emphasis on four objectives:

OBJECTIVE 1: BE MODEL SERVANTS

Preachers, elders, deacons, and church council members form the core for church work development. As servants of God, they need to be exemplary in the way they conduct their lives and their service to the Lord. Only then can they help members build a happy and fulfilling family life and establish a church that is like one family in the Lord. Furthermore, servants need to be adept in teaching the truth so that members do not go astray. They need to manifest the characteristics of Christ and live a life of faith, hope, and love.

A) Implement Continuous Training for Preachers and Ministers (1 Tim 4:16)

As God's servants, we need to establish and nurture good relationships with the Lord. Continuous training and spiritual cultivation must go hand in hand with our servitude; if we do not improve, we will fall behind. This is a serious matter as it can affect the members' spirituality and their salvation. 1 Timothy 4:16 reminds us to take heed to ourselves and to the doctrine; we must continue in the truth in order to save both ourselves and those who hear us. Only when our own spirituality grows can we save others and establish a glorious church.

B) Resolve to Offer the Best to Our Lord Jesus (Rom 12:11)

Every servant of God has to resolve to offer his best to the Lord. He should maintain his zeal in serving the Lord, not be lagging in diligence but always be fervent in spirit (Rom 12:11).

The Taiwan GA Pastoral Department requires preachers to submit monthly reports with information on on-going, newly added, and long-term work, challenges faced, resources required as well as with testimonies and other sharing. The purpose of the report is to encourage God's servants to practice periodic self-reflection and to consider whether they have offered their best to the Lord.

OBJECTIVE 2: BE ONE FAMILY IN THE LORD

Currently, the church faces two major challenges: an increase in the rate of members' spiritual decline and a reduction in baptism numbers. We believe that one way to solve this problem is to strengthen our members' sense of belonging and allow them to experience that the church is one family in the Lord.

A) Strengthen Family Service Groups (Eph 2:19)

Family service groups do not only study the Bible together; they can help their members practice their faith in their daily lives. Group leaders can facilitate regular interaction among group members and encourage them to share their faith with one another. They can mobilize those who are strong in faith to reach out to those who are weak and lost in their faith. When the lost sheep return, it will bring joy to the entire group and will allow everyone to experience the family spirit within the church.

B) Guide the Fellowships (Phil 1:5)

As with family service groups, fellowship leaders within the church should encourage their members to help, serve, and share with one another. This will help members feel at home in the church and motivate them to participate in the fellowship of the Spirit. A beautiful picture is created when members happily gather to discuss things pertaining to God: "Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name" (Mal 3:16).

OBJECTIVE 3: MOBILIZE EVERYONE TO SPREAD THE GOSPEL

The gospel is the Word of Life that can lead men out of life's predicaments. Hence, we should have a sense of urgency to preach the gospel. We must declare to unbelievers that which we have seen and heard, that they may receive the Word of Life and share in our spiritual joy (1 Jn 1:3).

Counties, major cities and places of interest in Taiwan

A) Testify of the True Jesus Church (Jn 1:46)

Many believe in Jesus but cannot receive His grace because they have not received the baptism that is in accordance with the truth of salvation (Eph 3:9). Therefore, when we introduce Jesus to those who thirst for eternal life, we must also introduce the True Jesus Church so that they may find the path of salvation.

When we bring our truth-seeking friends to church, we should also introduce them to the various available religious education classes and fellowships, because these can cater to people at different stages in life. Moreover, we can encourage our friends to attend testimony sessions and special services as well as to make use of the church's various media resources. We can invite our non-believing friends to attend special worship services held in church on meaningful occasions such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Senior Members' Day. Through these activities, they may experience the love of the Lord and return to Him. Regardless of our age, we should cordially invite our friends to "come and see!"

OBJECTIVE 4: UTILIZE PHILANTHROPY AS A PLATFORM FOR THE GOSPEL

The church should care for the weak and be integrated into society so that the gospel can be preached to more lost souls.

A) Serve the Community

During His ministry on earth, Jesus often healed the multitudes of their diseases (Lk 6:17–19). In

The Holy Spirit continues to work within us, equipping us with wisdom and capability. Therefore, we should not be stagnant in our servitude. Instead, we should pursue excellence through the Holy Spirit so that others can see the glory and beauty of the church.

recent years, the church has tried to manifest and uphold the love of the Lord Jesus in a similar way. It has established several charitable facilities and philanthropic programs. These include nursing homes, a women's center and a kindergarten, but also the Life Education Program[4] mobilized by Taiwan GA's Department of Evangelism, the Life Experience Camp,[5] after-school counseling sessions, and free medical clinics. Such work not only allows the church to help others physically and mentally but can also lead many more to salvation.

