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Issue 86:
Go and Make Disciples of All Nations

Are We the Final Restoration?
An Equal Right to Salvation
Overcoming Affliction for the Gospel

True Jesus Church

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Go and Make Disciples of All Nations

Ezra Chong
Bercham, Malaysia

Go and Make Disciples of All Nations

The redemption of all nations was part of God's salvation plan from the beginning of the ages (Eph 3:5–9). From of old, God had revealed to Abraham that he would become father of many nations, and all the nations of the earth would be blessed in him (Gen 12:2; 17:4–6; 18:18). Indeed, it was through Abraham's Seed—Jesus Christ—that salvation was given to all nations (Gen 22:18; Acts 3:25b; Gal 3:8, 14, 16).

After accomplishing the work of salvation, through His death and resurrection, Jesus commissioned His apostles with an important task:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them..." (Mt 28:19a)

As the revived apostolic church in the end times, the True Jesus Church has inherited this commission, and will see it fully realized:

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." (Mt 24:14)

In the Old Testament, "all nations" denotes peoples of different lands, languages, families and nations beyond God's chosen people (see Gen 10:5, 20, 31–32). However, the redeemed multitude in Revelation encompasses people "of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues" (Rev 7:9; also Rev 5:9; 14:6–7). This reflects how Jesus, through the church, shall call "a nation [we] do not know, and nations who do not know [us] shall run to [us]" (Isa 55:4–5; Zech 8:22–23). All nations shall flow to us because we have the truth (Isa 2:2–3).

To become the church of all nations, we need to work on overcoming prejudices towards those from different cultural and religious backgrounds, especially in relation to legalism, customs and cultural practices. We must also ensure that our chosen status does not feed into a sense of superiority, leading to narrow-mindedness towards and disassociation from those we are sent to save (Acts 10:28a; 11:2–3; Gal 2:11–13).

The True Jesus Church makes disciples of all nations through pioneering missionary trips to countries we have yet to reach. But just as important is the preaching in our own backyard. When we preach to migrants in our own country, the gospel can spread, through them, to their family and friends in their native lands. Once the seed is planted, our workers can organize a missionary trip to these places to carry on the work.

Today, spreading the gospel is not just a face-to-face endeavor. As the internet's reach and influence expand, so does the scope of the church's online evangelism, increasing the rate at which the gospel is preached (Rev 14:6–7; 2 Thess 3:1). With this in mind, we must utilize more community outreach volunteers in the internet ministry.

In fact, volunteers are the lifeblood of the church's evangelism work. The Department of World Missions, in both western and eastern hemispheres, must continue to recruit and train more volunteers to serve on volunteer mission committees, as medical personnel on medical missions, and as part of small, mobile evangelistic teams in pioneering areas (Lk 8:1–3; 10:1–2).

The true church is adopting many ways and means to reach out and make disciples of all nations; as members of the church, we should play our part to fulfill this commission. By God's grace, we must, and will, expand and "inherit the nations" (Isa 43:1–3).

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Samuel Kuo
Flushing, New York, USA

Of All Nations for All Nations

As the revived apostolic church of the end times, the True Jesus Church will continue the revival process until the second coming of our Lord Jesus. Isaiah prophesies that this revival will include believers of "all nations" (Isa 2:2; 56:7), but we still have much work to do to increase the ethnic diversity of the church. What lessons can we learn from the apostolic era? How can we strive to become the church for all nations today?

DIVERSITY FROM DAY ONE

From its beginning, the apostolic church was already quite diverse. While the members were all ethnically Jewish, it would be foolish to assume they were a homogenous group.

We know the story of the church's birth well. On the Day of Pentecost after Jesus Christ was crucified, the promised Holy Spirit was poured out upon humanity for the first time in history, fulfilling prophecies and the very words of the Lord Jesus Christ (Joel 2:28–29; Ezek 36:26; Lk 24:49; Jn 15:26–27). The Spirit's manifestation was both visible and audible, filling the whole place with the heavenly sound of speaking in tongues (Acts 2:1–4).

Soon after the initial 120 believers received the Holy Spirit, Scripture says that "Jews, devout men, *from every nation under heaven*" gathered together when they heard the sound (Acts 2:5–6, emphasis added). Geographical diversity was evident.

Not only were these observers from different nations, they also spoke different languages. Sixteen different localities, each with its own implied native language, are mentioned in Acts 2:9–11. Thus, when God opened their ears to understand the spiritual tongues spoken, many commented, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, *each in our own language* in which we were born?" (Acts 2:7b–8, emphasis added). Linguistic diversity was also evident.

Such were the demographics that characterized many of the Jews who would go on to repent, receive baptism, and join the apostolic church (Acts 2:37–41). Those called by the Lord were already a diverse lot.

LESSON 1: EXPECT GROWING PAINS AND BRIDGE THE GAPS

In the church's nascent stage, the differences within the Jewish congregation eventually resulted in

some growing pains:

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

(Acts 6:1)

Though the believers were from different places and spoke different mother tongues, they eventually distilled into two main groups: Hebrews and Hellenists. "Hebrews" refers to the Judean Jews, who were most comfortable communicating in Hebrew and Aramaic. "Hellenists" refers to the Diasporic Jews, who had adopted Greek language and culture. So, even within an ethnically uniform congregation, complaints and divisions arose.

It is likely to be the same today. While ethnic diversity is an important goal, we also need to bridge the gaps and fortify the fellowships within the existing diversity of our present congregations. Though many of our congregations are ethnically near-homogenous, sometimes there are wedges that fracture the congregation, whether it is language, politics, age, or class.

To handle this issue in the early church, the apostles had the members appoint seven members—"men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom"—to serve (Acts 6:3). These men of spiritual character were able to bring about resolution and peace in the congregation, so the word of God could be spread (Acts 6:7).

Today, the church also needs brothers and sisters to serve in this type of reconciliatory role, whether appointed or not. We must work to let Christ's love knit the church together. This takes awareness of church dynamics and a commitment to promoting peace and joy in the Lord. There is bound to be tension sooner or later if every Sabbath sees us huddling in our own cliques, solely focused on the concerns of our own social bubbles. For the growth and diversity of the church, it is imperative to transcend the natural human inclination towards tribalism—socio-economic, political, linguistic, racial, or otherwise. We should reach out to members whom we rarely or never talk to, especially those with backgrounds we may have preconceptions about. Learn about and share each other's culture and language, and put ourselves in their shoes. In this way, with the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, we can build up the fellowship of faith, for the unity in Christ's body.

> *"We still have much work to do to increase the ethnic diversity of the church. What lessons can we learn from the apostolic era? How can we strive to become the church for all nations today?"*

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. With this type of precaution, Paul circumcised Timothy before his second missionary trip (Acts 16:3). A conference had just concluded that circumcision was unnecessary for salvation (more on this later), but Paul circumcised Timothy anyway, so that the Jewish believers would readily accept him. Paul was seeking any advantage possible to minimize conflict, which could hinder the preaching of the gospel. As he proclaims:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews.

(1 Cor 9:19–20a)

Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others." *(Phil 2:4)*

While this was Paul's approach, Timothy was the one who underwent circumcision. His willingness to yield to this painful suggestion for the sake of the ministry is worthy of our admiration. This is the spirit of self-denial we must imitate in order to mitigate the cultural friction within our congregations.

LESSON 2: REACH OUT PROACTIVELY

It was not God's will for the church to only remain in Jerusalem. He allowed the dispersion of many members into neighboring lands through persecution (Acts 8:1; 11:19). Not long after, through Peter's preaching to Cornelius, the church became a church consisting of both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11:18). God also used Paul to expand His kingdom to many Gentile lands (Acts 22:21). By God's design, the church had obtained ethnic diversity. A church of all nations, for all nations, had arrived.

Cornelius' conversion to Christianity was a watershed moment. Whereas Peter and Cornelius' encounter was divinely orchestrated, the whole concept of reaching out to other ethnicities was already developing organically around the same time.

Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus.

(Acts 11:19–20)

Here, Scripture makes a distinction between two groups of evangelists. One only preached to Jews, but the other shared their faith with Hellenists (in this case, referring to non-Jews)—people with different customs, cultures, and backgrounds. This was exemplary, given that they had only recently immigrated to these new lands. God was very pleased with this mindset: "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord" (Act 11:21).

There is a dire need for this missionary mindset in the True Jesus Church today. Jesus Christ commissioned us to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). But how much are we really doing? How much do we have to show for our miraculous call and election?

Often, we are simply too engrossed with fulfilling our own interests rather than expanding the kingdom of God. Though the True Jesus Church is entering more and more nations, more often than not, it is not with a missionary mindset, but with an economically driven one, as our members emigrate for work.

Within Evangelical Christianity, the numbers are enlightening. According to the Joshua Project,[1] a ministry that gathers data relevant to the Great Commission, as of August 2018, an estimated 41.6 percent of the world's 17,000 people groups are still "unreached,"[2] comprising 41.4 percent of the world's population. How much more, then, should we in the True Jesus Church strive to preach to the nations we have yet to reach? While we have many existing Christian resources at our disposal (for example, Bible translations), our members must be compelled and equipped to spread the true gospel of salvation—to learn new languages, to be adequately trained, and to venture to unreached peoples. Make it our aim, like Paul, to preach the gospel where Christ has not yet been named (Rom 15:20). "Freely you have received, freely give" (Mt 10:8b).

Even if foreign missionary work seems too daunting or far-fetched, for those living in countries that welcome immigration, the mission fields are not far at all. Many of us live in heterogeneous societies where the varied people of the world's nations are our next-door neighbors. To borrow an environmental slogan: think globally, act locally. "Behold…lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (Jn 4:35b).

Only when we reach out proactively to the world, even if it is only to those on our doorstep, can we grow to be a church for all nations.

1 www.joshuaproject.net.

2 The Joshua Project defines an "unreached" people group as one in which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize to this people group without outside assistance. Furthermore, less than two percent of this community are Evangelical Christians and less than five percent are Professing Christians. These types of definitions are subjective and arbitrary, but the point is still valid—there are so many unreached people we need to evangelize to.

LESSON 3: EXALT THE TRUTH OF SALVATION ABOVE ALL

In apostolic times, as more Gentile believers were added to the church, a critical controversy arose: did Gentile converts have to receive circumcision and keep the Mosaic Law in order to be saved (Acts 15:1)? Through convening, sharing, debating, and yielding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the elders and apostles determined that there was no need to subject the Gentile converts to circumcision. A letter was distributed to announce this doctrine to the churches (Acts 15:24–29). This strengthened the believers and gave them great joy.

This event illustrates an important principle—the core truth of salvation is to be discerned and exalted within God's church. We all know, understand, and believe in our ten basic beliefs—the Articles of Faith—which summarize the biblical truths of salvation. These truths always are to be preached, defended, and exalted.

However, because of our diverse church membership, certain people and groups may promote other ideas, some of which may sound spiritual in nature, but in fact have nothing to do with salvation (or may even go against salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ). Members are well-intentioned, but the church must be able to discern properly and uphold the truth of salvation, through studying the Scriptures and being led by the Holy Spirit. The True Jesus Church general assemblies in various countries have established Truth Research Committees for this very purpose.

As the church grew more diverse in Paul's day, he reminds them not to allow

"For those living in countries that welcome immigration, the mission fields are not far at all. Many of us live in heterogeneous societies where the varied people of the world's nations are our next-door neighbors. To borrow an environmental slogan: think globally, act locally."

> *“The apostolic church serves as the blueprint of the True Jesus Church. The manner in which they grew in diversity and handled their differences is directly applicable to us today. Let us endeavor unto perfection, building a church of all nations, for all nations.”*

non-essential disputes to divide the church. “Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things” (Rom 14:1). He particularly mentions disputes over food (a vital part of every culture, not only significant to the Jew-Gentile divide) as matters that are not related to the truth of salvation; he thus warns the believers not to judge one another, nor be a stumbling block to others because of food (Rom 14:2–3, 14–15, 20–23). Paul also mentions how some Jewish Christians may still observe various holy days as a sign of piety; they are to be received as well (Rom 15:5–6). Ultimately, Paul encourages us to “pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another” (Rom 14:19). If it means curtailing our own rights and freedom, so be it. “It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak” (Rom 14:21).

Sometimes, it takes direct communication to exalt the truth and promote the spirit of unity. On one occasion in Antioch, Paul noticed that Peter was “not straightforward about the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:14). At the time, since Peter had already been set free by the gospel, he was living “in the manner of Gentiles,” not having to keep the ordinances and statues that were fulfilled in Christ. He was even eating with Gentiles, contrary to Jewish custom. But once the pro-circumcision Jewish Christians came, he disassociated himself from the Gentile believers, making himself a hypocrite in light of the gospel he preached. Paul unabashedly pointed out his hypocrisy in order to exalt the truth (Gal 2:11–14).

ON TO PERFECTION

The apostolic church serves as the blueprint of the True Jesus Church. The manner in which they grew in diversity and handled their differences is directly applicable to us today. Let us endeavor unto perfection, building a church of all nations, for all nations, until John’s magnificent vision is realized:

“[B]ehold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”
(Rev 7:9–10)

An Equal Right to Salvation

Vincent Yeung
Cambridge, UK

Across the world, we are witnessing a growing gap between the super wealthy and the rest of society. Oxfam reports that eighty-two percent of wealth created in 2017 went to the richest one percent, while the poorest half of the human race gained nothing.[1] This extreme imbalance between rich and poor is evident even in the specter of climate change: the effects of greenhouse emissions from more developed countries are wreaking havoc on poorer nations that are ill-placed and ill-equipped to survive extreme weather and rising sea levels.

Those advocating for the powerless against inequality, social injustice and corruption have brought such scandals to wider attention. It is important to fight for justice and equality for all, regardless of gender, race and social status. The question is, if we all deserve the right to life and equal opportunities, what about the right to eternal life?

The human ideal of equality finds a pleasing parallel in the impartial nature of God's love: we are all undeserving of His grace, so we all have an equal right to salvation. With this logic, perhaps Christians of different denominations should not be so uptight about their differences and, instead, celebrate their shared values.

Ecumenism is the culmination of this belief. The ecumenical movement began in 1910 at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh,[2] promoting unity within the Christian world. It seeks to bring diverse groups of Christians together to enact wider social and political change. The ecumenical movement has also gained traction in a broader context, promoting unity across all religions to work towards the common goals of freedom, charity, and peace for all.

TO ADAPT OR BECOME IRRELEVANT?

The liberal, pluralistic Western society champions the moral standards of tolerance and inclusivity. While these principles afford us the freedom to thrive and to worship, political correctness can begin to seep into religious belief, to its detriment. In one

1 "Richest 1 percent bagged 82 percent of wealth created last year – poorest half of humanity got nothing," Oxfam International, January 22, 2018, https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2018-01-22/richest-1-percent-bagged-82-percent-wealth-created-last-year.

2 "Ecumenism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed April 26, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/topic/ecumenism.

BBC radio interview, the interviewer challenged the Christian belief that only faith in Jesus can save, calling this belief offensive. When the Christian interviewee pointed out that it is the teaching of the Bible, the interviewer retorted that this was a matter of opinion. We are now in a relativist, "post-truth" environment, where there is no absolute truth, only opinions. No wonder some Christians try to reconcile the unwavering and timeless teachings of the Bible with the inclusive attitude of liberal society. This leads to the belief that the blessing of Jesus applies to all; that every family of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3; 28:14), and that all flesh shall see the salvation of God (Lk 3:6).

The message of the True Jesus Church has become politically incorrect and diametrically opposed to the general direction of mainstream Christianity. The message of one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God (Eph 4:4–6) is outdated and backwards. The true church is seen as a sect, stuck in the past and irrelevant to the modern world.

And yet, we still carry the commission to preach to the ends of the earth. Should we dilute our message and join wider Christian and interfaith communities to promote social justice? Surely, this openness would not only make our lives easier, but also attract more souls to our fold and quicken our spread throughout the world. Before going down this path, we need to address two questions: Since God is all-loving and merciful, are biblical doctrines irrelevant to salvation? And what is the church's role in making the world a better place?

UNIVERSALISM: RESTORATION OF ALL THINGS

To address the first question, let us look at the concept of universalism—the belief that all human souls will ultimately be reconciled to God, through His divine love and mercy.[3]

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples were eager to find out if the kingdom of Israel would be restored at that time (Acts 1:6). This question was borne of the misconception that the fallen Davidic kingdom (Amos 9:11) would be physically restored on earth. This idea was wholly rejected by Jesus, who emphatically proclaimed that His kingdom is not of this world (Jn 18:36). His kingdom arrived with power, as He foretold (Mk 9:1), when the Holy Spirit established the apostolic church at Pentecost (Acts 2).

