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03 Jan 10

Today, we celebrate the 37th anniversary of Calvary B-P Church. Thirty-seven years of blessings. Thirty-seven years of good times and not so good times. Whatever the case, undeniably, these are thirty-seven years of God's abiding presence in our midst. We praise God that He has never left us or forsake us. We have not been perfect in following our Lord Jesus. We have not been always faithful "*yet He abideth faithful: He cannot deny Himself*" (2 Timothy 2:13).

Today is also Dedication Sunday. This is an annual exercise where we re-consecrate ourselves to serve Him faithfully. To be sure, all of us stumble and struggle in our service for God. There are times when we feel like giving up. However, the annual dedication service reminds us to persevere. The Apostle Paul reminds us, "*Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect...Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:12-14).

Continuing with our series on the relationship between the member and the church (local congregation), one of the key responsibilities of a church member is his attendance at worship services. All worshippers must come with hearts prepared to praise and worship God. Charles Spurgeon writes, "There should be no stumbling into the place of worship half-asleep, no roaming here as if it were no more than going to a playhouse. We cannot expect to profit much if we bring with us a swarm of idle thoughts and a heart crammed with vanity. If we are full of folly, we may shut out the truth of God from our minds.

The key part of that worship is the preaching of God's Word. The ministry of the Word is central to a worship service, everything else leads to and supports the preaching of the Word of God. That is the attitude that worshippers must have when we worship. The Book of Acts records that the disciples "*continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*" (Acts 2:42), and that "*daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ*" (Acts 5:42).

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy that the local church is to "*give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine...[to] meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all*" (1 Timothy 4:13-15).

This begs the question. If the preaching of the Word of God is paramount in worship service and in the worshipper's life, why is the church resorting to gimmicks to keep worshippers in the church? Why do worshippers often complained of boredom and ineffective preaching?

One reason is the man who is responsible for preaching the Word of God. There are men who are not as well trained as they should be, and there are preachers who are not as well prepared as they should be. The late Rev. Timothy Tow used to tell his students, "Don't think that you can preach without preparation. If you do, when you are in the pulpit, sand will come out of your mouth."

We also have to recognize that God has given to every believer different gifts, and different measure of a same gift. "*But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:7). Not every one is called to preach. When Spurgeon started his pastors' college, he would turn away men who had a speech impediment. As far as Spurgeon is concerned, God has not given them the gift of preaching.

However, there is a more insidious reason for the worshippers' boredom when it comes to the ministry of the Word of God. It is the worshipper's attitude toward preaching and the preacher. Variety may be the spice of life. However, too much spices may kill the taste for simplicity. Sadly, the church has become a market place where the

worshippers are the consumers; they are the sermon tasters. The preacher is the cook. The consumers go to wherever they can get the most satisfaction. That is the reason members of a local church hop from church to church. And the preacher must always invent new concoctions to retain the worshippers.

This is not a new phenomenon. The church at Corinth is in love with wisdom of the world. Paul says to them, “*I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?*” (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

The Corinthians could not take strong meat because they thought they knew enough. Paul exposed the false wisdom. And there are believers who could not take strong meat because they are content with enough to get by but not enough to grow spiritually. The writer of Hebrews says, “*We have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*” (Hebrews 5:11-14).

Preaching is communication. Communication is a two-way street. One preaches and the other hears. The preacher teaches the Word of God. The worshipper meditates upon what he has heard. Even the world’s best orator would make no headway when he preaches to a brick wall. And worshippers have to carefully examine whether or not they are dull of hearing; whether or not they have built up a brick wall that would prevent their hearing of the Word of God.

Spurgeon says, “Men ought not to preach without preparation...men ought not to hear without preparation.” The prophet Hosea says, “Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the LORD, till he come and rain righteousness upon you” (Hosea 10:12). The people are commanded to break up the fallow ground. Our hearts must be prepared – turned in and out, up and down – in order that we may receive God’s Word. Here are some suggestions for us to hear God’s Word better in this new year.

- Prepare yourself physically. Sleep early on Saturday to be stay awake on Sunday.
- Block out the distractions during the Worship Service. Turn off the hand-phones. Follow the sermon by turning to the scriptural texts.
- Prepare your hearts for worship. “*Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully*” (Psalm 24:3-4).
- Pray for the preacher that God will use him to convict your hearts.
- Take notes during the sermon.
- Purpose in your heart to make the appropriate changes as a result of what you hear.

May the Lord bless the ministry of His Word so that the seed that is sown will fall on good ground so that you who “*heareth the word, and understandeth it [will] also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty*” (Matthew 13:23).

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Later this afternoon, the Evangelistic Band (E-Band) will meet at 1:00pm in Room 3.4 for an orientation programme to train and equip our members in door-to-door evangelism, giving out tracts and inviting them to Church. The E-Band is being reconstituted as we see a pressing need to reach out to the surrounding neighbourhoods with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To prepare for the Gospel Sunday on the fourth Lord's Day of the month, the E-Band will go out the Sunday before to the HDB blocks around our church. The E-Band will be working in tandem with the Mandarin Congregation.

The need for the Gospel at home is as pressing as that overseas. So please come and join the E-Band, and be a witness for our Lord Jesus Christ. "How shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:15).

We have been considering, over the last few weeks, the responsibilities of the church member in worship, specifically in the area of hearing and learning the Word of God. There is another area of church life that requires equal if not more attention, and that is corporate prayer. A church member ought to be praying with and for the church.

Corporate Prayer in the Bible

Corporate prayer is not a modern idea. Prayer has always been a vital part of the Jews' religious experience in the Old Testament. "*And [Solomon] stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands...kneeled down upon his knees before all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven, And said, O LORD God of Israel, there is no God like thee in the heaven, nor in the earth; which keepest covenant, and shewest mercy unto thy servants, that walk before thee with all their hearts: Thou which hast kept with thy servant David my father that which thou hast promised him; and spakest with thy mouth, and hast fulfilled it with thine hand, as it is this day*" (2 Chronicles 6:12-15). The prophet Isaiah describes the temple as a house of prayer. "*Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people*" (Isaiah 56:7).