B) Become a Selfless Fountain of Love in This World (1 Jn 3:17)

Proactive participation in charity work is one good way to become a selfless fountain of love in this world. The Dorcas Love Mission serves as a wonderful example of this. In the past decade, it has provided support to many in need, not only in Taiwan but also internationally, such as in Africa, India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Sabah.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit continues to work within us, equipping us with wisdom and capability. Therefore, we should not be stagnant in our servitude. Instead, we should pursue excellence through the Holy Spirit so that others can see the glory and beauty of the church.

Even though serving God seems to require sacrifice, it is actually a form of grace. As Paul said, "His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor 15:9–10). May the love of the Lord compel us so that the longer we serve Him, the sweeter He grows. ★

Footnotes:

1 The Puli Christian Long-Term Care Home can accommodate 140 people. It serves both as a retirement and nursing home.

2 Both the Puli Long-Term Care Home and the nursing home in Chiayi provide care to elderly church and non-church members.

3 The Dorcas Love Mission supports brethren and the public at large in Taiwan and abroad; it provides emergency aid to disaster victims and the critically ill.

4 The Life Education Program supports schools through student counseling and assisting in classroom management. This is done through character education classes that include gospel elements.

5 The Life Experience Camp is held on an irregular basis. Camps are usually held for a short period of time and include active and passive character education, and the teaching of biblical values.

A Heart to Serve

A.L.—Vancouver, Canada

For many of us, serving in the various ministries of the church has become such an integral part of our lives that we rarely stop to reflect on why we serve, how we serve, and most importantly, what a privilege it is that we have these opportunities to serve. In recalling the first time she was moved to serve and her subsequent participation in the music ministry, a sister gains precious lessons of faith.

HE MOVED ME

Some of us may recall the first time we served the Lord. But how many of us can remember the moment when we first felt the strong calling to serve God? I remember the latter very clearly.

I was then around twelve or thirteen years old and attending a hymn evangelistic service in church. This was certainly neither my first time attending such a service nor hearing the choir sing. But that day was different. My eyes were drawn to the pianist; as I listened to the music, I felt compelled to serve God. At that moment, I resolved, "I want to be like her one day and serve God as a pianist."

Looking back, my resolution does seem over-ambitious, for I barely knew the basics of piano then. Moreover, I did not even know how to plan to realize my aim to play as well as that sister. But at that moment, all I knew was I wanted to serve in the ministry, and I was determined to make it happen.

However, being a young teen, I soon forgot this initial inspiration. It was only a year later, when the church held a training session for pianists, that I remembered my resolution to serve the Lord. I took the first step to learn how to play the piano and God guided me the rest of the way.

Generally, most teenagers do not practice an hour of piano every day without being prodded by someone. In addition, I was not a particularly disciplined person. Even as an adult now, I have difficulty dedicating an hour each day towards something so persistently! But back then, each day after I returned home from school, I would practice for an entire hour without any parental reminder. Such tenacity to practice could only have come from God.

As I did not have a piano teacher, I often asked other sisters from church for advice. God later provided me with a church sister who walked me through all the hymns in the church hymnal over the course of more than a year. At first, it took me well over two weeks to learn to play just one hymn. Gradually, it took me less and less time to learn a new hymn, and three years after that memorable hymn evangelistic service, I began to serve as a pianist.

HE QUALIFIES THE CALLED

My journey from that first moment of inspiration to participation in the ministry provided me with a good lesson in faith—if we are willing to serve, God will help us and give us strength. However, as I served Him, there were times when I questioned myself and my ability to serve. I often felt that I did not match up to the others. In terms of technical skills, I was certainly not as professional as those brethren who specialized in music. As for personal cultivation, I felt that I was an ignoble vessel, lowly and lacking.

Such thoughts bogged me down and made serving in the music ministry burdensome. I no longer felt moved when playing the piano. Neither could I feel the joy from

I thought of the disciples who, though uneducated fishermen, were called by the Lord Jesus to speak before the elite scribes and Pharisees. I thought of Moses who, though fearful at first, was empowered by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. I thought of David who, though neither the oldest nor the tallest of the sons of Jesse, was chosen by God to be king. It then dawned on me that "[t]he Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

serving the Lord. Soon, playing the piano during services became little more than a task to be completed dutifully.

One day, a quote I had previously heard popped into my mind: "God doesn't always call the qualified, He qualifies the called." I pondered on that quote for some time, trying to recall biblical characters to whom the quote applied. I thought of the disciples who, though uneducated fishermen, were called by the Lord Jesus to speak before the elite scribes and Pharisees. I thought of Moses who, though fearful at first, was empowered by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. I thought of David who, though neither the oldest nor the tallest of the sons of Jesse, was chosen by God to be king. It then dawned on me that "[t]he Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

The "outward appearance," which includes factors such as looks, wealth, education levels, or technical skills, is not as important to God as our hearts and attitudes in service. If we have the heart to serve the Lord, He will personally guide and enable us to do so. Hence, if His Spirit moves within us, compelling us to take part in His work, we should go forth with confidence that comes from faith in God, for we know we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil 4:13).