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Later, after healing a lame man at the temple, Peter spoke of the "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). This has different connotations, depending on your interpretation. The original Greek is ἀποκατάστασις (*apokatastasis*), meaning "reconstitution, restitution or restoration to the original or primordial condition." The Bible depicts the coming of the Messiah as the inauguration of a utopian period where there is no pain or destruction (Isa 11:6–9; 65:25). Death entered this world through Adam (Rom 5:11–12), but the "gift of righteousness" and "justification of life" came to all men through Jesus (Rom 5:17–18). The concept is clear, but its application is equivocal. Does the restoration of "all things" include the material world, as well as the whole of humankind—the good, the bad, and the indifferent?

According to universalism, the "restoration of all things" applies to all humankind, because God will "gather together in one all things in Christ" (Eph 1:10). God is love, and love never fails (1 Jn 4:8; 1 Cor 13:8). God commanded us to forgive, so if He were to cast sinners into endless punishment, would that not make Him a hypocrite? The punishment of hell depicted in the Bible must be temporary and remedial, not merely punitive, because nothing can overcome the love and compassion of God. Therefore, at some point, all human souls will become holy and know the joys of heaven.

Humanism: Logic and the Sanctity of Life

To understand the concept of universalism, we must recognize its debt to humanism. This is a philosophy that emphasizes the value of human life and individual agency, and that has a positive view of human nature. Modern humanism is fundamentally atheistic, and expresses itself in these terms:

> *Humanists are people who shape their own lives in the here and now, because we believe it's the only life we have. We make sense of the world through logic, reason, and evidence, and always seek to treat those around us with warmth, understanding, and respect.*[4]

These uplifting ideals have not only influenced society but also permeated the hearts and minds of modern Christians. This has led some Christians to reassess the Bible and their faith in a new light. They ask: How can an absolutely loving God be absolutely just—rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked (Rom 2:6–8)—at the same time? How could a merciful God allow the poor souls of sinners to suffer eternal torment?

To such Christians, the traditional teaching of heaven and hell has become irrelevant. To satisfy their human logic, these Christians attempt to bridge the perceived gap between God's righteousness and mercy. The result is the belief that, at some stage, all believers, non-believers, sinners and saints will be forgiven and saved. Nothing is impossible for God, and in the big scheme of eternity, even a billion millennia would still be temporary. This

3 Alan Richardson and John Bowden, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 591.

4 Humanists UK website, accessed April 26, 2018, https://humanism.org.uk/.

> *"Biblically, the concept of universalism does not hold up. If everyone will eventually receive salvation and enter the kingdom of God, what is the point of preaching the gospel, and with such urgency?"*

is a comforting thought, but is it based on sound biblical teaching?

Contradictions: Theories Falsely Called Knowledge

Paul reminded Timothy to guard the faith by "avoiding…contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" (1 Tim 6:20). Persuasive though it is, universalism is an unproven theory. Much of its reasoning comes from the Scriptures, but we know that even the devil quotes the Scriptures (Lk 4:10–11). Throughout the ages, humankind has attempted to rationalize God's nature and deeds, using human logic to explain any apparent contradictions. They either invent new language to blur or distract from the issue, or find some other way to explain it.

A classic example of this relates to Jesus' dual nature—His simultaneously human and divine status as both the seed of David, according to the flesh, and the Son of God (Rom 1:3–4). In contemplating how the divine could exist in fallen flesh, the human mind has conceived such ideas as docetism and adoptionism. The former is the belief that Jesus' body was not human, but some kind of phantom; He only appeared to suffer, while not experiencing physical pain. The latter is the belief that Jesus was merely a man, but was adopted by God because of His virtue. Not only are both of these theories heresies, they also fail to explain the so-called contradictions in Jesus' nature, which is ultimately a mystery beyond human conception.

THE WORD OF GOD IS ABSOLUTE

One Path to Salvation

Humans have a tendency to play with words to make unpleasant truths more palatable. God's word, on the other hand, is absolute and immutable. When it comes to salvation, the Bible is unequivocal: "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The only way to find God and salvation is through Jesus; as Jesus Himself said, "No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn 14:6). In simple terms, no religion except Christianity can lead man to God.

Further, Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21). Jesus foretold that many would enter the broad gate leading to destruction, and that few would enter the narrow gate leading to life (Mt 7:13–14). These verses indicate that not all Christians will be saved. In fact, Jesus declared, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). It is clear that one needs to meet certain conditions in order to enter God's kingdom. Whether one is saved or condemned (Jn 3:16; 5:29) depends on one's actions. No amount of euphemism can nullify the gravity of God's word.

There are Christians who accept that hell is a final destination, but argue that God would not allow the suffering of sinners to be eternal—they would just eventually cease to exist. This belief is called annihilationism. Again, this attempt to cast God's judgement in a "friendlier" light is misguided. The Greek word translated as "perish" (ἀπόλλυμι, *apollumi*)[5] can indeed mean "total destruction," but the word translated as "destruction" (ἀπώλεια, *apóleia*)[6] also has connotations of being "completely cut off." The latter better describes the "torments in Hades" experienced by the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:23; cf. 2 Thess 1:9).

5 John 3:16; 2 Thessalonians 2:10.
6 Matthew 7:13; Romans 9:22; Philippians 3:19.

The Urgency of the Gospel

Biblically, the concept of universalism does not hold up. If everyone will eventually receive salvation and enter the kingdom of God, what is the point of preaching the gospel, and with such urgency?

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 3:2; 4:17; cf. Mt 10:7; Mk 1:15). This phrase is repeated throughout the Gospel books, and the message is clear: the kingdom is near and hearers must respond immediately, believe and come to the light (Jn 3:18–20). If universal salvation had been accomplished through Christ's death on the cross, there would be no need to proclaim the gospel to all creation. There would be no need to preach that "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16; also see Mt 28:19–20). We would all be able to sit back and relax because, at some point in the future, everything and everyone, including Satan, will be restored. There would be no need for Jesus to point out the many criteria for being saved and the difficulty of entering the kingdom (Mt 18:3, 35; Lk 13:3, 5; Jn 3:5; 6:53; 13:8; 15:4; Mt 19:23). And there would be no need to cultivate our salvation with "fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12).

Contend for the Truth

Salvation is, indeed, open to all humankind, since Jesus sacrificed Himself "once for all" (Rom 6:10; Heb 7:27; 9:12; 10:10). But does that mean we can continue to do and believe whatever we like, and still expect to receive salvation?

If doctrinal disputes are redundant, why did Jude encourage us to "contend earnestly for the faith" (Jude 1:3)? Why would Paul be willing to suffer in order to defend the faith (2 Cor 11:26–27; Gal 5:11; 1 Cor 15:20)? Why would he encourage Timothy to "hold fast the pattern of sound words," keep "that good thing which was committed to you," and "commit these [things] to

faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 1:13–14; 2:2)? If there is no resurrection, if Christ has not come in the flesh, and if circumcision is required for salvation (1 Cor 15:12–13; 1 Jn 4:3; Gal 5:3), why would the apostles dispute these beliefs? Why would the apostles warn against sin and unrighteousness if they were of little consequence (Rom 6:1–2; 1 Cor 6:9)?

The fact is that the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). The church is not a cafeteria where you can pick and choose items according to your personal taste.

Do not be mistaken—in Matthew 25:46, "everlasting" punishment and "eternal" life are both based on the same Greek adjective: αἰώνιος (*aiónios*). Paul also describes the punishment as "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess 1:9). In this verse, the original Greek word for "destruction" (ολεθρον, *olethron,* "ruination") does not imply "extinction," but total and everlasting separation from the Lord and His glory. There is no way back.

The truth and validity of God's words remain the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Human theories and logic have no place if they contradict the teaching of the Bible. The Bible does not change, and neither does the message of the true church.

THE SOCIAL MISSION OF ECUMENISM

To address the question of what the church's role in society should be, let us examine the forces driving the ecumenical trend. Given that modern society has become more liberal and pluralistic, and churches are seeing a decline in membership, it seems Christianity needs to become more relevant to attract believers. The most obvious method of reinvention is to downplay traditional doctrines in favour of something everyone can agree on: social justice, making the world a better place, and providing charity to those in need. By emphasizing the endeavors and issues they are similarly passionate about, theologically divergent groups can be drawn together.

Many Christians who interpret the Bible strictly hold a strong pro-life stance, a traditional view of family, a commitment to care for the homeless and sick, and a desire to see justice in the world. It would make sense for these Christians to set aside their differences to create a global organization to push for the change they wish to see in the world. But should the true church join with other churches to promote such charitable causes?

As a church, we should not forget our responsibility to care for our members and broader society. When there is a natural disaster, the church should address the immediate needs of those suffering and comfort the bereaved. But we should not forget the primary mission of the church: to preach the gospel of salvation. Jesus, out of compassion, healed all kinds of sickness and disease (Mt 4:23; 9:35), performed miracles to feed the crowds (Mt 14:14–21; 15:32–38), and, when He sent out the twelve, commanded them to heal the sick, cleanse lepers and raise the dead (Mt 10:8). But we should note that He always prioritized preaching the gospel above addressing the physical needs of the people (Mt 10:7–8).

The Spiritual Mission of the Church

When Jesus' anointing at Bethany is retold, the emphasis is often placed on the woman's unreserved sacrifice for Jesus—her willingness to give up a precious flask of costly fragrant oil. But notice the reaction of the disciples, who indignantly asked, "Why this waste?" (Mt 26:8).

Today, we could point to the many hours spent on church administration: repetitive discussions about human and financial resources, fundraising for local church buildings, event schedules, and so on. The humanitarian efforts of our church fall into this list, and, just as Jesus reminds us that we will always have the poor (Jn 12:8; Mt 26:11), these administrative and humanitarian tasks will continue indefinitely.

We need to pray for the wisdom of Mary—to be able to serve God unreservedly and in a timely manner (Jn 12:3, 7; Mt 26:12). The Bible tells us that the angels rejoice over one repentant sinner (Lk 15:10), not when a road is built or a well is dug in a developing country, and not when a food bank is stocked in the developed world. Time is short and opportunity is fleeting (Rom 13:12; Jn 12:35–36), so we should preach the gospel while it is still day.

> *It is the gospel that judges; it is the gospel that evokes and demands a response. Jesus' salvation is effective only for those who believe, and restoration is granted only to those who respond.*

CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF LOGIC

Proponents of universalism would have us believe that we will all be saved eventually. But the apostle Peter tells us to "be even more diligent to make [our] call and election sure," to secure our entrance into the "everlasting kingdom" (2 Pet 1:10–11). Our salvation is not a given. The Bible warns us not to be swayed by philosophy and vain deceit, beguiled by persuasive words, or carried about by strange doctrines (Col 2:8, 4; Heb 13:9; Eph 4:14).

This diverse and liberal society is the ideal environment for wide-ranging ideas to flourish, but True Jesus Church members should beware of human philosophies creeping into their faith. These philosophies can seem logical and persuasive, but they are not the truth of God. For example, consider the well-known philosophical conundrum: can the Omnipotent God create an immovable object that even He cannot move? By the logic of this conundrum, no matter if the answer is yes or no, God's omnipotence is disproved. This logic is circulatory and hermetically sealed. But God cannot be reduced to fit a human definition of omnipotence; it is not possible to apply cold logic to God's nature and existence.

God says, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion" (Rom 9:15), yet humans judge this to be unfair. God says, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14) and calls Himself "the Alpha and the Omega" (Rev 22:13), yet humans yearn to remake God in their own image. We are His creatures, and should remember that we cannot question His sovereignty (Rom 9:20).

Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn 14:6). There is only one body, one hope, one faith and one baptism (Eph 4:4–5), and only those who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 7:21). From a human perspective, these words are offensive to members of other religions and Christian denominations; but to believers, they are words of salvation. We do not condemn those who do not believe and remain in darkness. It is the gospel that judges (Jn 12:46–48; 3:18); it is the gospel that evokes and demands a response. Jesus' salvation is effective only for those who believe, and restoration is granted only to those who respond (Jn 3:19–20). With this knowledge, believers of the gospel should not hold back, but go forth confidently to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19).

Peter Shee
Singapore

Are We the Final Restoration?

The Bible is about God and His covenant people, whom He had chosen from before the foundation of the world (Deut 7:6–9; Eph 1:4) and who will enjoy everlasting fellowship with Him in the new heavens and the new earth (Isa 65:17–18; 66:22). This is more than a return to Eden, in that our bodies will be transformed through God's redemptive program, and death utterly defeated by resurrection. The original creation, with the son of God created out of dust, is finally and permanently restored.

ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

Israel was the Old Testament elect. The church—comprising Jews and Gentiles—is the New Testament elect.

God's eternal purpose—our election in Christ (Eph 3:11; 1:4–11)—unravels in time and space through Abraham and his seed (Gen 12:7; 13:15; 24:7). The repeated use of the singular "seed" in the Genesis narrative is explained by Paul as a reference to Christ, in whom we receive the status of co-heirs (Gal 3:16, 29; Rom 8:17). The story of Israel, and God dwelling among them, is thus a pattern for the church. This is further attested by the allusion to Isaac and Jerusalem (Gal 3:22–28).

The exodus from Egypt resulted in the birth of Israel as a nation, with God dwelling in their midst (Ex 25:8; 29:45–46; Lev 26:11–12). The divine Presence in the tabernacle was evident throughout the wilderness journey and later in Solomon's temple (Ex 40:34–38; 1 Kgs 8:10–11). Likewise, the church as the "dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Eph 2:22) is filled with glory.

We then see a progression in the way God dwells among His people—from a physical sacred space in the tabernacle within the camp, to a physical temple within the city of Jerusalem, and finally, under the new covenant, God dwells directly within the redeemed human community itself. This is described by Peter as a "spiritual house" built up with "living stones" (1 Pet 2:5).

The chosen people in the Old Testament were known as the "assembly [*qahal,* Hebrew] of God" (Neh 13:1; Deut 23:3). The Hebrew *qahal* for "assembly" is conceptually identified with the Greek *ekklesia,* translated as "church" in the New Testament. Hence, when Jesus

establishes a new covenant with us, He re-organizes a new assembly of the chosen, comprising both Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2: 11–18; 3:6, 10), which He calls "My church" (Mt 16:18).

THE CHURCH'S ONE FOUNDATION

God's church in the New Testament is founded on the works of Jesus Christ and apostolic teaching.

Towards the end of the apostolic era, sectors of the church were only alive in name but were in fact dead, and others were ready to die (see Rev 3:1–2). The post-apostolic church went through considerable syncretization. Simple home gatherings centered on prayer and the Scriptures (Acts 2:42) gradually morphed into elaborate liturgies with incense, candles and even images. Daily prayers in the temple (Acts 2:46–47) were replaced with daily rituals in buildings filled with icons and statues. Baptism in natural living water was brought indoors and embellished with ritual; with this deviation from scriptural prescription, the sacred ordinance became divested of the efficacy of Christ's blood brought about by the Holy Spirit. Receiving the Holy Spirit evidenced by glossolalia—speaking in tongues—was substituted with ritual conferment of the Spirit through the imposition of hands by bishop or priest.

But revival would certainly take place, for Jesus Himself declared that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail" against the church founded on solid rock (Mt 16:18). The solid foundation, the works of Jesus Christ completed in His lifetime and enshrined in apostolic teaching, was fully laid during the apostolic era (Eph 2:20). Thankfully, the form of doctrine, the pattern of sound words (Rom 6:17; 2 Tim 1:13), has been perfectly preserved in the canon of the Scriptures, comprising the Old and New Testaments. The apostle Peter attests that apostolic doctrine, or the New Testament, is built upon the Old Testament, and is in fact the sole interpretive authority for the Old Testament. This is because Jesus, as the beloved Son who came to fulfill Old Testament Scriptures, speaks with final authority (2 Pet 1:16–21; 1 Cor 15:1–4; Heb 1:1–2).