In the Gospels, the life of our Lord Jesus was marked by prayer. He prayed alone (Luke 15:16). He prayed early in the morning (Mark 1:35). He prayed through the night (Luke 6:12). He prayed when He was on the cross (Luke 23:34). Our Lord did not train the disciples how to preach, but He taught them how to pray (Luke 11:1-2).

In the New Testament, the early church continued with the tradition of praying together. "*These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren*" (Acts 1:14, 4:24; Acts 6:4).

The success of the early church is the result of the people coming together in prayer. Prayer and unity of the church go hand in hand. When they prayed together, they were united; and they were united because they prayed together.

The church grew because the people were united in prayer. "*And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved*" (Acts 2:46-47). God delivered His people because the church prayed. "*Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him*" (Acts 12:5).

This raises an important point. As important as individual prayer are, there are blessings and benefits when the church gathers in one accord to pray. Paul told Timothy, "*I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications,*

prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men... I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (1 Timothy 2:1, 8). Paul is making the point that the church ought to be praying.

Corporate Prayer in Our Church

An important part of our worship service is the intercessory/pastoral prayer. This is a time when the elder or pastor of the church leads in the congregation prayer. While the worshippers do not pray aloud, we are to be actively participating in the intercessory prayer by listening and following the prayer, praying with him in the heart.

Members of the church can be involved by praying before, during and after the worship services that the Word of God will have free course in the lives of His people. This was Paul's prayer request to the church at Thessalonica, "*Brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified*" (2 Thessalonians 3:1). In the ministry of Charles Spurgeon, it is said that while he preached, there was a group of people who gathered in another room praying for him and the ministry of God's Word.

In our church, there are several prayer meetings in a week: Tuesday night prayer meeting, Agape Prayer Fellowship on Thursday afternoon; pre-worship service prayer meetings at 9:30am and 3:30pm. Besides these, there are fellowship groups prayer meetings usually held before each fellowship group meeting. The church office staff also has a prayer meeting every Thursday morning. As much as possible, avail yourselves to one if not all of these prayer meetings.

In November, our church will have a week of prayer. Every evening, from Tuesday to Friday, we will meet together in church to pray for our church, our country, and for one another. "*Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much*" (James 5:16).

No Christian will deny the importance of prayer in his/her life. So I want to encourage you to include coming to prayer meeting as one of your top priorities in 2010. "*Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning [all elements of praying]: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil*" (Joel 2:12-13). God told Solomon, "*If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land*" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

The church leaders will do our part in praying for you. "*God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way*" (1 Samuel 12:23). And you will have to do your part by praying for us and with us (1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1; Col. 4:2-3).

May the LORD bless our church as we unite in prayer!

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If we wait for people to come into our church building, this Great Commission will never be carried out. Our Lord Jesus says, "*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*" (Mark 16:15). The command from our Lord Jesus Christ is to GO! So later this afternoon, the Evangelistic Band (E-Band) will be going around the neighbourhoods. I would encourage you to join the E-Band and bring the Gospel to the homes around the church.

Let me also encourage you to continue to pray for the church. It is encouraging to see more of you coming to the Tuesday Night prayer meeting. There is still room for more, so let us continue to pray together as a church. One challenge: how about having every family in the church represented by one member before the throne of grace every Tuesday night?

Sacraments of the Church

In the Old Testament, God gave the children of Israel many religious rites and rituals. These were meticulously spelt out in the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Old Testament. These rites and rituals were to distinguish the children of Israel from the rest of the people. These rites were covenantal in nature, meaning to say that they reminded the Israelites that they belonged to God.

God first told Abraham, *“I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations”* (Genesis 17:7-9).

As a seal of that covenant, God gave the sign of circumcision. *“This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant”* (Genesis 17:10-14).

Note the import that God gave the covenantal sign of circumcision. The person who was born in or bought into the house of Abraham must be circumcised. Whosoever was not circumcised would be cut off from God’s covenant. No man in the Old Testament could be part of God’s covenant if he was not circumcised.

The other important covenantal sign was the Passover. *“And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt. And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever”* (Exodus 12:13-14). Again, the children of Israel were commanded to observe the Passover.

In the New Testament, our Lord Jesus established two covenants – baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Both sacraments (some would describe them as “ordinances”) are to be taken seriously. Yet, there are many Christians today who make light of these sacraments due to ignorance or neglect.

Baptism

The first of our Lord’s two sacraments is baptism. Our Lord Jesus commands, *“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”* (Matthew 28:19). While we reject the unbiblical teaching of baptismal regeneration, we obey God’s command to baptize. Water baptism does not save, but we baptize because it is God’s command. And every born again believer would want to obey God by being baptized.

In the New Testament, when a person was converted, he was also baptized. Example: the believers at Pentecost (Acts 2:38); the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:36-37); Paul (Acts 9:18); Cornelius (Acts 10:46-48).

Contrary to the teaching in some churches today, baptism was not an option for the first century believers. They believed and they were baptized. Again, it is not because one had to be baptized to be saved, but baptism was the first outward expression of a person’s faith in and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ. And obeying God’s commandment is proof of our love for Him (John 14:15; 1 John 2:3) and that we know Him.

Infant Baptism

Our church also practise infant baptism. There are some Bible-believing Christians who do not believe in infant baptism, and some even go as far as describing Presbyterians and those who practise infant baptism as adopting Roman Catholic practices. To begin with, we do not believe baptism saves – whether it is believer’s baptism or infant baptism. So that immediately separates us from the Roman Catholic practice of infant baptism.