Spiritual cultivation before and during our service is key. Some may think, however, that this means we have to wait for a "better" time to serve or for the day when we have become "perfect." God alone is good and perfect, yet He wants us to pursue His perfection. He understands that this is not achieved overnight but a journey that lasts through our lifetime. Even though we may not be perfect vessels, the Holy Spirit will constantly refine and renew us if we submit to His guidance.

In fact, serving God is integral to the path to perfection. By serving, we learn more about Christ and how to be more like Christ. We grow spiritually and are able to better understand the heart of God. By sharing in Christ's work, we shall also share in His glory.

MOVING FORWARD

We are all at different stages in our service to the Lord. However, whether we are thinking about serving God or are currently doubting our own ability to serve, let us remember that since God has called us, it is His will for us to serve Him. And the Scriptures assure us that if we lack wisdom, strength, or zeal, we can ask God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to us (Jas 1:5).

God may call us to different areas of service and may give us differing levels of ability. But one thing is common to all of us—we have all received opportunities to work with Him, to experience His power, His grace, and His abundant blessings. Do not allow the lack of skills or lack of spiritual cultivation to hinder our participation in the ministry. When we resolve to serve the Lord, God Himself will equip us and make us qualified servants. Thus, whenever the Lord calls, let us answer as Isaiah did: "Here I am."

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying:
"Whom shall I send,
And who will go for Us?"
Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."
(Isa 6:8) ⋆

Virtues of Counselors (II)—Be Filled With the Love of God

Based on a lecture series
by Vuthy Nol-Mantia—Dallas, Texas, USA

Christian counseling is very different from secular counseling because it requires us to see things from God's perspective. In the preceding issue, we considered two virtues required of a Christian counselor, namely having the image and the likeness of Christ and having a close relationship with Christ. In addition, we deliberated on the weapons available to us in this spiritual battle—the Word and the Spirit of God. In this issue, we continue to explore the virtues of a counselor. We will consider how counselors for Christ ought to be filled with the love of God.

INTRODUCTION

We may have heard of people who had been counseled by the best counselors but were still unable to receive the help they required. Deeper probing will usually reveal that these people were unable to benefit from the counselling because they could not change themselves. Even our Lord Jesus Christ had such cases. Jesus was the best counselor ever, but there were still moments where His counsel did not convince everyone to follow Him.

A case in point was the young rich ruler who asked Jesus what he ought to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus' response to him was clear: "You must follow the Commandments… Do not steal, do not defraud, do not deceive; honor your mother and your father." Our Lord Jesus then concluded by instructing him, "You must sell everything that you have and give it to the poor, and then follow me" (cf. Mt 19:16–18). But the young man who wanted to enter the heavenly kingdom was short-sighted. He only saw the tangible — his wealth and possessions—which he was unwilling to leave in order to follow Christ (cf. Mt 19:21–22).

Similarly, although we earnestly counsel our brothers and sisters and they themselves recognize God's will for them, they may still make a wrong decision in the end. Regardless of our counselees' response, we should still be there for them and give them our best in their moment of need.

BE FILLED WITH THE LOVE OF GOD

We can only provide the most optimal spiritual counseling if Christ lives in us. Hence, counselors must be filled with the word of God, the Spirit of God, and the love of God. Persevering in the journey of counseling will be difficult if we are not filled with the love of God. Conversely, if we are filled with God's love, which is stronger than death, we will be able to continue loving and helping our brethren.

The Necessity of Godly Love

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (1 Cor 13:1–2)

In 1 Corinthians, Paul gives us a good overview of what being a counselor entails. He reminds us of the necessity for counselors to have love. A counselor may speak with the eloquence of men and of angels but if he does not have love, he becomes nothing but a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal, unable

to bring true spiritual edification to his counselees. Hence, even though we may desire to speak like angels, it is more important to have true love to fuel us as we speak to others. Furthermore, as counselors, we want to be both full of knowledge, and filled with faith. However, even if we had the type of faith that can move mountains, yet fundamentally lack love, we actually have nothing at all.

In contrast, we may have seen brothers and sisters who know nothing about formal counseling techniques encouraging one another. Although these brethren may not speak with the tongues of angels, they are able to motivate others because of their sincere and godly love. For this reason, and in order to perpetuate godly love within the church, those who desire to be good counselors must truly manifest the love of God.

[W]e ought to recognize that it is God's compassion that motivates us; and the love of God which gives us the opportunity to grow. Hence, that particular counseling session that we are involved in is in fact an opportunity for us to manifest the very love that God has shown us and, in turn, shower it upon our counselees.