Since the foundation of the church is Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures, revival does not involve laying the foundation all over again. Nothing needs to be added to Christ's work or to the Bible, and the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3) can be rediscovered within the pages of the Holy Writ. We just have to build on the existing foundation. The church is revived once we return to the Bible, specifically to the gospel that accords with apostolic doctrine in its fullness. Baptism in Jesus' name, as preached by the apostles, traces its roots to the Old Testament ablutions and makes the important link to real effective cleansing based on the Old Testament concept of atoning blood (Heb 6:1–2; 10:19–22). With the return to efficacious biblical baptism comes the promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38); thus, members of the revived apostolic church only need to ask in faith to receive the Holy Spirit, with tongue-speaking as evidence.

THE TEMPLE AND THE CHURCH

God's church—typified by the latter temple—is built over two stages: foundation-laying during the apostolic era, and revival in the present era.

Intrinsic to our affirmation that we are the revived true church is that we are the final restoration, leading to the consummation of all things. But how can we be assured of this? Understanding biblical prophecy is the key to discerning the times. Interestingly, in Matthew Chapter 16, Jesus mentioned the signs of the times and the sign of Jonah just before talking about building His church (Mt 16:2–4). He then moved on to announce His death and resurrection (Mt 16:21) as well as His kingdom (Mt 16:28, 19). Clearly, the sign of Jonah is the sign of His resurrection, the most important milestone in God's restoration of Israel.

The resurrected body of Christ is identified with the church as a body of believers resurrected in Christ through baptism (Eph 1:20–2:1; Col 2:12). The unmistakable link between the temple and the church, uttered by Jesus Himself (Jn 2:19–22), was well understood by New Testament writers (Eph 2:19–21; 1 Cor 3:6; 2 Cor 6:16; Rev 21:2, 10, 22). They saw the church in their era as the real temple, fulfilling the shadows of Old Testament temple rites (Heb 8–10) as well as exilic and post-exilic prophecies about God dwelling with His people (2 Cor 6:16; Ezek 37:27–28; Zech 8:8–9). Since the body of Christ is the real temple made without hands, it will last till the end of time; it will not be destroyed and there should be no need for rebuilding. As explained earlier, despite the downward spiral of the post-apostolic church, the dark ages of apostasy, and the current fragmentation of denominations, the foundation remained intact. The finished work of Jesus Christ cannot be undone, and the Bible has perfectly preserved the apostolic exposition of salvation by the cross.

Exilic and post-exilic prophets projected into the distant future in their prophecies surrounding the second temple. Careful study in this regard gives us a clear picture of how the True Jesus Church fits in.

"I will shake heaven and earth...I will shake all nations...and I will fill this temple with glory. ...The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former." *(Hag 2:6–9)*

This prophecy does not refer to the temple Zerubbabel built, but to a future temple built with living stones—in

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> *"The foundation that was laid through the apostles was preserved in the Scriptures. And in God's own time, He brought about a revival, with the True Jesus Church continuing to build upon the apostolic foundation."*

other words, the church of Jesus Christ to whom salvation came (1 Pet 1:10–12; 2:5), whose foundation was laid during the apostolic age (1 Cor 3:10–11; Eph 2:20). The fact that the apostolic project did not promptly result in a worldwide spread of the gospel and the destruction of Gentile kingdoms (Hag 2:20–22; Zech 14:8–9,17–19) is no reason to doubt that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed commissioned by God, whose disciples constitute the eternal temple to which all Gentiles will turn (Acts 5:38–39). The Jews stumbled at a crucified Messiah, because they did not understand that He shall come a second time in glory. Thus, we should learn to recognize the two stages in the construction of the church: the foundation-laying stage during the apostolic age, and the revival stage in our times. Only at the end of revival will the church have greater glory than Solomon's temple—when she shall be adorned for her husband, reflecting the very glory of God (Rev 21:2, 10–11). Since death could not restrain the crucified Christ (Acts 2:24), the church would certainly be revived in time, even though she seemed to have descended into abysmal doom after the apostolic age.

ZERUBBABEL AND TEMPLE-REBUILDING

Zerubbabel eventually completed the second temple, despite some temporary disruption. In the same way, Jesus Christ, who raised the True Jesus Church as the revived apostolic church, will surely bring the restoration to its completion.

As the temple-rebuilding was used prophetically to refer to the church being the final dwelling place of God, we must pay attention to the key figure, Zerubbabel, who led the delegation of rebuilders to Jerusalem for this great task (Ezra 2:2; 3:8). Of Davidic descent, he was made governor of Judah (Hag 2:2; Mt 1:1, 12).

Concerning Zerubbabel, the word of the Lord came to Haggai, saying: "I will take you, Zerubbabel My servant, the son of Shealtiel...and will make you a signet ring; for I have chosen you" (Hag 2:23). This is of utmost significance, because Zerubbabel was a descendant of the second last king of Judah, of whom the Lord through Jeremiah declared:

"[T]hough Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were the signet on My right hand, yet I would pluck you off. ...
For none of his descendants shall prosper,
Sitting on the throne of David,
And ruling anymore in Judah."
(Jer 22:24, 30)

Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, was never installed king over Judah. Hence, Haggai's prophecy of the choice signet refers to a later fulfillment in the Messiah, whose virgin birth averted the curse upon Coniah. Hence, "the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Lk 1:30–33).

As for the temple, Zerubbabel's hands were frustrated after the foundation was laid, and the work ceased for about fifteen years (Ezra 4:4–5, 23–24). Nevertheless, the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah brought about a revival and the rebuilding work resumed (Ezra 5:1–2). Likewise, throughout the worst of times encountered by the post-apostolic church, the foundation that was laid through the apostles was preserved in the Scriptures. And in God's own time, He brought about a revival, with the True Jesus Church continuing to build upon the apostolic foundation. Therefore, the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel is especially applicable to us today:

"Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit...
Who are you, O great mountain?
Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain!
And he shall bring forth the capstone
With shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!' "
(Zech 4:6–7)

Looking at the trajectory of the apostolic church's rise and fall, some may wonder whether the True Jesus Church will also and eventually fall away from the truth. The answer is that we will not if we are truly the continuation of the work of the eschatological Zerubbabel—Jesus Christ—building on the very foundation He laid when He first established His church (Eph 2:20). Since the gospel of salvation we preach is the very "faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), then we can claim the Scripture saying: "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands shall also finish it" (Zech 4:9)!

Adapted from sermons by
Derren Liang
Irvine, California, USA

Building a Strong Evangelism Team

Editor's note: This article is based on a series of lectures delivered by Preacher Liang at National Evangelical Workers' Workshop in February 2017 at Baldwin Park, California, where he shared practical advice for building a committed evangelism team.

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."
(Mt 9:35–38)

Our Lord Jesus instructed His disciples to preach the gospel. This Great Commission now rests on members of the True Jesus Church. We have to preach the salvation gospel to the world and, to do this effectively, we must have strong evangelism teams. What lessons does the Bible provide on how to select members for these teams, and what these teams should do?

WHO SHOULD BE IN THE TEAM?

Choose Impartially

The first thing to note when building a team is that we should not exclude anyone merely because of their cultural background. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy were all part of the evangelism team during the apostolic period (1 Thess 1:1) although they had very different upbringings. Silvanus grew up within traditional Jewish culture, while Paul, also a Jew, was educated under the tutelage of Gamaliel. Timothy was a Jew who grew up in the Gentile regions. Differences can be strengths. In particular, the varied skillsets, experiences and backgrounds of believers can and ought to be tapped to build a good evangelism team. A diverse team will bring different perspectives

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and considerations, enabling richer discussions and work approaches.

Choose Those with Right Mindset and Motivation

Second, in selecting evangelism team members, choose those who will serve with the right motivation.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples returned from Mount Olivet to Jerusalem and stayed in the upper room (Acts 1:12–15). There, 120 people, including the women who followed Jesus, His mother Mary and His brothers, gathered to pray for the Holy Spirit. These 120 represented the core of the church, and within this core group, there were three sub-groups of believers who can provide lessons on the correct motivations of service.

1. The apostles: the gift of service

The apostles were personally trained by the Lord Jesus and assigned specific responsibilities, one of which was the critical task of passing on the complete truth that Jesus had taught them (Mt 28:20). Today, when we work for the Lord, we are also assigned duties. It is important that we have a sense of responsibility, but we must guard against having this deteriorate into a mere sense of obligation. The Almighty God can accomplish things on His own. Yet, He shows us grace by providing us this privilege to participate in His work. Hence, we must never view these duties as burdens to be grudgingly borne. Viewing our service to the Lord as a great sacrifice reveals the immaturity of our faith; we do not realize how very blessed we are to be His servants. So, if we have been entrusted with the responsibility of serving in church, to be used by God, we should consider this a blessing and be joyful and thankful.

2. The women: out of gratitude

The women who followed Jesus had received bountiful blessings from Him, so they served Him out of deep gratitude. Believers who are grateful for the Lord's love will have a natural desire to reciprocate, needing little persuasion to serve. Of the ten lepers Jesus cleansed, only one returned to give glory to God because he was filled with gratitude. Mary, who had seven demons cast out of her, not only followed and served Jesus, but also offered financial resources to support the ministry, because Jesus had given her a new lease of life. Service motivated by gratitude is powerful. An evangelism team underpinned by such grateful service will truly be effective (2 Cor 5:13–14). In contrast, we should be cautious of compelling reluctant members to join the evangelism team. As we can see from our social or work interactions, when one is not driven by genuine motives, one may end up just contributing superficially or undermining the organization (Acts 8:18–21; cf. Ex 25:2).

> *"We should seek those who accept their assigned sacred duties with joy and humility; who are grateful for the blessings of the Lord; and who are moved by their understanding of God."*

3. The family of Jesus: recognition of the Master

Jesus' mother, Mary, had recognized earlier that Jesus was truly God (Lk 2:19, 51), and, by this time, the rest of His family had also come to know this truth. Today, if we recognize and remember that the One we serve is the Almighty God in heaven, we would carry out God's work diligently.

So, in summary, what are the right attitudes to look out for when recruiting members of an evangelism team? We should seek those who accept their assigned sacred duties with joy and humility; who are grateful for the blessings of the Lord; and who are moved by their understanding of God.

Choose Those with the Right Attributes

Third, we must choose those who have the right attributes according to biblical principles.

When the apostles selected seven men to serve tables, they did not just select randomly. Nor did they seek those with administrative abilities. Instead, they sought out "men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3). These three prerequisites are a good basis for selecting workers to form part of the evangelism team.

1. Good reputation

Paul reminded Timothy, "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). Good reputation is earned through good conduct. From the Bible, we can see how important it was for God's servants to maintain a good reputation (see Acts 20:33–35).

2. Filled with the Holy Spirit

Someone filled with the Holy Spirit is also filled with the love of God, because the Holy Spirit pours God's nature—love—into his heart (Rom 5:5). When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, it is a joy to serve the Lord, and to bring God's word and love to others. We are also filled with courage, not fear (2 Tim 1:7).

3. Wisdom

Having wisdom from the Holy Spirit aligns our perspective with God's. We need this wisdom to lead the church on the right path. Disagreements may arise in church because members from different backgrounds will have different perspectives on matters. But the matters of the church are actually the matters of God and, if we are filled with God's wisdom and are aligned with His perspective, we will be able to find consensus when making decisions. For example, many Christian churches today use various secular means to attract the younger generation—contemporary, upbeat music performed by rock bands are employed to liven up worship services. Wisdom from above will help us discern that adopting such secular approaches is not correct, no

matter how well-intentioned. Wisdom from above will help us remember that the True Jesus Church should continue to rely on only three things to draw man to God: the truth, the Holy Spirit and the love of God.

Include God-fearing Pillars

Fourth, while we tap into the diverse gifts and experiences of different team members, we should include pillars of the church—stable and godly believers who will not easily fall or crack under pressure. The apostle Paul describes James, Cephas and John as pillars of the church (Gal 2:9).

A key identifier of these pillars is that their strength lay in the Lord. Paul exhorted Timothy to be strong in the grace of God (2 Tim 2:1). As humans, we are weak, and it is only through the grace of God that we can accomplish anything. Pillars remain humble throughout their service, regardless of how significant their past evangelistic achievements. In fact, the more truth-seekers we bring to church, the more humble we should become. This is because we soon realize that no matter how eloquent we are, we cannot make someone believe. If God is willing, He will move their hearts to accept Him. When we recognize and understand this, we will learn to humbly rely on and find strength and courage in Him.

WHAT SHOULD BE THE TEAM'S WORK APPROACH?

Casting and Mending Nets

And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."...Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets.

(Mt 4:18–19, 21a)

In these verses, we see two persons casting nets and another two mending them. Which is more important—casting or mending? Casting a net with a big hole may initially sweep in many fish, but they will likely escape. Conversely, if we have a well-mended net but do not cast it out, we will not catch any fish either.

For an evangelism team to do its work well, it must first mend its broken nets. What are these nets made of? The first component is love, because without love we will not be able to attract others. The second is the power of God, because it is this power—experienced through the Holy Spirit and prayer—that causes newcomers to stay in our church. The third is unity, which we need to successfully carry out God's. If an evangelism team is equipped with these—love, power and unity—it will become a very strong force and, through the grace of God, will catch many fish.

Remaining Committed

After Isaac moved to Beersheba, "he built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD, and he pitched his tent there; and there [his] servants dug a well" (Gen 26:25). These three actions alone tell us a lot about Isaac's priorities. Firstly, Isaac built an altar, which was to establish his life of faith; secondly, he pitched a tent, which was to invest in his family life; and thirdly, he dug a well, which was to continue his livelihood.

Isaac's priorities also highlight his commitment to his God. Today, commitment means we will dedicate a portion of our time to God. Committing ourselves to the work of evangelism requires a re-balancing of our lives, which, given the number of demands on our time on any given day, may seem like a difficult task. But if we truly have the heart, God will provide the means.

THE CHURCH WORKS WITH THE EVANGELISM TEAM

We mentioned earlier that evangelism is not just about casting nets to catch fish, but, importantly, also about mending nets to ensure the fish are brought to shore. While the evangelism team does its work with love, reliance on the Holy Spirit, and unity, the entire church must also do its part by considering what it is that really attracts people to the body of Christ.

If we use activities to attract newcomers, then the latter will lose interest when such activities end. If we rely on certain members to keep truth-seekers returning, what will happen if those members move away or even leave church? The force attracting people to church should be God Himself—it is God who draws believers to Him (Jn 6:37, 44, 65).

Beyond bringing people in, we need to help them remain in church. If truth-seekers and newly-baptized members are unable to become part of the fabric of the church, they will easily stray. We need to focus on making the church, the body of Christ, more welcoming. But how can we transform the church in this way?

Acts 2:42 records how the believers "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." As a result, their preaching prospered, and "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Let us look at how these four factors can create a welcoming environment for truth-seekers.

Steadfast in the Apostles' Doctrine

When newcomers attend church, they should be entering an environment that feels different from the rest of society. Otherwise, what reason would they have to come? The difference should lie not only in that we pray in tongues, but also in our concepts, values and

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perspectives—all of which should be biblically-based. Every word in the Bible is good for us; God's word is perfect and the source of all wisdom. As such, the pattern of God's word must be held fast and protected (2 Tim 1:13–14). We do not retain newcomers just by talking incessantly and superficially about God's love. Instead, we help them grow in knowledge so that they can discern heresies when the time comes.

The word of God must also be applied. The apostle Paul reminded the young evangelist Timothy: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17). If we study the Bible in depth and systematically, and follow its teachings, we will indeed be transformed. Conversely, if there are believers who have attended church for decades but are not transformed, it is because they still hold on to concepts, values and definitions of success that are no different from those of the world. These believers have not applied the word of God in their lives and built themselves up in the most holy faith (Jude 20–21).

Steadfast in Fellowship

To have fellowship is to join together, to focus on God and share our faith. A common misconception is to associate fellowship with conducting many activities. Unless these activities are centered on God, they fall short of the definition of true fellowship because they will not strengthen the faith of members. The kingdom of God is more than food and drink. A church could have numerous visits to other churches, and a range of hiking and cooking fellowships, but still not grow spiritually. In contrast, if our fellowship is God-centered, truth-seekers will experience the genuine and warm atmosphere of God's love.

Fellowship is not just a social gathering: it should focus on God's love, which does not discriminate based on nationality, gender or social status. If, today, a truth-seeker comes to church and feels excluded, we have failed in our duty. As a church, we should not give precedence to any particular culture or language; we speak tactfully (Col 4:6) and speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15), because people of all backgrounds are accepted and should feel at home. Believers are prone, especially in large churches, to form cliques that newcomers find hard to break into. We must thus always remind ourselves that the church is one big family, and we need to commune and spend time with all our brothers and sisters, as well as any visitors.