We practise infant baptism because of our understanding of covenant theology. We believe that God deals with His people not as individuals but as a family. God told Abraham, *“I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee”* (Genesis 17:7). God’s covenant is that Abraham and his children would come to know of God’s blessings through faith in what God has promised. Note that the blessings do not come because of a person’s participation in some rite. The blessings come solely by the grace and mercy of God.

What does an Old Testament covenant got to do with the New Testament church? God said it is an everlasting covenant. Furthermore, Paul writes, *“Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham”* (Galatians 3:6-9).

The Bible tells us that Abraham *“believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness”* (Genesis 15:6), and then he was circumcised (Genesis 17:11). Abraham believed and then he was circumcised. The covenantal sign was made to express a person’s faith in God. Why, then, did God also ask Abraham to circumcise his children (at eight days old), when the baby was not able to express his faith in God.

Paul writes, *“And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also”* (Romans 4:11). He makes the distinction between the sign and the seal.

The Westminster Confession of Faith elaborates: *“Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace...”* (WCF, Chap. 28.1).

Besides the sign of circumcision which God had commanded, Paul mentions the *“seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.”* A seal bears the mark of authenticity. The seal on a document proves its validity and authenticity. It is a pledge of honour by the person who has promised to do whatever terms that he had agreed to.

The validity of a seal does not depend on the terms of the covenant being met. It is just like a man who puts his signature (a kind of seal) on contract to build a house. The contractors begin to build even before the man fully pays for the construction of the house. Likewise, circumcision was a seal of God that He would bless according to His sovereign will and grace. The WCF says this concerning water baptism, **“The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered;** yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongs unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in His appointed time.” In other words, with regard to infants, the sacrament is not tied to their faith in God.

This concept of this covenant continues in the New Testament; however, there is a change in the covenant sign. The sign of circumcision was replaced by water baptism. *“And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead”* (Col. 2:10-12; see also Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 9:14).

The early church also forbade the practice of circumcision (Acts 15:24; 28-29). The Apostle Paul also wrote, *“For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love”* (Galatians 5:6).

Conclusion

The sign of baptism is not an indication that those who received are saved. No sacrament can confer that which is the work of grace by Christ alone. Infant baptism also does not mean that salvation is certainly and necessarily assured in the future.

When a child is presented for baptism, it is important that parents realise their responsibilities to nurture their children in the holy faith. When parents present their children for baptism, it is a consecration of their hands and heart to nurture the child the ways of God. In the baptism of our children – who are the “heritage of the LORD,” God asks us not simply to trust Him, but to remember that He trusts us with His very own.

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The Bible gives us four keys to the success of a church (Acts 2:42). They are the apostles' doctrine, which is the ministry of preaching and teaching; the breaking of bread, which is the administration of the sacraments; prayers, which is the ministry of intercession; and fellowship. "To have fellowship" means "to participate," or "to share in a common interest." In the Greek language, the root is *koinos*, which means "common to all."

The role of members in a church therefore demands that we emphasize the commonness of all. The church is made up of people from diverse backgrounds in terms of culture, race, intellect, etc. But there is a commonness in all the members and believers that overrides all the differences.

These differences are bridged in a church when members serve one another. God has given to every believer gifts with which he/she can minister to others. Consider the following scripture passages.

- *"Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ" (Ephesians 4:7).*
- *"As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever" (1 Peter 4:10-11).*

In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul says that *"God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, **helps**, governments, diversities of tongues"* (1 Corinthians 12:28).

Who and what are the helps? It seems to be a word that covers every aspect of assistance. Sometime ago, I said that Calvary BP Church ought to be a congregation of ministers. The Church needs all sorts of help and helpers. The help could be spiritual or physical.

Physical Help

The Church needs help of people to distribute the weekly, to maintain the building, to drive the older folks to church, to arrange the tables and chairs, to control the sound system, to direct traffic, to prepare the sanctuary for Lord's Day Worship, and a myriad of other jobs.

I remember the time when our church was building the expansion. Every Saturday afternoon, there was a team of people who came to church to mob, vacuum, sweep, wipe so that the sanctuary would be ready for worship the following day.

The Church needs help. Walk around the church. See if there is anything that needs fixing, anything that needs cleaning, and anything that needs to be thrown away. Are you a fixer? Can you help? Will you?

Be a deliverer. The *Daily Manna* is now being distributed in Malaysia, Australia, Canada. If you are heading to these places, please contact the church office to see if they need help in any delivery. That would save the church postage.

Hospitality Helps

The concept of co-labouring and serving one another is also seen in Paul's epistle to the Romans. *"Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness"* (Romans 12:6-8).

Paul exhorts those who minister, to wait on our ministering. "Ministry" is the word that is translated "deacon." The original role of a deacon was to "serve tables" (Acts 6:2), which would include the ministry of providing comfort and relief for the poor and sick. In Romans 12:7, "ministry" is a generic term for service of any kind. It speaks of the believer who goes out of the way to help another person.

In our context, the work of waiting on ministry would be to be friendly and hospitable to visitors who come to our Church. The Church ought to be a place where people feel welcomed and loved. The only way visitors feel that way is not by a general welcome over the pulpit, but from the members of the Church who sit behind, in front and beside the visitor.

I visited a Church once and was seated next to an old lady, and when she learned that we were visiting, she went out of the way to make us feel as though we had been her old friends. After the worship service, she introduced me to her friends. I can still remember what she had done which goes to show the deep impression that she left on me.

Every visitor to the church is a guest. And all of us can serve as ushers and hosts and hostesses of the church. Have an open hymnal or Bible for the visitor. Turn the hymnal especially when it comes to those anthems which we have memorized – Gloria Patri, Doxology, etc. Move a little to free up some space. Smile. Greet. Be friendly. There are many ways to show small courtesies to new friends that would make their visit to our worship services more pleasant and less intimidating.