Personal Sacrifice Possible Because of Love

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. (1 Cor 13:3)

Counseling work can be challenging. There will be times when we feel as if we have given our bodies to be burnt as spiritual sacrifices. However, love enables us to make—and continue to make—personal sacrifices.

For example, being a good counselor requires us to provide an ever ready ear for our brethren. But playing this role can be both tiring and demanding. Sometimes, counselees may call us and ask to talk when we are in the middle of something. Or they may need to speak on the phone for a long time to work through their problems. Unlike career counselors, we cannot tell our brethren to "call back during office hours" or "make an appointment"! So if we did not have love, we would simply not answer the phone.

However, if we are compelled by the love of God to understand that the counselee is calling us because he or she is in great distress and needs someone to talk to, we would answer that call even though we did not know how long that conversation might last. We can do this because we want to emulate our Lord Jesus who had such a punishing work schedule but was moved with compassion to help those in clear physical distress and who cried out for His help.

Paul makes a very strong, yet true proclamation:

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails….
(1 Cor 13:7–8a)

Indeed, a person who is filled with love is able to bear all things through love. A counselor with such love is able to believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things. This love that comes from Christ never fails and enables us to make personal sacrifices. Hence, if we want to be counselors who can help our brothers and sisters, it is imperative for us to be filled with Christ's love.

Love Will Cause Growth

But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ — from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Eph 4:15–16)

The power of love is captured in the verse above. Essentially, love causes growth. We counselors must speak the truth with love to enable the brethren to experience growth. However, we must also be aware that it is important to help our counselees mature in Christ. It is crucial then, to make a distinction between secular and spiritual growth.

The counselor's role is to facilitate spiritual growth in the brethren according to God's will. For instance, it would be much easier for the counselor to just provide a sympathetic ear and politely agree with the counselee's view of his or her situation. But that may not be the best way to help this counselee, especially if the latter has many erroneous or negative thoughts.

We thus need the wisdom and love from above to be able to speak the truth and edify (cf. Prov 25:11). We must be especially careful not to lead them to grow in their pride, selfishness, or anger, as these negative emotions do not edify and are displeasing to God. What a counselor should aim for is godly growth in biblical virtues, according to the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22–23).

Ultimately, when Christians are filled with God's love, it is a win-win situation for the counselor and the counselee, as Paul declares. Everyone will grow up in all things into Him who is the head. This means that the whole body—the church—will be joined and knit together, bringing edification to both the counselee and the counselor; and the church as a whole community will be built up to the glory of God.

God's Love Will Cover a Multitude of Sins

And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will

cover a multitude of sins." (1 Pet 4:8)

In a practical sense, counselors with fervent love for their brethren will find that God's love works both ways. There will be moments in a counselor's work where we are faced with situations of conflict or personal struggle. A true understanding of God's love will enable us to safely navigate through these conflicts.

Firstly, godly love does not mean condoning sin. It would be a mistake if we knew of a brother or sister who has committed sin but did not make an effort to point out their error and chastise them. It would be wrong to tell a brother or sister who has committed sin, "It doesn't matter. Don't worry. God loves you and I love you too. Don't worry about it." This is not the correct manifestation of godly love. Instead, godly love demands that the counselor be courageous and point out the error with the pure love of God.

Secondly, godly love does not mean condescension. Counselors with godly love do not put themselves on a pedestal. We must not think of ourselves as people without weaknesses; we should never counsel others with a judgmental and merciless attitude. In fact, God gives us counseling opportunities so that we can reflect on ourselves and our own weaknesses and realize first of all that God has been gracious to us.

In particular, we ought to recognize that it is God's compassion that motivates us; and the love of God which gives us the opportunity to grow. Hence, that particular counseling session that we are involved in is in fact an opportunity for us to manifest the very love that God has shown us and, in turn, shower it upon our counselees. With such a mindset, we will always be careful not to judge our brethren harshly. This is the kind of love that Peter talked about, a love that would cover a multitude of sins, both for the counselor and the counselee.

The Love of God Gives Us Strength to Continue

God will surely give counselors the strength and power to continue their ministry, because love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things (1 Cor 13:7).

If we consider the prophets in the Bible, we will notice that these workers of God could unremittingly persevere in doing the work of God because God's love motivated them. There was Moses who loved his brethren so deeply he could not bear the thought of them being forbidden to enter the Promised Land. His love enabled him to successfully lead Israel to Canaan despite an arduous forty-year journey. Then there was Nehemiah who was able to lift up the hearts of the chosen people, encouraging them, and stirring them up to rebuild the walls of their beloved city Jerusalem. He was unflagging in his encouragement even though it took a long fifty-two days before his effort bore fruit.