Breaking Bread

To break bread is to remember the Lord's love during Holy Communion, as well as a reminder for us to constantly count the blessings of God. If we are thankful, we will not complain; if we complain, this means we have become ungrateful. If we are grateful to God for leading us out of Egypt and slavery into the land flowing with milk and honey, we will not ask, "Why are we always eating manna in this wilderness?" Instead, we will be grateful when we see manna every day. Therefore, breaking bread—constantly thanking and praising God—is an important component of our spiritual lives and service.

Prayer

The more we pray in the Holy Spirit, the more united we will be. If two persons kneel down and pray together for half an hour, agreement will come easily between them. Conversely, the most obvious sign of disunity between two persons is the unwillingness to pray together. Evangelism team members should constantly pray together, and the church should also constantly support the team through earnest prayer. The example of how Moses prayed, with the physical support of Aaron and Hur, while Joshua battled is a familiar but perpetually apt reminder of how earnest and united prayer can defeat the fiercest of enemies (Ex 17:8–13).

During the first National Church Conference in the United States, in the 1980s, we had four days of meetings, some of which lasted until midnight. There were many gifted members—highly educated with sterling secular accomplishments—in attendance. But this also meant that they came with their own analyses and experience (and pride in these experiences, undoubtedly), affecting the unity of the sessions. So we started having fasting prayers and soon found that our meetings were significantly shortened—difficult issues were resolved in a matter of minutes. This shows that praying in the Holy Spirit not only makes us like-minded (Phil 2:1–3), but is also essential to understanding and carrying out the will of God (Phil 2:5–8).

CONCLUSION

The Lord has promised that the gospel will be spread to the ends of the earth and, by the grace of God, this task has been entrusted to us today. It is an immense blessing to be His chosen instruments. So let us prepare well by building effective evangelism teams in our respective churches, by adopting the right work approaches, and working in unity as one body to be fishers of men.

Lucas Wong
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Evangelism in the Age of Connectivity

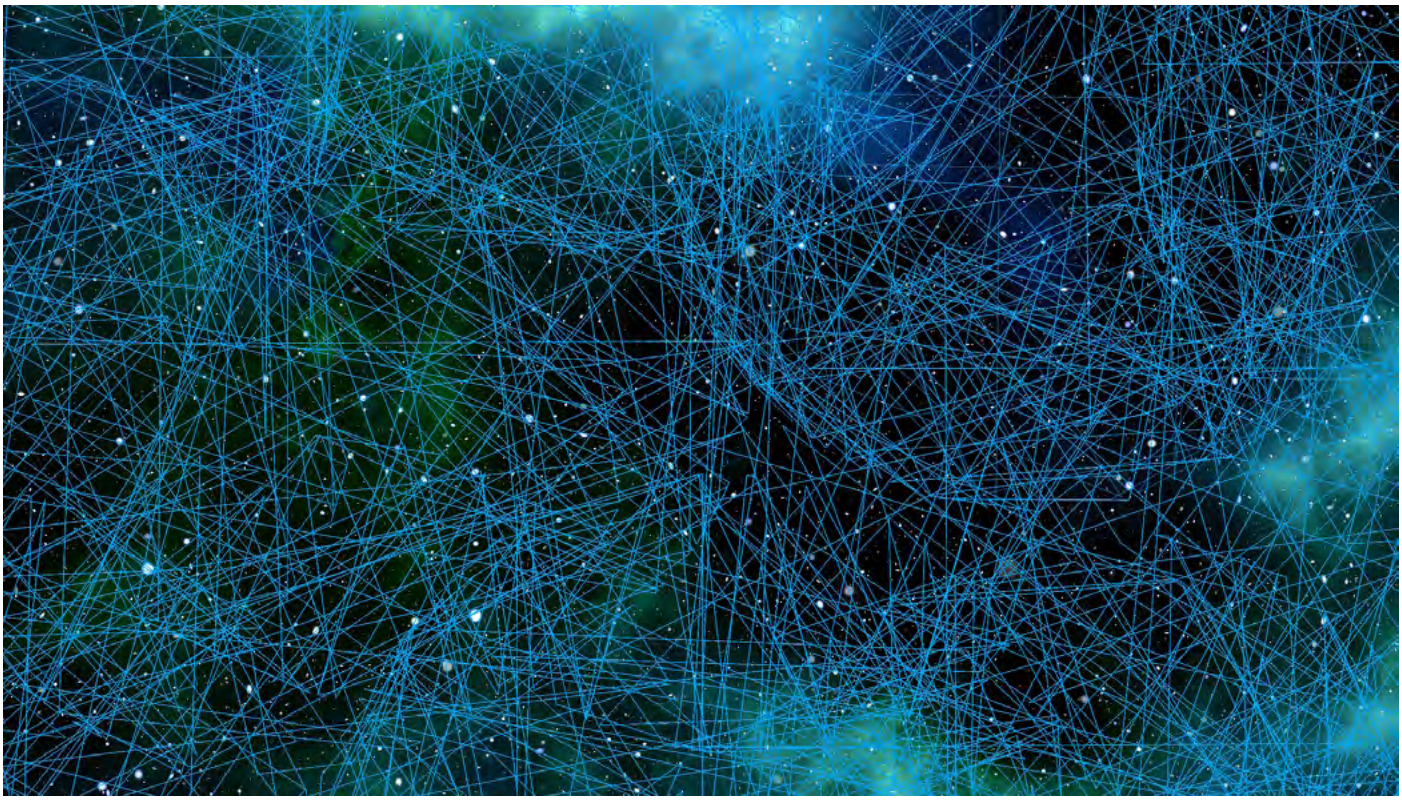
Over a decade ago, the True Jesus Church's Community Outreach Volunteer (COV) system highlighted the plight of an Indonesian sister residing in Germany. She had to make a two-hour commute to Hamburg twice a month to attend Sabbath worship services. During this time, her fourteen-month-old son was also suffering from severe neuro-dermatitis. This disheartening situation greatly challenged her faith. But by God's grace, she received encouragement and strength by listening to sermons uploaded to the tjc.org website. This spurred her to submit a request to the True Jesus Church's Internet Ministry Program (IMP) team to upload more audio and video sermons. This request has greatly encouraged the IMP team that their labor is not in vain in the Lord.

The internet has brought the world much closer. As one entrepreneur once remarked, with the internet, one can make money even while asleep. Likewise, the internet can be a useful platform for our evangelistic outreach and pastoral work. However, despite the convenience it provides, the internet does have its shortcomings. As Christians, we must seek to use the internet for good and seize every opportunity to fulfill the evangelistic mission entrusted to us by our Lord Jesus.

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but

THE COMMUNITY OUTREACH VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

Members of the Community Outreach Volunteer (COV) Program liaise with members of the public who contact the church through our public outreach website, tjc.org. The network of COV members is the first point of human contact for those interested to learn more about the True Jesus Church—be it our beliefs and doctrines, or locations of our churches. The COV members provide answers and connect truth-seekers to members and churches nearby, to guide them in their search for the truth.



to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.
(Mt 5:13–14)

Salt is typically used for seasoning. How should we "season" our online communication? Today, the prevailing methods of communication are emails, short messages and social media posts. This has led to the inventive use of acronyms, abbreviations, icons, emojis and animated images such as GIFs. Unfortunately, such abbreviations can leave room for misunderstanding; for example, "LOL" could be interpreted as "lots of love" or "laughing out loud." The elderly, being accustomed to more formal styles of communication, may have difficulties understanding these unfamiliar expressions. In light of these considerations, we ought to be thoughtful of our intended audience when we communicate online. Also, we ought to take it upon ourselves to seek clarification when we are unable to understand a message fully. Such efforts to "season" our conversations properly would preempt unnecessary misunderstandings and conflicts.

Salt is also used for preservation. The internet is a helpful platform to share ideas, views and knowledge. It provides services like online shopping or access to information on the latest trends. The internet can also simply be used for recreational browsing. Despite its various merits, this platform can be easily abused to become a gateway to addictive behavior. As True Jesus Church Christians, we have a responsibility to spread good tidings. This includes providing sound advice grounded in truth and biblically accurate teachings. In order to do so, we have to invest time to review the factual accuracy of what we share, and to be aware how our sharing, and, thus, implicit endorsements, may impact fellow believers and non-believers alike.

The True Jesus Church is established by the Lord Jesus to preach the gospel of salvation and save souls. We need to carefully assess how the IMP should support our mission to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). This can only be done with the abidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

As an individual, involvement in the IMP is simple:

1. Pray

We need our Lord Jesus Christ to guide us to carry out His will. Include the internet ministry in your personal prayer list. Everyone can support the internet ministry with intercessory prayers.

2. Propagate

Spread the good tidings to all people. Identify and share edifying videos, articles and content from church websites (including tjc.org). To do so requires that we become familiar with and sensitive to the current needs of others. Sharing content from our church website also helps improve the tjc.org search rating. If you notice any inaccuracies in articles or content, please report them via email to helpdesk@tjc.org.

3. Contribute

Write and contribute articles, share testimonies, and produce videos and other multimedia content to preach the gospel (Lk 24:47–48). Such invaluable material can be produced through collaboration between churches' audio-visual teams, writers, editors, graphic designers and video producers, as well as other behind-the-scene workers. There are many ways to prepare and equip ourselves for the ministry. Take the initiative to hone your skills and contribute while rallying fellow like-minded members to the cause. Remember to pray that all work is done according to His will.

4. Participate in the COV team

We preach to save souls. While internet ministry can be the first step towards bringing people to the Lord, certain aspects of salvation, such as baptism, cannot be conducted in a virtual setting. The COV team comprises True Jesus Church members who do the outreach and stand as a ready point-of-contact to bring to fruition the work initiated and nurtured by the IMP. COV members can meet and provide counselling and answers to those seeking the truth. People have short attention spans. They may feel a fleeting yearning for God, only to forget about it moments later. The COV team provides a real connection between the church and online truth-seekers, facilitating systematic follow-up efforts through regular encouragements. You can become part of the COV team by registering with your general assembly's IMP team, or you can drop an email to helpdesk@tjc.org and let us know you intend to join the COV team.

5. Support

"Freely you have received, freely give" (Mt 10:8). All that we have has been given to us freely. Your contributions to the IMP are but a fraction of your life that you can readily offer for the love and grace you have received. Offering your time, effort and money to support the IMP is pleasing to God. Remember that nothing you do for God in His name shall be in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

OUR COLLECTIVE EFFORTS

Collectively, the church plays an important role in IMP.

1. Pray

As with any church work, efforts in prayers are important. Like it or not, the internet has worked its way into every corner and crevice of modern life. It has become a fundamental part of life in both urban and rural areas. The IMP needs God's wisdom to effectively utilize

> *"As True Jesus Church Christians, we have a responsibility to spread good tidings. This includes providing sound advice grounded in truth and biblically accurate teachings."*

the virtual tools at its disposal, while seeking His protection from online assault, depravity and misinformation (Mt 6:13). The church should encourage and pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers to serve Him in the internet ministry.

2. Train

More training sessions on internet ministry are needed. Such trainings can include educating our members on virtual safety and security, along with the pros and cons of different types of online activities. The church can also provide opportunities and support for members willing and able to offer their varied talents to maintain church websites or launch new projects (for example, mobile applications).

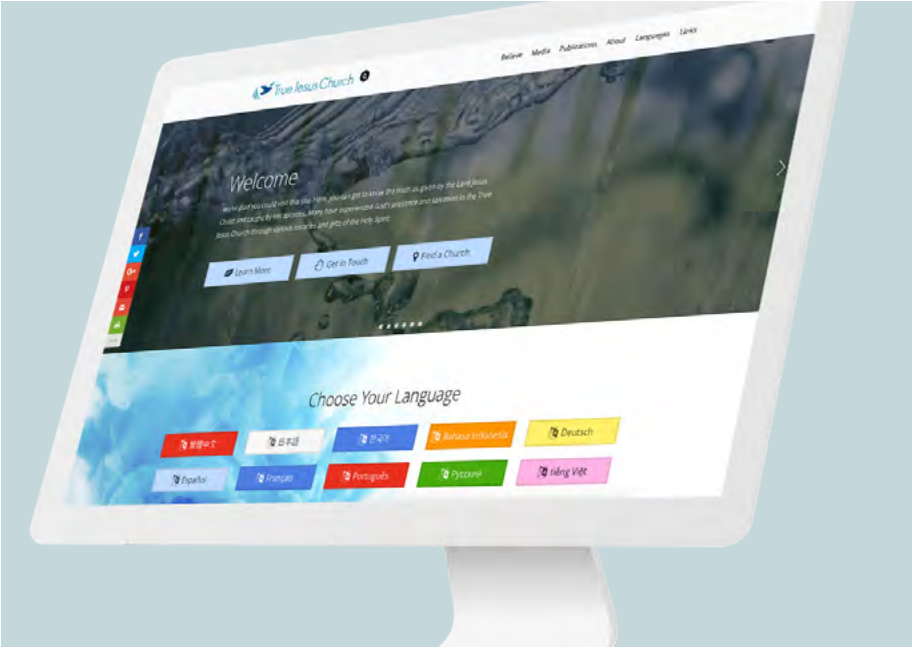
3. Connect

The church can connect talented members from local churches with their general assemblies and the International Assembly (IA). There are many skilled members around the world, but they may be working in isolated or uncoordinated environments. Unity and collaboration are essential to wisely manage the limited resources available to the IMP. Churches have to work with one another and with the IMP to connect members and raise awareness of the work being done in this area; "a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Eccl 4:12). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we must consider how best to bring all the organs of the church together efficiently, so that we may improve our work for the good of the body (Rom 12:3–8).

WHEN WAS YOUR LAST VISIT TO TJC.ORG?

By God's grace, the IMP has come a long way. In 2017, the IA launched a new portal for the tjc.org evangelism site, with a revamped user interface. The new site is more intuitive and user-friendly. It was released along with a public YouTube channel. The e-Library (ia.tjc.org/elibrary) also has a variety of edifying contents to meet different needs.

Work on expanding the e-Library, to include Bible study sites and provide content in languages besides English and Mandarin, is in progress. Many more features are also being developed. One upcoming feature is the ability to easily share evangelistic events among general assemblies, regional coordination boards and local churches. Everyone will be able to access pastoral, evangelistic, training and events information on a common site. With your prayers and support, we can continue to develop useful features.



> *"Unity and collaboration are essential to wisely manage the limited resources available to the IMP…to connect members and raise awareness of the work being done."*

We encourage you to browse the current website and familiarize yourself with the contents and resources available.

CONCLUSION

The IMP is at various stages of construction and is far from being a finished product. We welcome any support that members can offer. There have been many difficulties along the way. Yet with God's grace and guidance, we have and will continue to overcome.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified," says the LORD. (Hag 1:7–8)

May the Lord stir up our hearts to serve Him in this ministry!

Joshua Phoong
Ipoh, Malaysia

As a Servant

Editor's note: The Lord's Great Commission to the disciples, recorded in Matthew 28:18–19, is well known to Christians. Throughout the centuries, many have been inspired to obey this directive. Some have lived to see the results of their labor—winning converts, establishing churches and, as we can see from some celebrity evangelists, even garnering fame and fortune. But there are those who have left family and familiarity to travel to far-flung corners of the world, persevering through physical deprivation, only to meet rejection and loss of life. What would sustain us if the latter scenario—exactly what our Lord Himself suffered during His ministry—were what we encounter in our service? One important factor is to have the mind of Christ: a servant's mind (Phil 2:5–8).In this article, the author shares with us what being a servant entails.

When the Lord Jesus Christ was en-route to Jerusalem with His disciples, He was approached by the mother of James and John with a request: "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." The Lord replied, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink that cup that I am about to drink?" They then answered, "We are able" (Mt 20:21–22). When the other ten disciples heard of this incident, they were upset. Perhaps they too wanted to occupy these positions of power. If these brothers' request were granted, where would the rest of the disciples sit? Jesus seized this opportunity to teach His disciples about servanthood. He emphasized that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28).

Jesus came to serve men and to give them salvation. Christians—literally, followers of Christ—must walk in His footsteps. We follow our Lord Jesus Christ in many ways but, most importantly, we must follow His example of servanthood.