Do not judge a person by his/her external appearances. *“For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?”* (James 2:2-4).

I recognise that it is natural and convenient to hang out with the people with whom you are familiar, and that it requires effort to reach out to some one new, especially if the person does not fit into our profile of “good people.” James’ exhortation is that we should not prejudge a person by his outward appearance. To do so is to think evil.

At the turn of the last century, Charles Sheldon wrote a book entitled *In His Steps*. The story is based on a fictional church pastored by Henry Maxwell. One Friday morning, a vagabond appeared at the front door of the church while the Reverend Maxwell was preparing for his sermon on Sunday morning.

Maxwell briefly listened to the man’s pleas for help before curtly brushing him away and showing him the door. The man appeared in church at the end of the Sunday sermon, walked up to the front of the pulpit, and faced the people. And he began to state the facts.

“I heard some people singing at a church prayer meeting the other night,

“All for Jesus, all for Jesus, All my being’s ransomed powers, All my thoughts, and all my doings, All my days, and all my hours.” And I kept wondering as I sat on the steps outside just what they meant by it. It seems to me there’s an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn’t exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don’t understand. But **what would Jesus do?** Is that what you mean by following His steps? It seems to me sometimes as if the people in the big churches had good clothes and nice houses to live in, and money to spend for luxuries, and could go away on summer vacations and all that, while the people outside the churches, thousands of them, I mean, die in tenements, and walk the streets for jobs, and never have a piano or a picture in the house, and grow up in misery and drunkenness and sin.”

Then he collapsed and soon after, died.

That event changed the Rev. Maxwell, and he presented this challenge to his congregation, “Do not do anything without first asking, ‘What would Jesus do?’” The full title of the book is *In His Steps: What would Jesus do?*

Yes, what would Jesus do? What would you who bear the name of Christ do? We can all begin to be a congregation of ministers by beginning using your gifts to serve God and to minister to one another. “Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13).

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“Ignorance is bliss,” so the proverb says. That may be true in some cases. But it is certainly not true when it comes to a person’s spiritual gifts. In fact, the Apostle Paul told the Christians at Corinth, *“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant”* (1 Cor. 12:1). The reason is a regenerate person has a renewed mind, and he must not remain in ignorant bliss concerning his spiritual gifts. A second reason is that the diversity of gifts within a body of believers must work together for the unity of that body.

Every believer has a unique role in the local church. Every member is blessed with unique spiritual gifts to use to minister to one another (1 Pet. 4:10). Therefore, a church member who does not employ his spiritual gifts within the local assembly is doing a disservice to himself and the church. The church suffers from his non-contribution. By sidelining himself, the member never experiences the joy that comes from using his spiritual gifts to serve God and others.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul explains why it is important to use our gifts to serve one another. *“But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ...And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ...From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love”* (Eph. 4:7-16).

The Different Types of Gifts

Spiritual gifts – *“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant”* (1 Cor. 12:1). “Spiritual gifts” are gifts of a spiritual nature, meaning to say that these gifts are not natural, meaning to say they can be but not necessarily natural abilities. Example: a person may have the gift of making music, but if he is not using that gift to serve God, his natural ability is not a spiritual gift.

Grace gifts – *“Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit”* (1 Cor. 12:4). Here, the word “gifts” is derived from the word “grace.” Grace gifts also are not natural ability. By definition, grace is God’s undeserved favour, which He bestows upon man. A grace gift, therefore, is not given by God in reward for what man has done. A grace gift is given by God in spite of what man has done.

Ministry gifts – *“And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord”* (1 Cor. 12:5). The word “administrations” is the same word translated as “ministry.” Here, the spotlight is on the purpose of the gift; it is used to serve others. God gives us spiritual gifts so that we can use them for the benefit of others.

Working gifts – *“And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all”* (1 Cor. 12:6). The emphasis in this verse is on the power of God working through the church member. God’s providence in the world is His working in and through His creation. In the same way, God works in and through the church members so that while every one is given different gifts and even different amounts of the same gift, He nevertheless works through every believer. And we use the spiritual gifts; we are allowing God to use us.

Glorifying gifts – *“But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal”* (1 Cor. 12:7). When we use our spiritual gifts, we manifest – make known – the power and glory of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual gifts are not to be used by the person to glorify himself. God gives us spiritual gifts so that we may use them for His glory and for the good of His church. The Bible gives this reminder: *“He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord”* (1 Cor. 1:31).

The Response to the Gifts

Spiritual gifts are given by God (Eph. 4:7, 11; 1 Cor. 12:11, 18, 28; 1 Pet. 4:10). If we understand that our spiritual gifts are given by a gracious God, there will be no cause for pride and slothfulness. The Apostle Paul writes: *“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith”* (Rom. 12:3).

It is by the grace of God that we have the ability to serve, that our service is efficacious; and that we can see the fruits of our labour. God is the giver of our spiritual gifts, and God is the rewarder when we use those gifts. This awareness leaves no room for the believer to be arrogant.

Paul warns us not to think too highly of ourselves. It means not to be critical and condescending. If you are not happy with someone who co-labours with you, the Bible says this: *“Now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him”* (1 Cor. 12:18).

One problem in the church is that believers tend to make unhealthy comparisons – “He cannot preach well.” “She cannot sing in tune.” “I wish every one would be like me.” We are all given different gifts. And we are given amounts of the same gift. Instead of complaining or doing the minimal because you think other people are not as fervent in the Lord’s service as you, the Bible tells us that those who are blessed with more spiritual gifts ought to make up for the shortfall of those who have fewer gifts. *“Those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked”* (1 Cor. 12:23-24).

Church members ought to use God’s gifts to serve one another. *“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God”* (1 Pet. 4:10).