AN INDISPENSABLE VIRTUE

In conclusion, godly love is an indispensable virtue for counselors because it can motivate us in many ways. Love fuels us to continue our counseling work, even when times are trying and the work is tiring. Love is necessary because without it, we would not be able to serve God sincerely, much less for long. Love is important because it enables growth in our brothers and sisters and will cover a multitude of sins. Being a good Christian counselor, therefore, requires us to have the image and likeness of Christ and to manifest His godly love that is cultivated through a close relationship with God. ★

Next on: BE ABLE TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.

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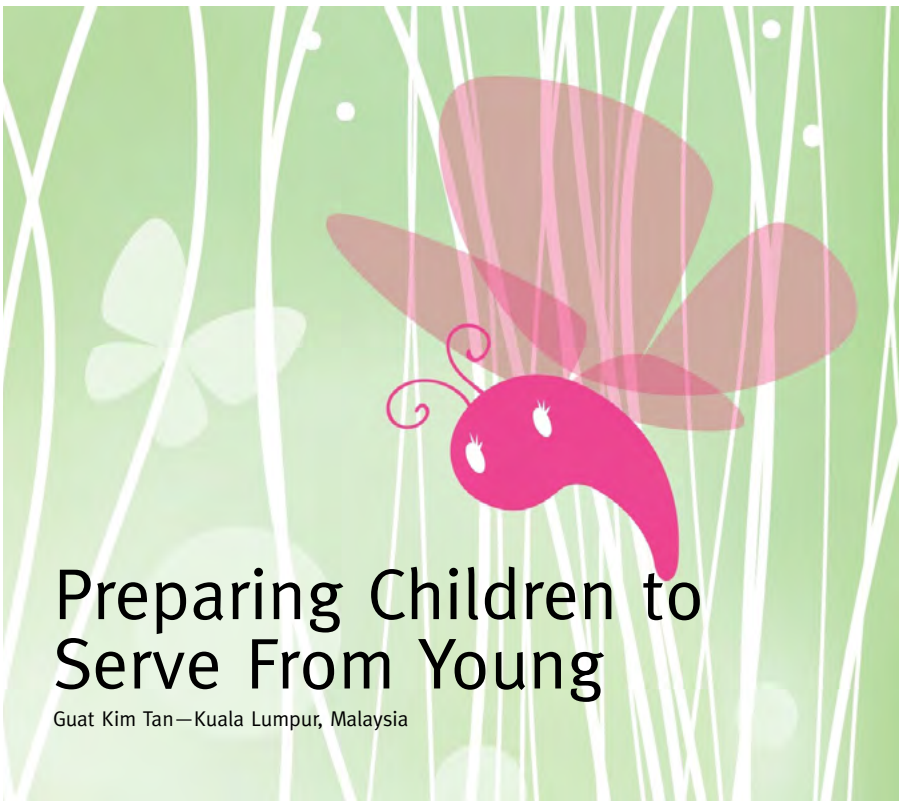


Preparing Children to Serve From Young

Guat Kim Tan—Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. (1 Tim 4:12)

Children are a heritage from the Lord (Ps 127:3), and God expects parents to be stalwart stewards of His children. To ensure they mature into godly Christians, parents have to diligently pursue various positive goals in raising them. Teaching children to serve in the church is one of these major goals. God admonishes parents to prepare and teach their children, early in life, to serve Him in a godly manner and to provide care to others (1 Pet 4:10). Serving must become a part of a child's faith journey—works must move in tandem with faith.

WHAT IT MEANS TO SERVE

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. (Mk 10:45a)

Involving children in church work helps them learn to live the life of a servant, just as Jesus did (Mk 10:45a). It will also help them acquire qualities such as humility, discipline, responsibility, submissiveness, self-respect, and tolerance.

With this understanding, parents have to teach their children to think and see beyond themselves— to focus less on themselves and more on others. Serving will foster the joy of helping, allowing them to demonstrate their love through acts of kindness and service, as they willingly give to accomplish what is good for others and glorify God.

Furthermore, a commitment to serve is also an act of honoring God, which is central to our Christian faith. Teach your children that it is their responsibility to serve and be concerned for members in the church, as well as for those outside the church. Involve children in different aspects of church work. For older children, encourage them to participate in home visits and in children's hospital visits. Encourage them to serve elderly members who are lonely and in need of help. Encourage them to preach to their peers. Be a mentor and a buddy to them. You may also assign them duties such as hymnal or prayer leading and piano playing. For younger children, let them do small tasks first, such as tidying the classroom after lessons and praying for friends and family. Encourage them to share and be a friend to those in need. These will teach them the meaning of responsibility and cultivate a sense of dependability.

SERVE FROM YOUNG

When should we start to train our children to serve? Hannah, the mother of Samuel, brought him to the house of the Lord in Shiloh when he was very young (1 Sam 1:24). She surrendered her son to the Lord and left him in God's care and protection, where he submissively learned to serve. Likewise, we can train children to serve from young.