Servanthood is not merely theory; it is a way of life. Our lives must testify that we are servants of the Lord God. To know how much like our Lord Jesus we are in this aspect, we must examine whether we have the following attributes:

"Servanthood is not merely theory; it is a way of life. Our lives must testify that we are servants of the Lord God."

1. SENSE OF DUTY

"And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.' " (Lk 17:7–10)

After the servant has finished his duties and returns to the master's house, he does not expect the master to invite him to take a rest and recline at the table. Rather, he will have to prepare and serve his master's supper. Only when the master has eaten and drunk his fill can the servant assuage his own hunger and thirst. After every instruction is carried out, no thanks from the master is expected or given. This is the life of a servant.

When our Lord Jesus Christ was in this world, He led a very hectic life. He had to busy Himself over many things, but He accepted that He had come not to do His own will, but that of the heavenly Father (Jn 4:34). This was the work entrusted to Him. Similarly, if we want to follow our Lord Jesus Christ and be a servant, we would complete our duties faithfully with no demand for reward (Lk 17:7). We may baptize hundreds, but we do not expect our Master to go out of His way to thank us.

2. SENSE OF URGENCY

Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; but He said to them, "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent."
(Lk 4:42–43)

During His ministry, our Lord Jesus Christ moved from village to village, city to city, to bring the gospel of the kingdom to the people. That was the purpose for which He had been sent to this world. He had no time to rest because He had to complete the work entrusted to Him.

> *"One day, when the door of salvation is closed, even if we wanted to preach the gospel, we would not be able to do so. As the Lord's servants, we must be driven by a deep sense of urgency to complete the commission entrusted to us by the Lord Jesus Christ."*

The people wanted to prevent Jesus from leaving because it was good to have Jesus—Provider, Healer, Teacher—with them. However, He was not distracted from His task, knowing the urgency of preaching the kingdom of God to all. The Bible tells us that we must work while it is day. When night comes, we will not be able to work. While we have the opportunity, we must use it to do the work of the Lord. One day, when the door of salvation is closed, even if we wanted to preach the gospel, we would not be able to do so. As the Lord's servants, we must be driven by a deep sense of urgency to complete the commission entrusted to us by the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. RIGHT PRIORITIES

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."
(Lk 9:57–58)

Jesus bluntly described what it is like to follow Him. Even animals have a home to return to, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. In other words, we must expect a busy life if we want to follow our Lord Jesus Christ—a life without rest, a life lived to accomplish the will of God, with no time for ourselves.

In the example the Lord Jesus used in Luke 17, after the servant had completed his work in the field, he returned to the master's house to prepare the master's supper. This servant was probably extremely weary and hungry from his work in the fields. However, because he was a servant, he was ordered to prepare supper. As servants, we too are expected to give priority to the affairs of our Master. We may have our own needs, but our Master's needs and His call take priority.

Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."
Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God."
And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house."
But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."
(Lk 9:59–62)

These two individuals wanted to follow our Lord Jesus Christ. However, they were unable to give priority to His work. There were other things in their lives they considered important and wanted to do before following Him. Our Lord teaches us that people who put their own needs above the call of the Lord God are not worthy. We must always prioritize the affairs of our Master above our own needs and affairs (Mt 10:37, 39).

4. READINESS

In Luke 17:8, the master instructs the servant to gird himself and be ready to serve him. A servant must always be ready to serve when his master calls. No good servant is caught unprepared when the master needs him.

"Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him

immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them." *(Lk 12:35–37)*

Such is the proper attitude of a servant pleasing to the master: he is ready at all times to immediately answer the call of his master. Today, we hear repeatedly that workers are still needed to take the gospel to the rest of the world, to other nations and peoples. Are we ready to spring to our feet at any time to answer this call of our Lord Jesus?

5. NO PERSONAL OPINION

The servant has no opinion of his own. His exhaustion or desire to rest is irrelevant. He must be ready at all times to respond and serve his master. Sometimes, in our service to God, we take time to consider whether we would like to do the work before we agree.

Acts 8 tells us the story of Philip, who preached the gospel to Samaria. Many came to believe and were baptized in Samaria, and when the apostles came to lay hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit. After a while, the apostles returned to Jerusalem. There were now new members in Samaria, who probably needed Philip to pastor them (Acts 8:4–8, 14–17). However, when an angel of the Lord told Philip to go down to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, Philip arose and went. He never questioned this command. There was much work to do in Samaria because the believers were newly baptized. However, as a true servant, Philip obeyed the calling of the Spirit without question, converting the Ethiopian eunuch on that desert road (Acts 8:26–39).

In this age, the calling of the Lord is through the church. When the church in Antioch sent Saul and Barnabas, the Holy Spirit instructed them to set apart these two workers for the work (Acts 13:1–3). Given a choice, the church would probably have wanted Saul and Barnabas to remain because they were the first preachers to pastor there. However, when the church was moved by the Holy Spirit, they obeyed.

"These righteous servants were unaware of the good work they had done because they did not do it to be seen by men. They did not do it for a reward. Doing this good work, even to the least of their brethren, was only natural to them."

Therefore, whether individually or as a church, servants of the Lord have no opinion with regard to their calling. They submit absolutely to the direction of the Holy Spirit. This too is what we must be able to do. Like Philip, we may be doing fine pastoral work amidst a large and thriving community in our respective churches. But if we are suddenly plucked out and asked to evangelize to just a single person or a small group in a remote place, we must go willingly and joyfully, reminding ourselves that a true servant submits to the direction of the Lord Jesus through His Holy Spirit.

6. NO EXPECTATION OF PRAISE

Common courtesy requires us to thank people when they have rendered us a service. But will the master thank the servant after he has completed his work? Luke 17:9 indicates that masters do not have to thank their servants. After all, the servant is only doing the work that he has been told to do; he is just doing his part. Likewise, for us today, when we have completed the work entrusted to us, we should not expect thanks or praise from others.

Only two types of people seek after praise: the self-righteous and the hypocrite. In Jesus' parable, the Pharisee prays, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess" (Lk 18:11–12). This Pharisee seems to be worried that the Lord God does not know of his good works. Therefore, he has to tell the Lord all the good that he has done. He also wants to compare himself to the tax collector next to him. Self-righteous people love to tell others what they have done and exalt themselves above others. Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us that people who exalt themselves will be humbled (Lk 18:14). He also describes the behavior of hypocrites:

"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward." *(Mt 6:5)*

Hypocrites love to show off their work to others. They love to receive the praises of men. When they have no audience, they may not do the work at all. Yet, when others are present, they work assiduously to earn the praise of men. We must not be like these people: we must do our work, whether in secret or in plain view. Only then are we truly faithful servants.

In fact, servants are not always aware of their own great works. In Matthew 25:31–40, Jesus describes the final judgment, when He will come to separate the sheep and the goats. The righteous sheep on His right will say: "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You or thirsty and give You drink?" (Mt 25:37). And the King will reply: "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Mt 25:40).

These righteous servants were unaware of the good work they had done because they did not do it to be seen by men. They did not do it for a reward. Doing this good work, even to the least of their brethren, was only natural to them. However, the Lord has seen and will reward them for their good work. We must strive to be these true servants: to do what is required of us without thinking of the reward.

7. GRATITUDE FOR THE OPPORTUNITY

"So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.' "
(Lk 17:10)

Does the Lord profit from our work? The Lord does not need us, as we are mere mortals and sinners. His work can and will definitely be accomplished, without us.

Esther 4 reminds us of this. At that time, the Persian king had passed a decree to annihilate the Jews. Mordecai sent a message to Esther, who was the queen, telling her to petition the king for her people. However, Esther explained her predicament: anyone who goes to the inner court without the king's summons could be put to death, and the king had not called her for thirty days. She thought it was impossible for her to go before the king to plead for her people.

Mordecai replied to Esther:

"Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. 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 4:13–14)*

Mordecai's point was clear: God had allowed Esther to rise to become queen for this very moment—to plead to the king for the life of the Jews. If she did not do this work, she and her family would perish. But for the rest of the Jews, deliverance and relief would still come, if not through the hands of Esther, then through another way.

When we are able to do the work of the Lord God, it is not because of our outstanding capabilities, but because He shows us favor. It is not because we are indispensable to the work of the Lord, but because His grace is with us. We have been given opportunity and great privilege to be the Lord's servant and participate in the work of the Lord.

In 1 Corinthians 15:9, Paul claims to be the least of the apostles because he had been a persecutor of the church of God. He confesses:

"For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and 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)*

Even though Paul had labored more than others, he attributed this to the grace of God. If not for God's grace, Paul would not have been able to do the work of the Lord.

We once visited a believer who was bedridden with cancer. He told us that if the Lord God healed him, he would surely do the work of God. He was a member of the church, but had not been fervent. When he fell ill, he wanted to do more for the Lord God. Sadly, he passed away soon after that. This is an example of one who did not take the opportunity to work for God when he had time. Today, we have received opportunities to pastor, to evangelize, to serve. We must be thankful for this grace of God and make good use of every opportunity, to be a faithful servant of the Lord until the very end.

8. LIFELONG HUMILITY

At the beginning of our Christian lives, it is easy to serve humbly. But as we progress along our journey of faith, it becomes more challenging to remain an obedient servant of the Lord.

Saul began his kingship as a humble man (1 Sam 10:16, 27) and good servant (1 Sam 11:6, 13). As time passed, his position went to his head. In 1 Samuel 15, the Lord instructed Saul to destroy the Amalekites. Saul fought with the Amalekites and was victorious because God was with him. However, Saul did not destroy all of them. He spared the

"When we are able to do the work of the Lord God, it is not because of our outstanding capabilities, but because He shows us favor. It is not because we are indispensable to the work of the Lord, but because His grace is with us."

> *“No matter how great the offerings and labors we render to God, if we cannot obey in the smallest matters, then we cannot please our Master. Do we deem our time and energy as too valuable to spend on the lowliest tasks? Are we able to humbly co-operate with our fellow servants to follow God’s will?”*

life of Agag and the best of the cattle. Samuel rebuked him.

“When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the LORD anoint you king over Israel? Now the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, ‘Go, and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.’ Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do evil in the sight of the LORD?” *(1 Sam 15:17–18)*

Despite this, Saul still insisted he was in the right. He claimed that it was the people who had brought back the best of the cattle to sacrifice to the Lord. But Samuel became even more severe.

“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
As in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to heed than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,
And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
He also has rejected you from being king.”
(1 Sam 15:22–23)

When we start off as nobodies, we can be obedient servants. However, as we grow, we start to feel that we are very important in the work of God. We think that the work will not be done without us. With that mindset, we cannot be obedient servants. We start to have—and stubbornly cling to—our own opinions and thinking; we begin to prioritize these in our lives and service. This is not a servant’s heart.

No matter how great the offerings and labors we render to God, if we cannot obey in the smallest matters, then we cannot please our Master. Do we deem our time and energy as too valuable to spend on the lowliest tasks? Are we able to humbly co-operate with our fellow servants to follow God’s will?

Let us examine our service and consider what we have learnt from the servanthood of Jesus—to have His mind, and to become and remain true servants of God. Amen.

Parables of the Heavenly Kingdom (Part 2): Accept the Gospel, Hold on to the Truth

KC Tsai
Toronto, Canada

Editor's note: In Matthew 13, Jesus used a series of parables to define the kingdom of God, explain the rules for entering this kingdom, and paint a picture of life inside and outside the kingdom. In this second installment of a series on these parables, we continue to look at the first two parables.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

After being questioned by the scribes and Pharisees, the Lord Jesus left the house and boarded a boat. From there, He preached to the multitude gathered on the shore, and He spoke the first parable:

"Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" *(Mt 13:3–9)*

The Lord Jesus later gave a direct and complete exposition of this parable: the seed refers to the word of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 13:19), the types of ground are the hearts of men (Mt 13:19) and the birds represent the wicked one (Mt 13:19), which is Satan (Mk 4:15), the devil (Lk 8:12).

This parable considers the different ways of responding to God's word.

By the Wayside

The wayside refers to those who hear the word of the kingdom of heaven, but do not understand. The word, sown in their hearts, is swiftly snatched away by the wicked one. Such people listen casually and have no place in their hearts for the truth. This lack of interest is compounded by the devil's quest to keep humankind from believing in the word and receiving the grace of salvation. The minute a person encounters the gracious word of God, the devil immediately seeks to snatch it from his heart. Both preachers and truth-seekers must thus be alert, ever conscious that the devil strives to hinder evangelism. As a church, we must pray for the power of the Holy Spirit, resist the devil by submitting ourselves entirely to God, persevere and ultimately triumph.

Another tactic of the devil is to use man's tendency to lose interest quickly. Coming to Athens, Greece, for the first time, Paul's spirit was provoked on seeing how the city was given over

> *"In the process of seeking the Lord, those who do not focus on His word—desiring only material benefits, or the witnessing of miracles—will be unable to withstand tests that may arise."*

to idols. He started to reason with the people about the word of the kingdom of heaven. Some Athenians wondered what "this babbler" wanted to say. Others, calling him a "proclaimer of foreign gods," took Paul to the Areopagus (hill of Ares, or Mars), the location of a court where religious matters, among other things, were discussed. Curious, these philosophers asked, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?" (Acts 17:19).

The Bible highlights that these people spent their time just discussing novel ideas (Acts 17:16–21). When man treats the gospel of heaven merely as an interesting topic of conversation, it is like the seed sown by the wayside where there is not much soil. Even the best seed will not take root and will be eaten by birds. Although Paul spoke a thought-provoking sermon, introducing them to the God he knew, some Athenians mocked him. Others demurred and wanted him to elaborate. Seeing the futility of further discussion, Paul departed (Acts 17:33).

Similarly, today, those whose hearts are like the wayside—who respond to the word of God only superficially—will quickly have this word snatched away by the devil.

On Stony Ground

Second, the hearts of some are likened to stony places where there is little earth. Seeds that fall on such ground germinate easily, but cannot become rooted because the soil is too thin. Such people are easily moved when they hear the teachings of heaven. They receive the word very quickly, but lose it just as quickly. This is because their hearts do not allow the word of God to take root. Their faith is superficial, so when adversities or persecutions arise, they stumble.

After Jesus performed the miracle of feeding the five thousand, the crowd wanted to make Him king. The Lord escaped, but the people eventually found Him again in Capernaum the day after. The Lord Jesus said to them:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him." *(Jn 6:26–27)*

In the process of seeking the Lord, those who do not focus on His word—desiring only material benefits, or the witnessing of miracles—will be unable to withstand tests that may arise. The multitude followed the Lord Jesus, but when He told them the truth about the bread of life and spoke a sermon on salvation, they responded with, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" From then on, many departed (Jn 6:60–66).

The word of God tests the hearts of man to ascertain if these are stony ground without much soil.

Thorny Ground

The third category comprises people whose hearts are like the ground beneath thorn bushes. Like these bushes, their lives are tangled and disorderly. Unable to differentiate between importance and urgency, they cannot recognize the most precious thing in life. After hearing the word, such a person will depart and—choked by the cares, riches and enjoyment of this world—become unfruitful.

The Good Ground

Finally, there are some hearts that are good and fertile ground. Seeds that fall on this type of ground will be deeply rooted and grow up strong, producing a crop of a hundred, sixty and thirty times what was sown. These are those who, after hearing the word with a good and noble heart, keep it and patiently bear fruit abundantly (Lk 8:15). They are able to keep the word within their hearts, and practice the word by allowing it to shape their thoughts, speech and conduct. These are people elected by God.

The Lord Jesus said all whom the Father gives Him will come to Him, and will by no means be cast out (Jn 6:37). They come to the Lord Jesus because it has been granted to them by the Father (Jn 6:65). They were drawn by the Father and will be raised up on the last day (Jn 6:44), for they are the saved true church, as recorded in the Bible.

THE PARABLE OF THE TARES

The Lord Jesus put forth another parable to them:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."'"
(Mt 13: 24–30)

The Parable Explained

After the parable of the tares, the Lord Jesus spoke two more parables. He subsequently sent the multitude away and entered the house, where His disciples asked Him to explain the parable of the tares.

He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The

field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" *(Mt 13:37–43)*

In the earlier parable of the sower, the seeds refer to the word of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 13:19). In the parable of the tares, the good seed sowed by the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus, refers to man—the sons of the kingdom who have received the word of heaven (Mt 13:38). They are the heirs of God (Rom 8:17), those who, by God's grace and mercy, shall receive eternal life in the future (Tit 3:5–7).