Recognizing that our gifts are from God gives us no room for sloth. Christians ought *“not [be] slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord”* (Rom. 12:11). The man who buried his one talent in the ground was rebuked by the master as the *“wicked and slothful servant”* (Matt. 25:26).

I think the man with ten talents but only uses one talent to serve God because he just wants to contribute equal share as the one-talent man will not escape God’s rebuke as well. Our service for God must not be measured by what other people are doing; our service for God must be measured by the gifts that He has given us. God does not expect the one-talent man to do a job that requires ten talents. Neither does God expect the ten-talent man to do only a one-talent job. Be not slothful because the spiritual gifts are given by God, and *“unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more”* (Luke 12:48).

As we enter the second month of 2010, it is not too late to reassess our priorities so that the God who has given us His Son will in turn receive the pre-eminence in our lives.

07 Feb 10

It always blesses my heart when I learn of Calvinists ministering to other churches. Last Lord's Day, there were several teams who went out. Elder Cheng and Elder Mak led a team to Bukit Gambir and Rawang; Elder Phua and Dn Lam Chun See led a team to Tangkak; Dn James How and Bro. Chuan Yu led a team to Kelapa Sawit. Let me challenge more to visit these not too distant churches. But more than just go, let me also challenge you to actually do that which will encourage the Christians there – teach a Sunday School class, have a Saturday evening Bible Study. Let Calvary be known as a congregation of ministers.

We also welcome to our staff, Brother Bendick Ong. He joined us as an assistant to the pastor on 25 January 2010. Bendick will be taking care of the literature ministry of the church. Bendick has been in Calvary for over five years, and he is actively serving in the AWANA Club, College & Career Fellowship, and Choir. He is, in every sense of the word, God's answer to my prayer, and we pray that God will bless his ministry in Calvary. Of course, we are continuing to look for young men and women whom God will call into the ministry.

God is the Giver of Gifts

We had considered the various gifts that God has given to His people in the church. The Bible tells us that God gives these gifts to us through “the manifestation of the Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:7). Paul also said “unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Eph. 4:7).

It is an unmistakable fact that the source of the gift is from God. The Bible's emphasis on the divine origin of the gifts is to promote the unity of the church. The exercise of these various gifts is that all believers “come in the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:13).

If Christians realise that our abilities are gifts from a gracious and loving God, and all that we do in our service is through His power and strength, then it leaves no room for pride and boasting, and no room for being judgmental and critical of others who are not quite like us. When we realise that that we have and all we do are from God, we echo the words of the hymn that reads...

Not I, but Christ, be honored, loved, exalted;

Not I, but Christ, be seen, be known, be heard;

Not I, but Christ, in every look and action,

Not I, but Christ, in every thought and word.

If Christ is indeed to be honoured and be known, if He is to be seen in all that we do, the stronger and the more-gifted Christians ought to help – instead of complain against – the weaker Christians,. “As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, *let him do it as of the ability which God giveth*: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

There are Christians who can do more and go farther in the Lord's work. There are some who are limited, but every Christian must serve God to the ability that He has given.

Every Christian is a Recipient

There is no Christian who has no spiritual gift. “But *unto every one* of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Eph. 4:7). Every born again believer – young or old, man or woman, educated or illiterate – will have at least a spiritual gift. There are several lessons to be learned here.

First, every gift is important. No gift given of God is too small or insignificant. The one talent given to a man is just as important as the ten talents. Giving a cup of water is no less important than preaching the Gospel. Our Lord Jesus says, "For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward" (Mark 9:41).

The Bible tells us that God measures out the gifts to His people. Some will have more, some less, but every gift is important. It is just a baker baking a cake, all the ingredients have to be carefully measured out. The cake cannot do without sugar or flour, but too much sugar, the cake will be too sweet; too much flour, and it will be too hard. Likewise God carefully measures out the gifts to His people.

The Apostle Paul says that God is the "wise master builder" (1 Cor. 3:10), who measures out His gifts accordingly for the building of His church.

This means that every member in the church is important. A cake without the right amount of ingredients would be unpalatable. A building that is erected without the right amount of materials will be uninhabitable. Likewise, a church will not be as effective as it can be if Christians do not serve "*of the ability which God giveth.*"

Second, the gifts are different. Going back the analogy of baking, to bake a cake, different ingredients are needed: flour, sugar, eggs, etc. "And [God] gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11; see also Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Pet. 4:11).

As we serve in the church, we must recognise that God has given different gifts to each believer. There are some whom God has given the gift of evangelism, and it seems to come naturally to them. They should not look down on those who find it a challenge to witness.

Third, God gave some evangelists and some pastors and some teachers. There are some overlaps in all these ministries, and we have to be careful that we should not expect all of them to have the same degree of giftedness. This is especially important when we evaluate leaders and preachers in the church. Instead of comparing preachers, we should be praying for them that they would make use of the gifts that God has given them.

The Purposes of Spiritual Gifts

"As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:10). Spiritual gifts are meant to be used for the benefit of others. Paul puts it this way, God "gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-12).

Spiritual gifts are used for the perfecting of the saints. The word "perfecting" means "to be fully equipped." It has the idea of a soldier being well-trained and well-equipped before he is sent into the battle field.

The purpose of training and equipping the saints is for the work of the ministry. In other words, saints are trained and equipped to minister to other saints. The modern church makes a false dichotomy between clergy and laity, between so-called full-time staff workers and ordinary members. There are churches who regard the pastor as hired help. He is to do all the evangelism, visiting, planning, executing, etc.

The New Testament makes no such distinction between clergy and laity. God did not intend His church to be that way; rather God has designed every Christian to be a priest and a minister.

In the New Testament, believers are priests (1 Pet. 2:5); they are also to be ministers (Gal. 5:13). Thus, the Christian is both a priest before God and a minister to other Christians. So the questions that every Christian needs to ask are these: Am I making the best use of the gifts that God has given me to minister to others? Am I willing to be trained and equipped for the Lord's ministry? I pray that we can answer both questions in the affirmative, and may we use the gifts that God has given us for His glory and for the good of His church.