GROUNDWORK

Parents and Religious Education (RE) teachers play a crucial role in nurturing a child's heart of servitude. This, of course, requires motivation and perseverance. When children serve God, they learn to acknowledge the grace of God in their daily lives and to repay His grace (Ps 116:12). Parents and teachers who guide their children to walk this path can work together to lay a good foundation

of preparing their children to serve. As with all things, commitment from both parties to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit when laying this groundwork is important.

WALK THE TALK

In all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works. (Tit 2:7a)

Personally, I believe that first and foremost, parents have to teach and lead by example, because they are their children's role models (1 Pet 5:3). Children tend to mimic their parents' behavior. Hence, as parents, we need to reflect. Do we serve in church? What can our children learn from us about serving God? If we adopt a lackadaisical attitude when serving, more likely than not, our children will imitate this negative attitude. We may persuade and encourage them to serve, but unless they see us doing likewise, our words carry no weight. Let's be exemplary in our own service, since actions have more impact than words.

SERVE AS A FAMILY

But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. (Jos 24:15b)

Here, Joshua boldly affirmed his faith—he and his family would serve the Lord and live by faith in God. Likewise, parents should stand firm on these words spoken by Joshua. It is their sole responsibility to take the spiritual lead. Moreover, each and every member of the family needs to find a place to serve in church. Serving as a family unites everyone's commitment to God as they jointly pursue a mutual objective of honoring and glorifying Him.

IDENTIFY GIFTS AND ABILITIES

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. (1 Pet 4:10)

God has blessed every child with certain skills and talents. Some may be more gifted and are often thrust into the foreground. But this does not mean that those who are less gifted are to be left behind. Our children need to understand that no one in the church is insignificant and that everybody's service is equally important in God's eyes. God appreciates and honors every sincere and honest service (however unimportant or menial it may seem) rendered to members and to the church.

Parents and RE teachers are responsible for teaching children to use their skills to serve and honor God and those in need. Help our children to identify the spiritual gifts God has given to them. Involve them in areas where they show aptitude and interest so that they can offer their best to God. For example, some children and teenagers love to write or are gifted writers in school. We can nurture and inspire these young writers to utilize their gift to serve God in literary ministry. Encourage them to contribute articles for their local church publications. Teachers can also post their written work on the RE notice boards. In doing so, our children can gain confidence and develop a positive attitude in writing Christian articles to promote the truth. They learn to use these God-given talents for a more important purpose in life and not as a showcase of their abilities.

Involve children in different aspects of church work. ... Be a mentor and a buddy to them. ... For younger children, let them do small tasks first, such as tidying the classroom after lessons and praying for friends and family. Encourage them to share and be a friend to those in need.

SERVE WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. (Col 3:23–24)

Constantly remind our children to serve with the right attitude. Only then will their efforts be fruitful and effective. Ask them to search their hearts and examine their motivation to serve. Is it spiritual fervor, self–esteem, gratefulness to God, or selfish ambitions that motivate their service? What God desires is a consistent service that is God-focused—one that does not succumb to mood or impulse, and a heart that sincerely yearns to serve Him and not to win the praises of men (Eph 6:7). Their service will then glorify God and benefit the church. On the other hand, if their goal is to gain the praise and admiration of others, their service will be insincere and futile. An enthusiastic and fervent worker of God has to develop a Christ-like attitude, characterized by humility and submissiveness.

OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES

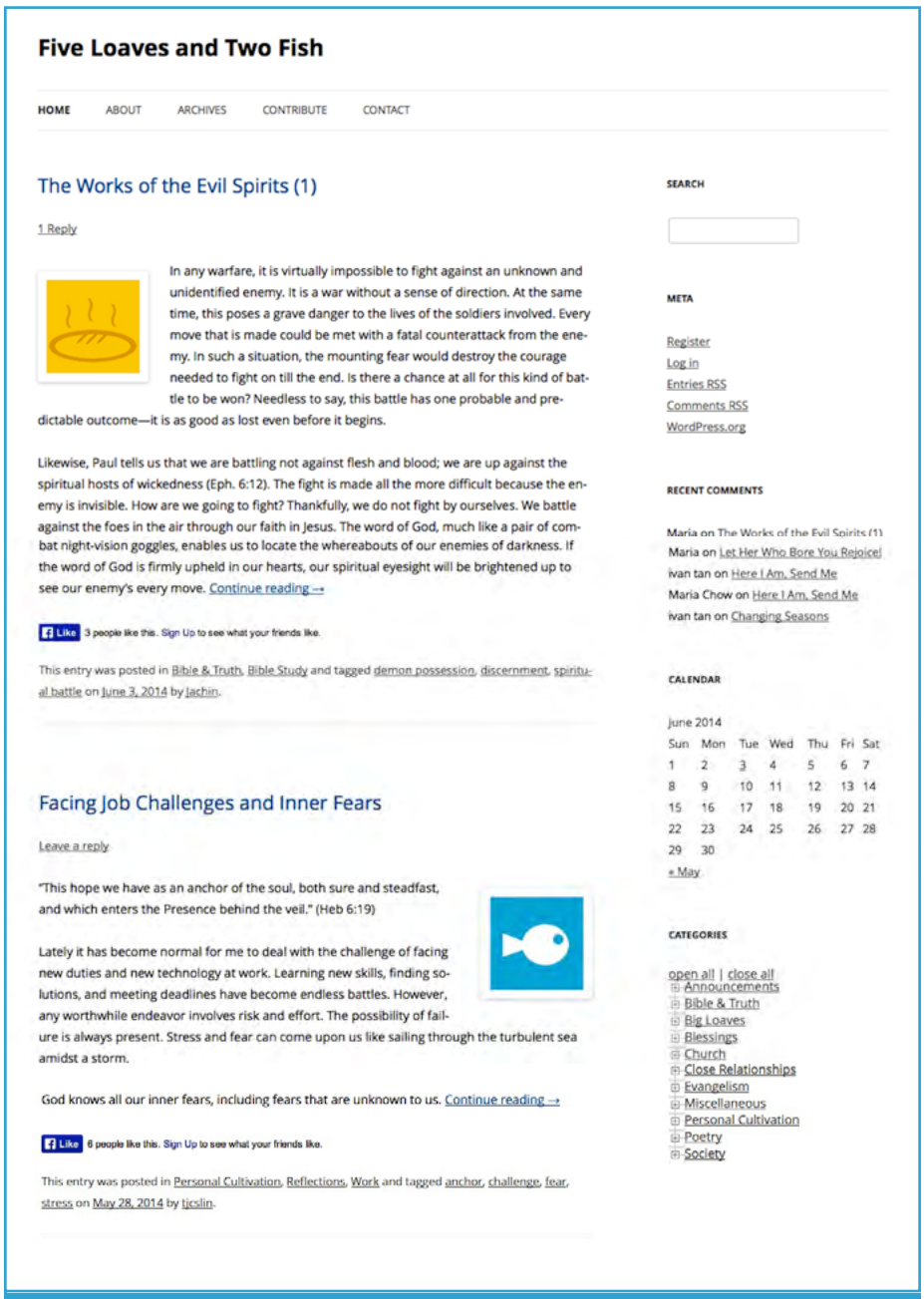
Children, particularly teenagers, are sometimes reluctant to serve in church. They often make excuses such as, "I do not have time." Undeniably, today's young people do live in a demanding world. In some countries, their workload in school is prodigious and their hectic, overloaded schedule of activities eat even further into their remaining time. What little free time they have is often spent on social networking sites or on their mobile phones! Knowing that their children are so busy, parents may feel guilty to ask them to serve in church or help those in need. But if we do not involve children in church work, their commitment and ability to serve God will not develop. Do not allow our children to use "no time" as an excuse. Parents need to cultivate the importance of serving. Let's teach our

children that God has put them here for a purpose—to serve Him and to serve others.

Another reason for inaction and reluctance might be a lack of self-confidence or a fear of inadequacy. This happens when we make unfavorable comparisons between children who are serving the same task. Instead of doing this, parents and RE teachers should constantly reassure and encourage them to pray and put their complete trust in God to overcome their fears and anxieties. A good starting point is to serve together with them and to be their mentors. Pray together and share ideas on how to serve and improve by the strength that God supplies. Imprint in their minds that a service which embodies the earnestness and simplicity of hearts is approved by God. Once children have gained sufficient confidence, they will feel comfortable serving on their own.

LIVING A LIFE OF SERVICE

Raising children to be good servants of God begins at home. Together with RE teachers and church ministers, parents should make a concerted effort to train children to serve from young and nurture the love and joy of serving to ensure that they are well equipped for a lifetime of service. Those who serve when they are young will most probably serve when they are adults. Today's young church workers will indeed be tomorrow's generation of God's stewards who will bring to fruition their pursuit of a lifelong service to God and men—a service that God will surely esteem. ★



Five Loaves and Two Fish
is the True Jesus Church weblog where you can share God-given inspirations and reflections with others for mutual edification and God's glory.

Let the blessings of God flow through you to our site visitors so they can be encouraged to draw closer to God.

Don't hesitate to offer your loaves and fish to the Lord today.

Visit **http://blog.tjc.org** and start reading and contributing!

Manna is looking for certain types of articles, or article genres. Each genre constitutes a different subject matter and writing approach. If you are planning to write an article (regardless of topic), please try to adhere to one of the genres below.