The tares sown by the devil refer to those who have fallen into the hands of the wicked one because of their selfish desires—the sons of the wicked one (Mt 13:38). They are full of deceit and fraud. As the enemies of righteousness, they constantly strive to pervert the straight ways of the Lord (Acts 13:10).

Jesus' sowing the good seed refers to His gathering of the sons of the kingdom to establish His church on earth. But the devil came to sow tares—sons of the wicked one—in the Lord's church "while men slept." God neither slumbers nor sleeps (Ps 121:3–4). This reference to men sleeping is rendered in the English Standard Version as: "while his men were sleeping."[1] These men were the Lord's servants, who inevitably experienced exhaustion and carelessness in their work.

Sons of the Wicked One

In His explanation of the parable of the tares, the Lord Jesus said, "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness" (Mt 13:41). Those who practice wickedness were originally part of God's kingdom. In today's context, the tares are people who were initially within the church. However, their desires lead them to be deceived and exploited by Satan to carry out his works (2 Thess 2:3–12), which is to cause others to fall.

On one occasion when the Lord Jesus was in the temple, He told the Jews:

"You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."

(Jn 8:43–44)

Therefore, those who do not uphold the truth, but lies according to their desires, are the sons of the wicked one.

Elder John clearly distinguishes the children of God from the children of the devil: "Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother" (1 Jn 3:10b). The devil sinned from the beginning; he not only disobeyed God, but also tempted Eve and Adam to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Using jealousy, discontent and hatred within Cain's heart, the devil tempted him to kill Abel. The Bible is unequivocal in its conclusion that Cain was the son of the wicked one (1 Jn 3:12).

Believers who harbor hatred in their hearts and are full of jealousy and discontent towards their brethren are prime candidates for Satan's deception and exploitation. They become his tools to bring harm to the brethren and cause damage to the church.

1 The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

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Many will Fall Away

Before His crucifixion, the Lord Jesus had an important dialogue with His disciples on Mount Olivet. They asked Him, "Tell us, when will these things [the destruction of the temple] be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" Jesus answered, "Take heed that no one deceives you." He added, "[M]any will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many" (Mt 24:3–11).

The Lord Jesus said that many would fall away. This is a stern warning to us. These people were originally in the Lord, but would subsequently depart from the truth and the church. Before the Lord's second coming, many will fall away, will betray and hate one another. Such is the turmoil that will be caused by the tares amidst the wheat; the sons of the wicked one will stir up strife and hatred within the church.

Believers ought to constantly examine themselves to see whether their current state of faith makes them wheat or tare. Before the day of harvest (i.e., the last day) man ought to rely on the Holy Spirit to be continuously purified and renewed through the word of God, to become holy in the truth, so as to become the sons of the kingdom.

One of You is the Devil

Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" *(Jn 6:70)*

Here, Jesus was referring to Judas Iscariot, but how could Judas be a devil? In the beginning, he was an ordinary person, no different from the rest. He was bestowed great grace when the Lord selected him as one of the twelve apostles, Jesus' loyal servants. However, his dishonesty, greed for wealth and hypocrisy led him to frequently give way to the devil (Jn 12:5–6; Eph 4:27). Eventually, his heart was overtaken by the devil (Jn 13:2, 27), and he betrayed the Lord for thirty pieces of silver.

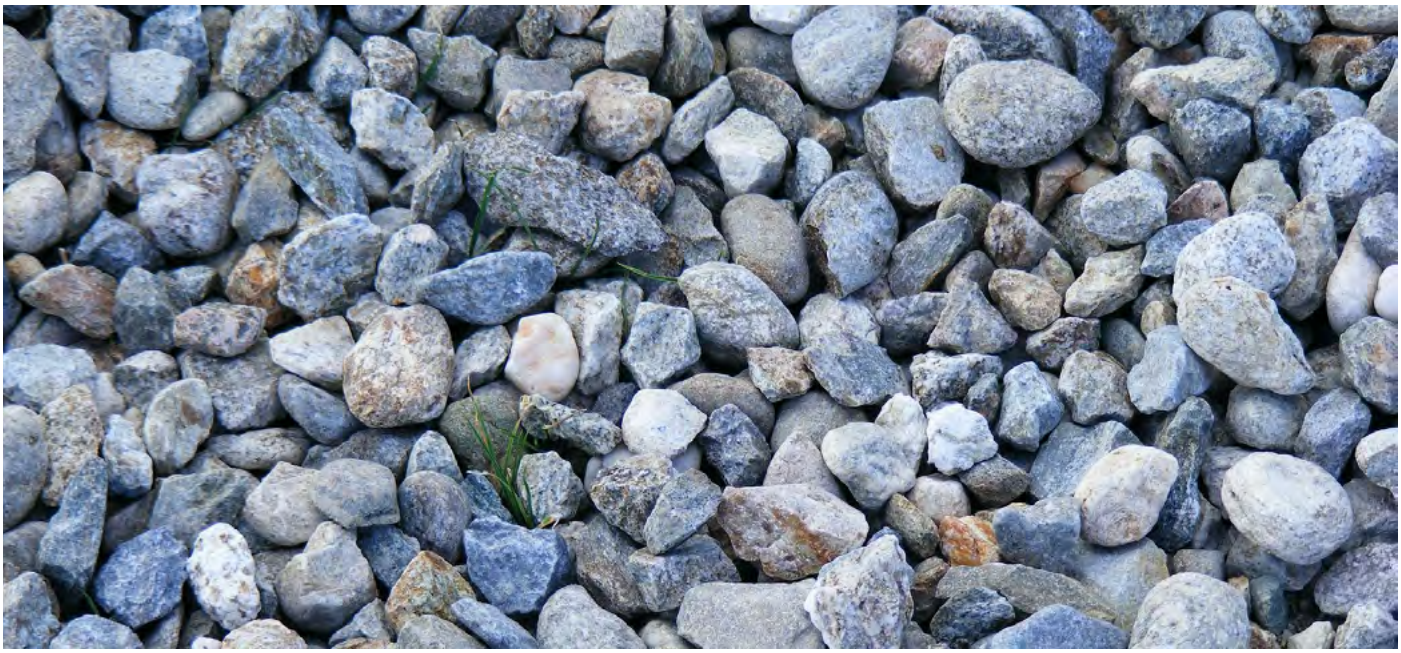
The Lord knew that Satan had entered Judas' heart. He could have cast out the devil from Judas, but He did not. This is because it was Judas himself who had invited the devil into his heart. There are some who are possessed by the devil before they know the Lord. For these pitiful people, who are under the power of the prince of the air, the Lord is merciful and willing to cast out the demonic spirit within them. However, it is very different for those who already know the Lord and have tasted His salvation grace, yet still invite the devil into their hearts. Jesus only said to Judas, "What you do, do quickly" (Jn 13:27).

This is a clear warning to believers to be constantly watchful, lest their selfish desires lead them to give place to the devil (Eph 4:27). Judas did not plan to betray Jesus when he was chosen to be an apostle. But in the process of serving the Lord, Judas allowed his selfish motives and greed to grow. These desires conceived sin and, just like a foetus in the womb, when sin was full-grown, it brought forth death (Jas 1:14–15).

> *"He allows the wicked to remain in order to refine the beautiful faith and spirituality of the sons of the kingdom, enabling them to "shine forth as the sun."*

Challenges of the Church

God does not act immediately to weed out evildoers and rectify issues that cause members to fall. Instead, He waits until harvest time—at the end of



> *True believers should have complete faith in the omniscience and omnipotence of the Lord, and completely trust Him. Have no doubt that He will manifest His righteousness and eradicate the wicked.*

the age—before He removes these tares from His kingdom. He does this in order to edify the righteous (Ps 11:2–7). Both are allowed to grow together in case the wheat is uprooted in the process of removing the tares. He allows the wicked to remain in order to refine the beautiful faith and spirituality of the sons of the kingdom, enabling them to "shine forth as the sun" (Mt 13:43).

God tests the righteous (Ps 11:5), so that their righteousness and justice will shine forth (Ps 37:6). If they are able to rely silently on God, wait patiently for Him, and not fret because of evildoers, they shall inherit eternal joy in the kingdom of God (Mt 13:43).

The parable of the tares is not a warning for the wicked; rather, it concerns the matters and people in God's kingdom. The tares sown among the wheat by the enemy represent the evildoers, and the things that cause believers to stumble, *within* the church. The parable commences with the Lord Jesus entering the world to preach the gospel of heaven, and ends with the end time. It describes the war that the church will need to fight on earth.

CONCLUSION

The Lord Jesus sowed good seeds and gathered the sons of the kingdom from various parts of the world in His name (Isa 43:5–7). He gave His life to establish His church on earth. From a spiritual perspective, these sons of the kingdom are created by God for His own glory, although they may have been gathered in different circumstances (Isa 43:5–7, ESV). Those appointed to eternal life shall receive the gospel and come to the saved true church (Acts 13:47).

However, the devil sowed tares within the church in order to lure the sons of the kingdom away. Those who do not stand firm will fall into his snares. When they do so, they become sons of the wicked one. These sons of the wicked one will then go on to actively preach a false gospel and cause so much confusion regarding the truth that those who are not worthy of eternal life will be offended (Mt 24:10–11; 1 Pet 2:7–8).

In fact, the sons of the wicked one did not make their first appearance when the Holy Spirit departed from the apostolic church, but before then. In the apostolic era, the apostles were persecuted by false apostles and false brethren (2 Cor 11:13–15, 26; Gal 2:4; 2 Pet 2:1–3; 1 Jn 2:18–19). The apostolic church suffered from the infiltration of heresies (2 Thess 2:3–12; 1 Tim 3; 4:1). Similarly, in this period of the true church established by the latter rain of the Holy Spirit, disturbances by the sons of the wicked one are inevitable, and will continue until they are sieved out at harvest time.

There is no need to be afraid. True believers should have complete faith in the omniscience and omnipotence of the Lord, and completely trust Him. Have no doubt that He will manifest His righteousness and eradicate the wicked (Ps 11:5–7). When we cling to His promises, we shall not lose heart when faced with the corruption of the wicked ones.

Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him;
Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way,
Because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass.
Cease from anger, and forsake wrath;
Do not fret—it only causes harm.

(Ps 37:7–9)

Aun Quek Chin
Singapore

Burning Coal that Sustains Spiritual Life

Before natural gas and other energy sources were discovered, coal was central to man's life. Coal was used to produce fire for cooking, and to keep home fires burning during cold winters. The Bible also cites three instances where coal, or what it represents, is central to our life of faith. Let us study these examples to see how we can sustain the flame of our spiritual life.

BURNING COALS ON THE HEAD

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat;
And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;
For so you will heap coals of fire on his head,
And the LORD will reward you.
(Prov 25:21–22)

Some believe that this refers to an Egyptian practice of bearing burning coal on one's head to redeem sins or mistakes. The agony of performing this ritual would represent the bearer's guilt. Some also believe that Native Americans used burning coals to represent forgiveness—they would reduce the coal to ash and spread it on the head of the one who offended them, demonstrating that their hatred had dissipated like ash.

This attitude reflects how we ought to respond to evil with good. David is an example of this. Even though he was being hunted by Saul, David did not harm him when he had the opportunity to do so. While hiding in a cave, David could have killed Saul, but instead, he spared Saul's life. This act moved Saul to weep bitterly. He told David:

"You are more righteous than I; for you have rewarded me with good, whereas I have rewarded you with evil. And you have shown this day how you have dealt well with me; for when the Lord delivered me into your hand, you did not kill me. For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him get away safely?" (1 Sam 24:17–19a)

David feared God. He did not treat evil with evil, but repaid evil with good. In doing so, he poured coals on Saul's head and caused him much shame.

When someone treats us unfairly, our natural reaction may be anger. We question why we are being badly treated, and the more we dwell on this, the angrier we become. But Proverbs teaches us an important truth: "The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger, and his glory is to overlook a transgression" (Prov 19:11).

A wise man does not become angry when wronged; he knows that God is watching and will righteously judge. So he yields to God and does not retaliate. He relies on God to remove the anger in his heart, and seeks peace from God. When he overlooks such wrongs, this will be his glory, testifying that he is becoming more Christ-like.

Paul says, " 'Be angry, and do not sin': do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil" (Eph 4:26–27). The ability to overlook a transgression stems from the ability to overcome the evil intent within us. If we cultivate goodness within, we can rely on God to overcome evil thoughts of revenge. Tell yourself this: "I will not allow myself to be overcome by evil; instead, I will overcome evil with good." And when you have achieved this, you will feel immense joy. The greatest achievement is not only in winning over others, but in winning over yourself.

Let us reflect: Are our hearts inclined towards good or evil? Do we choose to forgive or avenge? Do we allow our hearts to be darkened with anger, or do we rely on the Holy Spirit to brighten our hearts with the peace of God? Let us learn to heap burning coals on—to do good to—those who wrong us.

BURNING COALS ON THE LIPS

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said:
"Behold, this has touched your lips;
Your iniquity is taken away,
And your sin purged." (Isa 6:6–7)

The prophet Isaiah thought he was a holy man, but once he saw the glory of God, he immediately felt he was a man of unclean lips. Then, one of the seraphim used a burning coal to cleanse his lips.

It is common to have unclean lips and speak sinful words. We may not think that sinning with our lips could cost us our life. So why did the prophet say, "Woe is me, for I am undone" (Isa 6:5)? The sin of the lips can ultimately lead us to death—if we do not cleanse our lips, we will eventually be thrown into the lake of fire. In Revelation 21, liars are included among murderers, sorcerers and idol worshippers; this group will be thrown into the lake of fire. All of us have lied at some point in our lives. But we must stop lying, especially when those lies cause others to fall.

This is why Elder James teaches: "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless" (Jas 1:26). How do we gauge if someone is religious? We may assess this based on how frequently they attend church services, how often they pray and read the Bible, and how much they offer. But James bases his assessment on how a person speaks:

"With [the tongue] we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so." (Jas 3:9–10)

We may deem a man who reads the Bible, prays and sings hymns to be a religious person. But if we see this same man curse others and utter vulgarities, we will conclude that his religion is wasted on him. A religious man is someone who fears and praises God, while bridling his tongue. Therefore, we should avoid speaking lewd words that defile. The things we say originate from within our heart (Prov 4:23). If our hearts are truly holy, we will not speak unclean words.

We would not utter vulgarities during a church service, because we are hearing the word of God and worshipping Him. God is holy, so He wants us to worship in holiness. But once we step out of the church compound, do we speak vulgar words with our friends, forgetting that our holy God is listening?

Additionally, we have the responsibility to help others control their tongues. If we overhear our brothers or sisters speak crude words, or words that go against the truth, then the burning coal should be used to cleanse their lips. This is one task we have to do, and we have to do it with care, for it will likely cause pain and anger. Very often, we dare not use this burning coal, so we use honey instead. Everyone prefers to hear sweet and gentle words, but honey is unable to remove this sin. Ultimately, we have to brace ourselves and let the hot coal do its cleansing job.

Let us ask God to use a live coal to cleanse our own lips, and to grant us the wisdom to take a burning coal to cleanse the lips of others.

"A wise man does not become angry when wronged; he knows that God is watching and will righteously judge. So he yields to God and does not retaliate. He relies on God to remove the anger in his heart, and seeks peace from God."

"A religious man is someone who fears and praises God, while bridling his tongue. Therefore, we should avoid speaking lewd words that defile. The things we say originate from within our heart. If our hearts are truly holy, we will not speak unclean words."

BURNING COALS OF GRACE

John 21 relates how, after the Lord Jesus was crucified, the disciples lost hope and returned to fishing. They were no longer concerned with preaching the kingdom of God. On this occasion, they had worked through the night and were tired, cold and hungry, but had failed to catch anything; this would impact their livelihoods. They had labored in vain. But in the morning, Jesus appeared and directed them, resulting in a bursting net full of large fish—153 in total.

Later, when the disciples returned to shore, they saw a fire of coals and fish. Jesus said to them, "Come and eat breakfast." If you had been one of the disciples, there and then, how would you have felt? They had let Jesus down and had chosen to disbelieve Him. But when He appeared before them, He did not rebuke them. He instructed them to go and catch fish, and they caught so many. What was even more touching was that Jesus had prepared breakfast. There was a coal fire, from which the disciples could draw warmth, and there was fish to satisfy their hunger.