14 Feb 10

Today is Chinese New Year, and the Year of the Tiger comes roaring in. Below is an article by Elder Cheng on the topic.

Here comes the Tiger

Once again, the year of the tiger has returned. There is a Chinese saying: “keep a tiger and you will get hurt (养虎伤人)”, meaning that the tiger is a ferocious and dangerous animal and we must stay away from it. It is definitely not one that we can keep as a pet. Every Chinese New Year, the superstitious Chinese will look forward to the coming of the new zodiac animal, hoping that it will bring better luck than the year before. Last year, the cow has not been too much of a disappointment to people. It has brought along some economic recovery. It was certainly better than the rat which almost ruined the economy of the whole world. The last time the tiger appeared was in 1998, when the world was in deep recession and it did nothing to help, except to deepen further the already depressed economy. The year 2009 had been a reasonably comfortable year. “Thanks to the gracious and fat cow” so say the superstitious Chinese. Now comes the ferocious and fierce tiger which can pounce on any prey that is not alert and not fast enough to run away from it. Nevertheless, the traditional Chinese look forward to its coming. They think that the economy will bounce back very strongly under the leadership of the tiger.

Should we be afraid of the “tiger”?

According to the Chinese belief, the tiger is a courageous, liberal, fashion conscious but unpredictable animal. It is supposed to be good for the enterprising individual. It is liberal and always goes for new and fashionable life style. Perhaps, it will augur some new opportunities of business and new sources of entertainment. Tiger has not been mentioned in the Bible but other equally fierce and dangerous animals have frequently been mentioned. “Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out thence shall be torn in pieces: because their transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased” (Jer 5:6). Here, Jeremiah was pronouncing God’s judgment on those backsliding Jews. Today, let this be a warning to the backsliding Christians. Tiger, lion, leopard and wolf are representatives of Satan who is out to destroy those whom the Lord allows because of their iniquities. Perhaps, the tiger is here to remind us of the pending judgment of God. Sinners should therefore be afraid of God rather than the tiger.

Do we see tigers around us today?

A century ago, tigers roamed about in Singapore kampongs seeking whom they may devour. Today Singapore has become a modern city and there is no room for the tigers. However, one which is more savage and more dangerous than the tiger is roaming around us without us seeing it. The world and its constant and lustful attractions never stop to lure us to sin so as to provoke the wrath of God. Bars, night clubs, gambling rings, sexy magazines and TV programmes are around us all the time, not to forget some of the computer games and its spam and the misused SMS messages of our hand phones. Its unseen danger is lying around us and our children every minute of our lives. It would not be long before another big “attractions” be made easily available to us in the southern part of Singapore. All we need is a few minutes of bus or MRT ride and we will be right in the middle of it. The apostle Peter warned us: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet 5:8). This up-coming tiger will be more dangerous and ferocious than anything we have had so far. This is the one we Christians and Christian parents have to look out for. It is the most ambitious but morally corrupt enterprise our Singapore government has ever embarked on in the name of strengthening our country’s economy.

Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation

Knowing the danger of the tiger what must we do to avoid being hurt? Our Lord says, we must “watch and pray.” Do not think that we can fight the tiger with our own strength. “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt 26:41). The apostle Paul says: “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph 6:11). It is not the physical tiger that we are wrestling against, but “against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph 6:12). We

know that the tiger is a wild and subtle animal. So is the devil which is worse. He has a thousand ways of beguiling unstable souls. He is a powerful enemy of our souls. He is also the ruler of the darkness of this world and worker of spiritual wickedness in high places. He is everywhere around us. Just like the tiger roaming about in the old kampong, so is the devil targeting at us every moment of our lives. That is why we have to be sober and be vigilant, watching and praying. The only way to repel the devil is our fervent and unceasing prayer. The apostle James says "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (Jas 4:7). How to resist the Devil? Nothing but prayer can work. Dear friends, how has your prayer life been?

Fear the Lord and depart from evil

"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded" says the apostle James (Jas 4:8). Our God is an almighty and merciful God. If we fear Him and at the same time draw close to Him, we will have no fear of the tigers around us. The Psalmist says: "Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is thy keeper; the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand....The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: He shall preserve thy soul" (Ps 121:4-7). We are His sheep and He is our shepherd. He that comes to Him shall fear no evil. Again the psalmist says: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Ps 23:4). The tiger may be very fierce and ferocious, but the wise King Solomon said: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes; fear the Lord, and depart from evil" (Prov 3:5-7). Fear the Lord and come close to Him in prayer and we will not fear the tiger. Let the Word of God be our comfort and instruction in the coming year.

The year of the tiger has indeed come. We, the redeemed children of God should neither trust nor fear it. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps27:1). May I take this opportunity to wish everyone a blessed and God fearing lunar New Year.

21 Feb 10

One of the unique characteristics in the early church was that they had “all things common” (Acts 2:44; 4:32). The phrase does not mean they did not own private property; rather it means that personal things were given to common use. They were living as a family, where the needs of one are met by the kindness of another.

God blesses us with spiritual gifts for the same reason. We make up for the shortfall of one, and our shortfalls are made up by another. Paul says that God “gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-12).

The word “perfecting” is also translated as “mending” (Matt. 4:21), implying of course that the spiritual gifts are intended to take care of the shortfall of individual members within a local assembly so that the whole assembly may be fully equipped. To put it another way, when a church member fails to do his part, the church is poorer because of his non action. It also means that every member has the responsibility to fulfil the ministries in the church.

Effects of Using our Spiritual Gifts

The voluntary and self-sacrificing service of the early Christians in the church was one of the reasons for the rapid growth. Whenever the church was united with heart and mind in their devotion to God and service to His people, the Lord “added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47).