Christian Living
A Christian Living article gives practical biblical guidance on real-life issues and how to use Jesus' teachings in our daily lives.
Article length: 1500-2000 words.

Bible Study
A Bible Study explores a passage or character from the Bible and draws out the teachings for readers to apply to their lives.
Article length: 2000 words.

Doctrinal Study
A Doctrinal Study examines an aspect of True Jesus Church beliefs and may present it in comparison to other beliefs.
Article length: 2000 words.

Exhortation
An Exhortation encourages and admonishes the reader in different aspects of the Christian faith.
Article length: 1500-2000 words.

Testimony
A Testimony recounts an experience in the Lord that will encourage and edify the reader.
Article length: 1000-1500 words.

Creative Writing
Creative Writing pieces include poems, parables, or short stories that illustrate a biblical teaching or idea. Keep in mind as you're writing: how will this edify the reader?

SUBMISSION INFORMATION
Please email electronic files of articles (Microsoft Word) to manna@tjc.org.

Please direct any questions to manna@tjc.org or Fax: +1-562-402-3190

In your submission, please include your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number even if you wish to remain anonymous.

CALL FOR ARTICLES

Author Guidelines and Editorial Calendar

Issue #75:

Topic: Towards Maturity

Articles due: October 1, 2014

Once upon a time, we were dead in sin. But Christ's sacrifice has given us life anew. Since we are spiritually alive, then we ought to spiritually grow. And like any anxious parent, the heavenly Father hopes that we not only grow but attain spiritual maturity, for there is much at stake. The mature will know the right path to take towards eternal life. The immature are easily led astray and quickly devoured by the evil one.

There are thus many critical questions that every child of God can and must ask:

- Do we know what spiritual maturity means and entails?
- How can we correctly assess what stage of growth we are in? Are we infants thirsting for the pure milk of God's word so that this can help us grow or are we the infantile, clinging stubbornly to a liquid diet when we should have long progressed to solid food?
- In physical terms, ageing is inevitable. Is spiritual ageing inevitable too? How can we be both youthful and mature in our faith?

Share with us your insights and precious experiences of daily growth in stature and favor with God and man!

In your submission, please include your name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number.

GENERAL WRITING GUIDELINES

CONTENT

- Content should be biblically sound and adhere to biblical principles.
- Article should be organized and have a logical flow of thought.
- The main point or teaching of the article should be clear to the reader.
- Readers should be able to apply what they have read to their daily lives.

GRAMMAR/STYLE

- Use active instead of passive voice.
- Write concisely.
- Use concrete words and ideas instead of abstract concepts.
- Use "plain old English" instead of obscure, academic language.
- Use the NKJV version when quoting Bible verses.
- Use American spelling, if possible.
- Adhere to the IA Style Guide in its latest edition.

True Jesus Church

Articles of Faith

Jesus the True God

Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh, died on the cross for the redemption of sinners, resurrected on the third day and ascended to heaven. He is the only Savior of mankind, the Creator of the heavens and earth, and the only true God.

Holy Bible

The Holy Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, is inspired by God, the only scriptural truth, and the standard for Christian living .

Church

The True Jesus Church, established by our Lord Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit during the time of the "latter rain," is the restored true church of the apostolic time.

Baptism

Water baptism is the sacrament for the remission of sins for regeneration. The baptism must take place in natural living water, such as the river, sea, or spring. The Baptist, who already has had received baptism of water and the Holy Spirit, conducts the baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the person receiving the baptism must be completely immersed in water with head bowed and face downward.

Holy Spirit

Receiving the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, is the guarantee of our inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

Footwashing

The sacrament of footwashing enables one to have a part with the Lord Jesus. It also serves as a constant reminder that one should have love, holiness, humility, forgiveness, and service. Every person who has received water baptism must have his/her feet washed in the name of Jesus Christ. Mutual footwashing may be practiced whenever is appropriate.

Holy Communion

The Holy Communion is the sacrament to commemorate the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It enables us to partake of the flesh and blood of our Lord and to be in communion with Him so that we can have eternal life and be raised on the Last Day. This sacrament shall be held as often as possible. Only one unleavened bread and grape juice shall be used.

Sabbath Day

The Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week (Saturday), is a holy day, blessed and sanctified by God. It is to be observed under the Lord's grace for the commemoration of God's creation and salvation and with the hope of eternal rest in the life to come.

Salvation

Salvation is given by the grace of God through faith. Believers must rely on the Holy Spirit to pursue holiness, to honor God, and to love humanity.

Last Day

The Lord's Second Coming will take place on the last day when He descends from heaven to judge the world: the righteous will receive eternal life, while the wicked will be eternally condemned.

TRUE JESUS CHURCH CONTACT INFORMATION

For additional information on the True Jesus Church, contact us or visit us on our website. We look forward to hearing from you!

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