When the Lord Jesus restored them, the disciples must have been so moved that they resolved never to let the Lord down again. From then on, they would remain faithful to the Lord. From then on, they would live for the Lord. They understood just how much the Lord loved them. When Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" (Jn 21:15), He was referring to the net of 153 fish, and the miracle behind the catch. These were large fish, enough to earn a good wage. In other words, Jesus was asking Peter if he only wanted the miracle, the fish, and the livelihood. Peter understood. Jesus asked the question three times, and each time Peter replied, "You know that I love You."

Today, Jesus is also asking us, "Do you love Me more than these?" While we enjoy God's grace, we should ask the Holy Spirit to move us, to constantly remember to repay His grace. We can never fully repay God's grace, but if we are willing to offer Him our best—like the widow who offered two mites—then the Lord will be pleased with us.

Often, we do not think twice about spending our time, money and effort on the things of the world. People queue for hours to buy something special for themselves or their loved ones. If we are willing to brave the elements for hours to wait for something, but say to God, "Please forgive me, I do not have time to worship You," then we are deceiving ourselves. God knows where, how and to whom we are willing to dedicate our time, money and effort—be careful not to waste these on things we will regret.

Let us treasure our time and take every opportunity to love, worship and serve the Lord. He first sacrificed Himself for us, and His love compels us to respond to His calling. The most moving act in John 21 was Jesus preparing breakfast for His disciples who were weak in faith and about to depart from Him. He was concerned that they were cold and hungry. He fulfilled their needs and restored them before seeking their devotion. Truly the love of the Lord is limitless.

Perhaps, in the past, we loved the world more than we did God. As we understand more about His love, we ought to carefully examine ourselves and seek to love Him more.

We may wonder: Since the Lord is in heaven, how do I love Him? The Lord lacks nothing, what can I offer Him? We can offer our best to the church. The church of the Lord is here in the world. While some may claim that the church is merely a group of human beings, we know that the church is the body of Christ purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). We should repay God's love by putting in our best efforts to help, love and support the church. When Christ comes again, this church will be lifted up. Are we part of the church? Is what we say or do helping or harming the church? These are fundamental questions, because they concern the salvation of our soul.

CONCLUSION

Each of these three coal-related scenarios is necessary in sustaining our spiritual lives. The coal fire prepared by the Lord Jesus fulfills our needs, satisfies our soul, and inspires us to serve Him to the end. The burning coal that touches our mouth cleanses our tongue so that our speech may be pure and glorifying to the Lord, and that our hearts may remain undefiled. The burning coal heaped on the head reminds us to respond to evil with good, illuminating our hearts with the peace and joy of the Lord. May these three types of coal burn brightly in our lives, to sustain and empower us for our journey to the heavenly kingdom. Amen.

"Today, Jesus is also asking us, "Do you love Me more than these?" While we enjoy God's grace, we should ask the Holy Spirit to move us, to constantly remember to repay His grace."

Carlos Juan
Tampa, Florida, USA

God Loves Sinners

LIFE BEFORE KNOWING GOD

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I bear testimony.

I moved from Puerto Rico to Florida, USA, when I was five years old. My family is middle class and I received a good education. My parents are still married today, and I grew up with a lot of love and support. But despite these things, I went down the wrong path. I cannot point to a specific moment where everything went wrong; it was more like a series of events, where things gradually went from bad to worse.

When I was eight or nine years old, I was molested by a family friend who was babysitting us. I knew intuitively that this was a shameful and disgusting act, but as a child I could not process that what had just occurred was wrong. The perpetrator made it seem as if it was normal. Perhaps, if I had told my parents, I would have received the support that I needed to overcome this trauma. Maybe all I needed was a loving embrace and some encouraging words from my mother to tell me that everything would be alright. But I did not know any better and I dared not tell a soul. From that point on, I became numb to the world, and I navigated through life with a broken moral compass. Everything bad did not seem as such, and consequences did not have the same impact on me as it did on others.

Descending into Darkness

In my early teens, I was blessed to go to a private school, where I was actively involved in sports. But I was lost. I led multiple lives: one at home, one at school, and one on the streets with the neighborhood kids. I tried hard to fit in. At thirteen, I picked up a cigarette, and quickly moved on to marijuana. By

“From that point on, I became numb to the world, and I navigated through life with a broken moral compass. Everything bad did not seem as such, and consequences did not have the same impact on me as it did on others.”

my late teens, I would buy a box of fifty cigars, split them open and replace the tobacco with marijuana. I would be high all day. I experimented with everything: ecstasy, LSD, Xanax, cocaine and alcohol. Ecstasy will destroy you mentally: it plays with the brain's melatonin and serotonin levels; I have trouble sleeping to this day. Xanax is a muscle relaxant that slows your heart rate and can be fatal if abused. I have had several friends die in their sleep from mixing Xanax and alcohol. I have blacked out and woken up in strange places—on the floor in a random house, in my front yard, in a car with the engine running in an empty parking lot—with no idea how I got there.

By age twenty-five, I was a mess, with no clue as to how I came to be like this. By this time, I already had a child, but was completely out of control. My parents had lost all hope. My friends and I put poison on the streets, selling large amounts of marijuana and cocaine. We got into fights and drank till we passed out. I can look back now and see how stupid it was; there were many times I acted recklessly and put my life at risk, narrowly avoiding death. It is only by God's mercy that I am still here today.

Turning Points

My friend Americo once said to me, "If you look back and replay different moments in your life, you can see that Jesus was with you all along."

One day, I prayed to God to deliver me from my dependency on drugs. I was basically high all the time, and I no longer wanted to live like this. I was not sure who I was praying to, but I prayed in faith. Amazingly, after that prayer, every time I smoked marijuana I began to experience panic attacks. So I stopped taking drugs altogether. However, my addiction moved to alcohol, to the extent that I would drink an entire bottle of tequila in one go. Once again, I reached another breaking point, so I prayed to God again, since it had worked the first time. Sure enough, I started to become sick whenever I drank alcohol, so I gave that up. It is unusual to quit alcohol and drugs so easily. I still did not believe in God, but, looking back, I can see that He saved me from the worst physical and emotional effects of long-term drug and alcohol addiction. Now, there are times I am forgetful and distracted—but at least I can pray, read and remember the word of God.

Brother Carlos Juan and his two sons.

When I initially got into selling drugs, I set the goal of making five thousand dollars, and then I would quit. But then five thousand turned to ten thousand, and ten turned to twenty. You become accustomed to making easy money, and working a regular job becomes challenging. Eventually, I got involved in music production, nightclub promotions and concerts. Seeing this as my way out, I partnered with someone in the industry and we set up a legitimate marketing company, where we expanded into graphics, printing and sign-making for small businesses. I felt like I was finally getting my life back on track.

SEARCHING FOR GOD

Around this time, I had an encounter with a fortune-teller, who shared things about my personal life that no one else knew. I know now that fortune-tellers play for the wrong team—they are not from God—but this incident started me on my journey in search for the truth.

I was very serious about searching for God, but I am a skeptical person. I went about it logically, visiting Buddhist temples, Catholic churches (my family are devout Catholics), and reading up on all the different world religions. I practiced Santeria (a Cuban religion, mixing African voodoo with Catholicism), New Age and different types of meditation. But after all my searching and praying, Jesus would dominate my thoughts.

As I was looking for work one day, I stumbled across a daycare where I could give a quote for a sign replacement. This was when I met Brother Randy, Deacon Solgot's son. When I told him that I

"I can look back now and see how stupid it was; there were many times I acted recklessly and put my life at risk, narrowly avoiding death. It is only by God's mercy that I am still here today."

could return on Saturday to replace the sign, he said that he would be at church that day. I was intrigued by a church that worshiped on Saturdays, so I told him that I would like to go with him.

To Randy's surprise, I turned up at the True Jesus Church in Tampa that Saturday with my younger son, who was three years old. I remember feeling so welcomed. I grew up with a Catholic background, where the atmosphere of worship was very reserved. So when I experienced the loud praying in tongues of the True Jesus Church, I was not sure how I felt. I had previously attended a Pentecostal church close to my home, but their tongue-speaking was not the same. In fact, my son had been afraid at that experience. On the surface, they were worshipping God with the right intentions, but now I can see clearly that the spirit was wrong. In contrast, when my son and I witnessed the prayers of the True Jesus Church members, we were not afraid, and everyone seemed normal when they got up afterwards. My son knew before I did that this was the right church, which is something I hold dear to this day. It took longer for me to be convinced. For a period of six months, I would come and go and ask many questions. Even after receiving the Holy Spirit, like doubting Thomas, I continued to look elsewhere for the truth. Yet, the Holy Spirit always led me back to the True Jesus Church.

Receiving the Holy Spirit

About three months in, I received the Holy Spirit while praying at church. Suddenly, my tongue started to roll and I knew I had received the Holy Spirit. Even though I am an anxious person, in that moment, I felt no fear. It was as if there was no one else around me—it was just me and God.

However, even after this experience, I had my doubts. As with many people in my situation, I could not shake off my skepticism. We humans are constrained by the laws of nature, but when God gets involved, He bends those laws. Our brains do not have the capacity to process this kind of information. I began to question God and the Holy Spirit in prayer. I fasted and meditated for four days to gain clarity, but would refuse to pray, believing that the movement of my tongue was something I was controlling. I was testing God. For those four days, I felt empty and was a complete mess. By the fourth day, I had had enough, but when I wanted to pray, I could not. I called Brother Randy, who suggested that I put a prayer request to our prayer group, which we facilitate through Google Hangout. When it was time to pray, I started to roll my tongue with my own effort. But I knew this was futile, so I gave up. But as I stood, I felt someone gently pushing me to kneel down and pray. There was a fire in the pit of my stomach that wanted to burst out. I started to pray, and it was one of the most powerful prayers I have ever experienced. After a long prayer, I got up and felt full again—full of joy and full of life. It was an experience I could never forget; God had answered my doubts. Since that day, I have never doubted God again.

> *"There was a fire in the pit of my stomach that wanted to burst out. I started to pray, and it was one of the most powerful prayers I have ever experienced. ...I got up and felt full again—full of joy and full of life. It was an experience I could never forget; God had answered my doubts. Since that day, I have never doubted God again."*

Finding Home

One time, I had a moment of crisis: I started to feel out of place; as I looked around the church, I felt I could not relate to most of the other members. We were just too different. I felt the need to connect with someone who looked, talked, and thought like me. That week, I received a phone call from an old friend who had given her life to the Lord. I accepted her invitation to attend her church, and was pleased to see a couple of people there from my time in the streets. One of them used to be a Santeria priest. He had even performed some animal sacrifices and rituals for me when I was trying to avoid being arrested. I was so glad to see that these old friends were alive and well, and had completely turned their lives around to follow God. I remember standing around in a circle with my old friends; we all had these big goofy smiles on our faces. I really felt at home with them. But when the service began, just as quickly as I had sat down, I got up and left. Although I was grateful to see people who were just like me, who had a heart to seek after God, I felt as if something was missing. It felt incomplete. The Holy Spirit helped me to discern between true and false, and led me back home to the True Jesus Church.

There are around forty thousand different Christian denominations. Having attended a number of different churches, I have a good understanding of how they have deviated from the early church of Acts. They may appear to be joyful, loving Christians, who pray and serve God, but there is always something missing. The word of God says that the Spirit will lead us into all truth, and without the Holy Spirit, we will not be able to recognize truth from heresy.

SPIRITUAL BATTLES BEFORE BAPTISM

In 2012, I decided to be baptized. My older son chose not to join me (he would later be baptized in 2016), and I was not sure if it was the right thing to baptize my younger son. Before my own baptism, it seemed as though the universe was trying to stop me. I had several nightmares and visions. Things were tense at home and I was struggling to transition spiritually from the world to the church. My younger son was supposed to be baptized on

the same day as me, in June 2012, but he got sick. Although I was baptized, my son's baptism had to be rescheduled. I continued to have nightmares. I had a dream that a black panther was stalking my son, carefully circling him. On another occasion, I was asleep and I could feel a snake crawling on me. I can remember the thickness of the snake and the feeling of it covering my neck. I could feel its scales pinching my skin as it slithered across it. I jumped up quickly and saw it on my bed. After turning on the light, I watched it crawl under my bed, and then it disappeared. I was terrified. These events continued happening until both of my boys were baptized.

Although I was a skeptic, the presence of evil cannot be denied. Paul writes that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities (Eph 6:12). Even though I had experienced all kinds of evil, fortune-tellers and voodoo priests, I still wanted to deny these things and just live a normal life. But my life—our lives as True Jesus Church members—is anything but normal.

Early on the morning of my younger son's rescheduled baptism, he had one of the worst asthma attacks he has ever had. He had to go to hospital, and the baptism was again cancelled. But after all I had experienced, I was certain he should be baptized. At the third attempt, in October 2013, my parents had planned a vacation for us, but I was not going to miss this baptism for the world. We woke up at 5 a.m. to drive one and a half hours to get there on time. During the baptism, Brother Randy received a vision of the water and the sky turning red. He started to cry. Two families were baptized that day, and I was encouraged by the accompanying signs.

THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSFORMATION

Of course, baptism is not the end of the journey, it is only the beginning. Titus 3:5 mentions "the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." I had to be continually renewed, but I took it one day at a time. For a while, I would curse by mistake. But thank God for His conviction and for the gift of reflection. Through my prayers, I was able to see clearly God's will for my life, which was for me to start afresh with new friends, new ways of thinking and behaving. I still live in my old neighborhood, where I caused a lot of trouble for other people. But miraculously, it is as if God has made me invisible to them, so I never see anyone who may have a problem with me.

When you make yourself available for God's will, He will lead you on a different path, even when you remain in the same location. I have had the honor of reaching out to several of my friends. Some are happy for me, others think I am crazy. But one of them has started coming to church, and another is baptized. Thank God that He was willing to use me in this small way.

Learning to Let Go and Find Peace

Today, six years after my baptism, I am still single. This was extremely difficult at first, after living the way I used to live. But I wanted to do things the right way, and wait for the woman God would choose for me.

Less than two years into my Christian walk, I met a beautiful woman with whom I had an amazing connection. She was also a survivor of childhood abuse, so we felt we could heal together. But the more emotionally involved we got, the less clearly I could hear God. I could not focus in church services. Eventually, Brother Randy pulled me aside and expressed his concern. I thank God for his support and encouragement, because in that moment I realized that I had to make a choice.

I thought it would be easy to end the relationship. But feelings are funny, and can rise up when least expected. One day, I was at home, having a shower and

> *"The realization hit me that I was a victim of abuse and that I could be alone forever. I was on my knees, crying in the shower—I was falling into a dark place, spiritually and emotionally, and I needed to be lifted up."*

> *“I fall often along my journey, but get right back up. For me, the evidence of God’s existence lies in the change that takes place in all of our hearts, and this motivates me every day to keep fighting the good fight.”*

speaking to God in my heart. I began to question why He would allow this to happen to me. After surviving abuse and depression, and going through all kinds of terrible experiences, it felt like meeting this woman was the one good thing to happen to me. So for God to say that she does not belong to me felt so unfair. The realization hit me that I was a victim of abuse and that I could be alone forever. I was on my knees, crying in the shower—I was falling into a dark place, spiritually and emotionally, and I needed to be lifted up. Then, a piece of Scripture came to my mind:

“So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”
(Lk 11: 9–10)

This strengthened me to say to God, “This is what you have promised, Lord. I am asking for nothing but some encouragement.” In that moment, I felt a complete peace; I knew that God was going to answer my prayer. I was even excited to see how He would do it. After this, I went to the mall, but everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. Someone took the parking space I was going to take; the person in front of me at the tea shop dropped his change on the floor, holding up the queue. As I walked out toward the food court, three church members crossed my path. They were new to my local church, and lived nowhere near the mall—in fact, in a different city. But their reservation at a restaurant was cancelled, so they decided to get ice cream at the mall. These unlikely events meant that I was entering the food court just as they were leaving—God’s arrangement. Indeed, when we sat down to talk, they gave me the words of encouragement that I needed to hear.

A few months later, I was still speaking to my female companion, but I knew I had to choose between my faith and my friendship with her. For a few days, I had strange dreams about seeing her car, but the car was always empty. A couple days later, she told me she had similar dreams too: she would keep seeing my car on the road, but it would also be empty. She asked me, “What do you think it means?” But I knew what it meant—I told her we could not talk any more. By then, I was pretty rooted in the truth and could see where God was leading me. Unfortunately, she had come to church a few times, but still had her doubts. She was headed in a different direction, so we had to go our separate ways.