Unity in the church. The Apostle Paul says that the ministry of the gifts within the church should continue until “we all come in the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:13). There are strife and divisions within the church because church members do not use their spiritual gifts. Those who are active in Christian ministry sometimes complained about those who are not as active as they. On the other hands, those who are sitting on the sideline tend to be backseat drivers and armchair coaches and are often critical of those who are trying to do their best.

It is when church members are serving one another that they cultivate a sense of inter-dependence and appreciation for the ministry of other people.

Maturity for God’s People. As church members use their spiritual gifts in ministering to one another, they will also grow in spiritual maturity. God’s people are to use their gifts to help believers proceed toward maturity, and “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

A person’s spiritual maturity is evidenced in his stability. Paul says that the mature believer is not like small children, “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (Eph. 4:14).

One of the ploys used by the devil to break up the church is to introduce new ideas. Some new ideas sought to replace established truths. The more subtle ones purportedly enhance biblical truths. But Christians are warned to be careful of new ideas. Charles Spurgeon gives this timeless advice, “There is nothing new in theology except that which is false.” New ideas are nothing more than old heresies repackaged.

But the devil is cunning. By focusing on the doctrines (ideas and learning), the people’s attention are drawn away from their ministry. By focusing on that which is able to make one wise (or that which portrays one as wise), believers are filled with pride and self-conceit, and they are distracted from obeying God and serving Him.

The spiritually mature person will be discerning in these areas. God’s truth will never destroy His church. God’s truth will never oppose His ministry. Thus, as the Christian grows in spiritual maturity, he will also grow in ministry.

Discovering our Spiritual Gifts

Before we can know how to use our spiritual gifts, we must know what our spiritual gifts are. Paul says, “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant” (1 Cor. 12:1). As far as our spiritual gifts are

concerned, God does not put us in a dark room to grope about blindly. Here are suggestions how you can discover your spiritual gifts.

Read the Bible. In Ephesians 4; Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12; and 1 Peter 4:10-11, we read about the gifts that God has given to His church. These are by no means exhaustive, but they are a good place to begin. Check your abilities and desires against the list of ministries. The Word of God is the will of God. A believer who desires to know the will of God must begin at His Word.

Pray. “This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us” (1 John 5:14). Ask God for a burden. Pray for God to equip you. Pray for God to provide you with opportunities to serve Him. Never dismiss the efficacy of sincere prayer. The Bible tells us that “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16).

Assess your abilities. God will always equip believers with the skills for His ministry. Be honest with yourself. One writer suggests that you make a list of ministries under the following headings: CAN DO (ministries in which you can be involved), HAVE DONE (ministries which you are presently involved), DOING BETTER (ministries which you need to improve), and WANT TO DO (ministries which you desire to be involved with).

In this regard, it may be helpful to seek the counsel of spiritually matured believers who will give you honest and objective answers. “Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counsellors they are established” (Prov. 15:22)

Seize every opportunity to serve. Every believer must enter into a ministry with much prayer. Having said that, there are believers, who in the pretext of waiting for God’s will, turn down opportunities to serve God.

When God presents you with an opportunity to be involved in a ministry, seize it. This opportunity could come by way of an invitation from the pastor or elder, or it could come by way of a need which the LORD has placed upon you. Whatever the case, seize the opportunity to serve. There are times to wait and seek God’s will. There are times to roll up the sleeves and work.

Conclusion

I like watching sports; that speaks a great deal of my participation in sporting activities. In spectator sports, there are people who are eager supporters, and they cheer on from the sidelines while others are hard at work. There are also others who are critics. Nothing is ever right from their point of view. Then there are others who are just indifferent. They care very little one way or another. They would be happy if there is a church to go to; if not they just move to somewhere else.

The Church, as one writer puts it, is also slowing becoming a spectator sports with its fair share of sidelined supporters, critics and the indifferent. But the church is not a spectator sport. The best way for a believer to grow is to serve. That is the only way for the church to grow. Paul writes, “For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty [set free by Christ]; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

28 Feb 10

“And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that *they may be one*, as we are....That *they all may be one*; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that *they also may be one* in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; *that they may be one*, even as we are one” (John 17:11, 21-22). These are the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. The prayer for unity within the body of believers is foremost in the mind of our Lord Jesus.

The Apostle Paul, in several of his epistles, also dealt with the subject of church unity. To the Corinthians, he wrote, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10).

To the believers at Philippi, Paul wrote that they ought to “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel...[that they] be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (Phil. 1:27; 2:2).

The Apostle Peter made a similar appeal, “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous” (1 Pet. 3:8).

The fact that our Lord Jesus mentioned unity four times in His prayer, and that the apostles Paul and Peter exhorted the people to be united imply that unity was not only important to the church, but it was also tenuous. It takes a great effort to forge unity, but it only needs nothing at all to destroy it.

Beware of the Little Foxes

In Philippi, Paul was dealing with a church that he loved, but even in that church, there was trouble brewing. In Philippians 4:2, Paul refers to two ladies who were not on the best of terms. “I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord.” The fact that Paul had to beg them to be of the same mind meant there was disagreement between them.

From the words of Paul, we can also make some intelligent conjectures on the nature of the quarrel. First, the disagreement was not over a matter of doctrine. If it were, Paul would have come down for the truth and against falsehood. Paul was not afraid to speak out against Peter when the latter did something that was against the Word of God (Gal. 2:11).

Second, the disagreement was not over issues of ethics and morality. Paul was never afraid in standing up to those who had committed grave immorality. In 1 Corinthians, he wrote the leaders at Corinth to “deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5).

Paul described the two women as those “laboured with [him] in the gospel” (Phil. 4:3). The word “laboured” means “to strive together.” It means that there was a time when Euodias and Syntyche were co-labourers. The fact that Paul said that both of them should “be of the same mind in the Lord” tells us that the differences between the two ladies had to do with the ministry within the church. Perhaps it was over what missions to support, or the running of the Sunday School, or the colour of the carpet.