Without the Holy Spirit, we are like a leaf blown by the wind. We will try to use our own logic to figure out where God is. I feel privileged to have received the Holy Spirit, because I have never been so rooted in the word of God as I am now.

REFLECTIONS ON GOD’S CALLING

There were many moments in my life when I could have gone to prison or been killed. I have suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts. There have even been times on my Christian walk that I wanted to give up. But it is only by God’s mercy that I am still here.

My sons are now aged ten and twenty. They have both seen the change in me. The elder one has been with me throughout this journey of soul-searching and seeking God. He came with me to Buddhist temples, fortune-tellers, and so on. He was old enough to understand what was going on and decide what he believed. I did not have to force anything. He wrote me a touching Father’s Day card one year, saying that even though I had not been a father to him for much of his life, I was there for the best part—when I introduced him to God.

Both my sons know about my past and all the negativity that came with it. I think it is right for them to know, because the lifestyle of the streets holds a certain mystique for young people. But I want to teach my sons that Jesus Christ is cool, and that He is the true revolutionary.

In prayer, God has impressed these Scriptures on my heart:

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)

And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. *(Mk 16:15–16)*

If Brother Randy had not invited me to church, there is a possibility I could be dead or in jail. So these two verses affirm my calling to me, and I take my calling very seriously.

The calling of God seems so clear to some people, but not so much for others. I believe the call is equally clear to all, but only some are open to listening. There is a clear divide between good and evil, and the existence of the one true God only becomes clearer as you read the word, pray and attend church services regularly.

I am too scared to preach on the pulpit, but I love to invite people to church and reach out to those who are lost, and share my testimony. This is our true purpose: to use the gifts God has given us to glorify Him. If cleaning is how you glorify God, then do it to the best of your ability. I do what I can for the Lord, whenever I can. I fall often along my journey, but get right back up. For me, the evidence of God’s existence lies in the change that takes place in all of our hearts, and this motivates me every day to keep fighting the good fight.

FF Chong
London, UK

Overcoming Affliction for the Gospel

On the surface, pioneering work in Africa seems difficult: one is forced to live without creature comforts, handle numerous culture shocks, and live through weeks on just bare essentials. As a result, repeat visits in the field are rare. However, serving God in harsh conditions brings many spiritual blessings, which more than make up for the physical discomfort. The lessons learned under such circumstances are invaluable.

A common problem, when doing pioneering work in Africa, is coming into contact with illness and disease. Despite modern medical science, personal health and safety precautions, there is no such thing as being one hundred percent immune from disease. Sometimes, despite the worker's utmost caution, God will use affliction to teach the worker. This testimony is about one such lesson I received from God during my service in Africa.

ILLNESS BEGINS IN KENYA

In 2002, I was assigned to minister in Kenya. The work was going smoothly until one afternoon when I was conducting water baptism. I suddenly noticed swellings on my left thigh, right foot, and other parts of my body; I also began to pick up a temperature. Initially, I thought I would sleep it off, hoping that some rest would ease the swelling. However, the pain in my thigh became so bad that I could neither walk nor sleep.

That night was indeed a sleepless one. I prayed throughout the night, sincerely asking God to have mercy on me. I was anxious for daybreak so that I could seek medical help. After consulting a local church worker, I was persuaded to see a doctor at a private hospital in Kisumu. When the doctor saw the swellings, he was shocked and asked me what I had done to myself. I did not know how to respond. In the end, I was given two antibiotic injections, and left the hospital feeling quite dejected at the doctor's perplexed reaction.

The swellings subsided and the day of my return to the United Kingdom (UK) arrived. Swellings were still visible on my face, and it took some time for them to completely disappear. Foolishly, I did not see a doctor when I arrived home. I thought that the disappearance of the swellings meant I was better and ready to continue God's work. At that point, I had no idea I had contracted a liver infection. My ignorance proved costly, and it severely impacted my subsequent trips to Kenya.

ILLNESS WORSENS ON RETURNING TO KENYA

The following year when I returned to Kenya, the infection that caused the swellings relapsed severely. A number of boils appeared around my waist and grew to the size of dove eggs. When burst, they seeped pus, and the pain was torturous. I struggled with basic movements and my sleep was badly affected. I debated internally whether I should return to the UK early to seek medical help. However, part of me felt I must rely on God and continue as planned. I was quite torn in deciding the best course of action: my body cried out for help, yet my mind was uncertain. To make matters worse, the next location on our itinerary was Sigulu Island, located in the middle of Lake Victoria in Ugandan territory, East Africa. This was a place so remote that basic necessities do not exist: there were no toilets or washrooms. Knowing what I would face, my desire to leave only grew stronger.

The night before our departure, I prayed to God to help me make a decision. To my surprise, prayer empowered my will to continue God's work. My fears were driven away and I was no longer unsettled: I was determined to continue as planned. We remained at Sigulu Island for four days, walking distances of up to five kilometers or more each day. During this time, God truly demonstrated His mercy and power on me whilst in this impoverished environment.

Before this particular trip, my wife had prepared a small first aid kit for me. To ensure no further infections, I carefully applied what was in the kit to the boils and affected areas. At the end of each day, I would sterilize some water for my shower, and change the dressings after showering. Each time I did this, I saw thick pus and blood clots. However, I noticed the boils reducing in size. The walking seemed to help. And by the last day, the boils had virtually disappeared. I still experienced twinges of pain but, by the grace of God, I was able to complete the trip without further complications. We even managed to visit some other places of worship to cater to the spiritual needs of the brethren there.

> *"I would not have been able to serve the Lord in Africa had He not given me strength, protection and, most importantly, life. Through my experiences, I have come to know God's work as living and true."*

FINALLY HEALED

Despite the healing of my skin, the liver infection persisted. More boils developed over the months after my return to the UK, but they were smaller than before. I was referred to the Royal Free Hospital in London for treatment and a liver biopsy was performed. This left me exhausted and in excruciating pain. During the course of my treatment, I was diagnosed with a fatty liver, non-alcohol related—a condition that required constant monitoring and further examination by the consultant. This involved yearly scans and blood tests to ensure no relapses occurred. After three years of careful monitoring and diet control, the doctors were happy with my progress and I was fully discharged.

DO NOT TAKE GOD'S WORK LIGHTLY

This experience left enduring reminders about our appreciation of God's presence and our attitude to God's work. We must not be nonchalant when taking up church assignments. Although the church may assign you to carry out a task, it is God who gives the ultimate green light on any project. I would not have been able to serve the Lord in Africa had He not given me strength, protection and, most importantly, life. Through my experiences, I have come to know God's work as living and true, rather than as just a concept preached from the pulpit. Furthermore, we must do all our work for God with a heart of thanksgiving and humility. There are many times when many of us could easily have perished had it not been for God's direct intervention in times of danger.

AFFLICTION PRODUCES A POSITIVE EFFECT

When serving God, not everything will go smoothly and easily; God allows afflictions to blight us when we work for Him. His intentions are clear: He makes all things work for the good of His children (Rom 8:28). With this in mind, affliction can be positive for our spiritual lives. I learned to trust in God despite my physical pain. I still remember how I prayed throughout that night of great agony and, in the process, received a heart of peace in the face of uncertainty. I managed to find strength only in the Lord. With this, I could then continue with the work until the very end.

Secondly, suffering can put us in the right frame of mind when serving God. It is not about doing what we want to do for God; rather, it is about what God wants us to do for Him, regardless of what state we find ourselves in. Some may judge my persistence in going to the poverty-stricken island despite my severe infection as reckless, foolish and unwise. I did not make that decision in a moment of extreme impulsiveness and madness. I had gone ahead because, after deep and earnest prayer, I was filled with a strong conviction to complete God's will.

Thirdly, suffering can produce genuine faith. When we exhibit faith in difficult circumstances, we see that the power of God manifests itself to achieve His will. Had I not been given faith in the first place to go to the island, I would not have been able to evangelize there. The joy and peace I had within me was boundless because I knew that God was there to help me face this ordeal. Furthermore, God gave me strength, endurance and wisdom to preach the gospel; I really thank God from the bottom of my heart.

Fourthly, affliction shapes us for the better. It makes us think about our

Preacher FF Chong and his wife.

relationship with God. During times of trouble, we reflect and desire to be closer to the Lord. The sense of uncertainty or loss drives us to make extra efforts to right the wrongs in our relationship with God. During the two years of my infection, whilst serving in Africa, I often took time to reflect over my work for God, my life, my inner being, and my faith. Although I was unwell, I found myself with time, energy and willingness to search deeply into my heart. It dawned on me that God is truly the sustainer of my servitude. Without Him, I would be a mere shell without the substance of a soul. I was only able to survive the trip because He mercifully chose to sustain me—thank God! I may not have experienced this affliction, and subsequent closeness to God, had I only served in comfortable environments. Complacency would have robbed me of the chance to learn these invaluable lessons.

Finally, affliction teaches us to be more understanding and empathetic towards others who are suffering. The perennially healthy can never envision the amount of endurance needed to fight an illness. Some illnesses are stubborn and recurrent in nature—a torment to the sufferer. Even though what I went through was not too severe, it has given me a clearer idea of how distressing and disruptive illness can be in a person's life. For those who suffer, assistance, comfort and encouragement from brothers and sisters are essential in uplifting the spiritual wellbeing of the sufferer. As such, the church must always be ready and willing to provide this support in times of need.

"It dawned on me that God is truly the sustainer of my servitude. Without Him, I would be a mere shell without the substance of a soul. I was only able to survive the trip because He mercifully chose to sustain me."

CONCLUSION: COUNT IT ALL JOY

It is understandable, given our human nature, to want to serve in comfortable and easy environments. However, when serving in a pioneering area, one must face the reality that hygiene levels and medical care may not be what we are used to, especially for those living in developed countries. Of course, if the church sends us to these areas, we must responsibly ensure we take precautions to prevent illness. Doing otherwise would be foolish and constitutes testing God, which is wrong. Yet, illnesses do happen and workers may fall ill when ministering in a pioneering area. If this happens to us, be positive, knowing that affliction brings about the fullness of God's mercy, grace, strength and power. In whatever circumstances, let our illness be a positive catalyst in our relationship with God, helping us draw ever closer to Him as we come before Him with humble, prayerful and grateful hearts.

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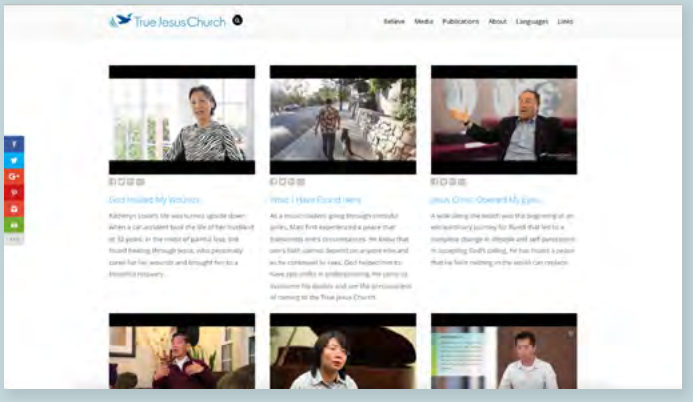

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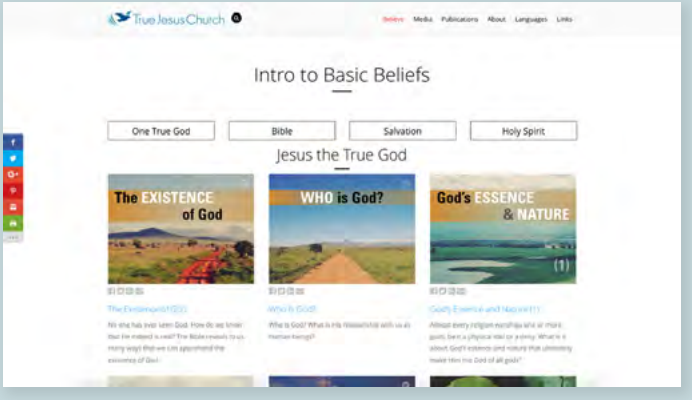

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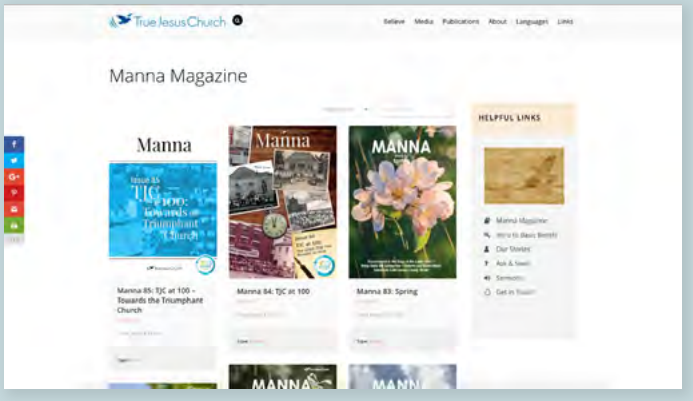

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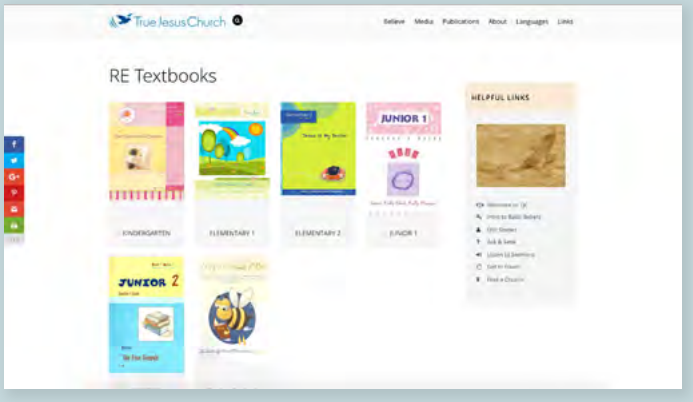

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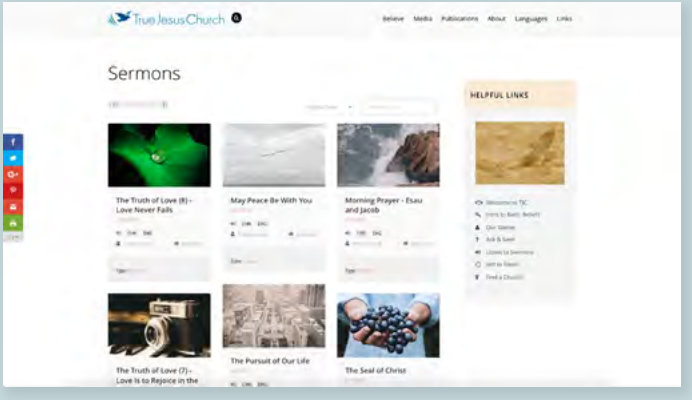

Sermons

lst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel
-to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people."

ion 14:6

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- 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.
- Do not plagiarize the work of other writers or institutions, published either in print or online. Any quotations, ideas, or concepts taken from other sources must be properly referenced.

Grammar/Style
- Use active instead of passive voice.
- Write concisely.
- Use concrete words and ideas instead of abstract concepts.
- Use "plain English" instead of obscure, academic language.
- Use the NKJV version when quoting Bible verses.
- Use American spelling, if possible. in print or online.

SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Please email articles as Microsoft Word documents 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.

Manna only accepts submissions written by True Jesus Church members. 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: 2500–3000 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: 2500–3000 words.

Exhortation

An Exhortation encourages and admonishes the reader in different aspects of the Christian faith.
Article length: 2000–2500 words.

Testimony

A Testimony recounts an experience in the Lord that will encourage and edify the reader.
Article length: 1500–2000 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?

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 Spirit

Receving the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, is the guarantee of our inheritence 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 it 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 in 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.

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.

Holy Bible

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

Baptism

Water baptism is the sacrament for the remission of sins for regeneration. The baptism must take place in natural living water, such as a river, sea, or spring. The baptist, who already has received baptisms 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 down.

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.

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.

Judgment Day

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

CONTACT INFORMATION

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

True Jesus Church, 21217 Bloomfield Ave, Lakewood, CA 90715 USA

Phone: +1-714-533-8889 | Fax: + 1-562-402-3190 | email: info@tjc.org | website: http://www.tjc.org