These are small matters, but it is these small matters that often afflict the church. And these small matters are the little foxes that “spoil the vines” (Song 2:15). The case of Euodias and Syntyche proves the point that conflict can exist between committed Christians. It also proves the point that disunity exists in any body of believers.

Conflicts in the church arise when there is a failure to handle inter-personal conflicts biblically. Every person has his or her own idiosyncrasies, and it is not unusual to have differences between them. However, when these differences are not resolved biblically and in a Christian manner, they can spiral into something worse.

Drivers know the folly of ignoring warning signs appearing on the dashboard. When the engine indicator is flickering, the problem is not with the light on the dashboard, it points to a larger problem. When the temperature gauge indicator is beeping, it means that there is a more serious problem; perhaps the radiator is leaking. To ignore these problems is to run in major ones later. The reason for a church split is due primarily to inter-personal conflicts which are not resolved biblically.

Wrong Responses

“I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord” (Phil. 4:2). The reason Paul mentions both persons by name tells us that he holds both persons responsible for the unresolved conflict. Paul did not side with one against the other; he was careful not to pin the blame on one person. If it takes two to dance, it takes two to squabble.

Get Even

When someone offends us, the tendency is to strike back. After all, the Bible teaches the principle of “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Exod. 21:23-24). This eye-for-eye principle is justice that was meted out by a third indifferent party (e.g. the law courts of the land) so as to prevent individuals from taking personal revenge by striking back at those who have hurt them. The eye-for-eye principle of individuals striking back and getting even is what Exodus 21:23-24 forbids.

In the case of Euodias and Syntyche, someone must have started the quarrel, but the bad reaction of the other person aggravated the situation. A person raises his voice; the other person responds by raising his voice, and in no time, it deteriorates into a shouting match. Or a person begins by refusing to talk; the other person reacts by doing the same, and a silent war develops.

More often than not, the unbiblical unchristian reaction to a bad situation fuels the conflict. James exhorts us: “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (James 1:19). Solomon has some wise advice for us. “In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise” (Prov. 10:19). “It is an honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling” (Prov. 20:3).

Sweep Under the Carpet

At the other end, there are people who think that the best way to deal with problems is to pretend that it is not there. Again, this attitude is based on wrong interpretation of Scripture. Our Lord Jesus says, “Resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:39). This turn-the-other-cheek principle is not to do nothing; it is not to ignore the problem and sweep it under the carpet. On the contrary, to turn the other cheek is to actively “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21).

Ignoring a problem far from solving actually keeps the problem simmering and engenders resentment and bitterness, and waiting for the right time to blow the problem apart.

Our Lord Jesus says that such an attitude hinders one’s worship, so He exhorts, “That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Matt. 5:22-24). It is not always wise to walk away from a problem; sometimes, God’s people must learn to confront one another in love.

Speak the Right Word Rightly

Solomon gives us two seemingly contradictory proverbs. “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit” (Prov. 26:4-5). The point is that Christians must be discerning. It is not enough to speak the truth, we must speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). It is not enough to do right, we must do the right things the right way so that our “good [will not] be evil spoken of” (Rom. 14:16).

When confrontation is necessary, we must examine ourselves to see that our attitude, motivation, words, and actions are right. Paul warns, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

Paul writes, “I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord. And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life” (Phil. 4:2-3).

Like Paul, we live in an imperfect world of sinners. In every church, there will be Euodias and Syntyches. We have to learn to deal with them in a loving and Christian way. However, thank God that there are also people like Clement and the other fellowlabourers. And the question we need to consider prayerfully as we examine our lives is: Am I an Euodias or Syntyche? Or am I a Clement?

07 Mar 10

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore” (Ps. 133:1-3).

Unity amongst Christian brethren not only gives vitality to the church, but it is also a thing of beauty to behold. David describes the unity of believers using the most fragrant and luscious terms. Yet we also realize how easy it is for that unity to be marred. All it takes is for a few dead flies to turn a sweet-smelling ointment bad. The Preacher, touching on the folly of so-called little sins, says, *“Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour”* (Eccl. 10:1a).

Be of the Same Mind

Unity in the church then requires us to keep those flies away. The first thing we need to do to maintain unity is to think biblically; to prevent those flies buzzing around us. As God’s people, we have a renewed mind; we are *“transformed by the renewing of your mind”* (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23). The Apostle Paul urges Euodias and Syntyche to *“be of the same mind in the Lord”* (Phil. 4:2).

Paul is, by no means, saying that all Christians should think alike in every situation and every issue. God has made us all different. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul writes, *“For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another”* (Rom. 12:4-5). *“For the body is not one member, but many...But now are they many members, yet but one body”* (1 Cor. 12:14, 20).

The church is not an amoeba – a one-cell organism. We are all different, and yet members of one body. Paul is certainly not saying that Christians should never have differences in opinions. He is not advocating thought control. So what does Paul mean when he says that believers are *“be of the same mind in the Lord”*?

To the Philippians, Paul writes, *“Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 2:2-5).

There is a definite relationship between being “likeminded” and having the mind of Christ. In fact, to be likeminded is to have the mind of Christ, and that mindset is reflected in our attitudes — to be loving to one another, to be other-centred, to refrain from actions that promote one’s glory and agenda, to be mindful of the reputation of others.

To be like-minded then is to think like Christ in all things, to think of each other in the same way that Christ would have thought of us. In one word, it is to be humble. If believers are clothed with the humility of our Lord Jesus Christ, then our differences can be used to advance the kingdom of God.

So for the church to be united, Christians must work hard to cultivate humility of Christ. Paul uses our Lord Jesus as the supreme example of humility. *“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”* (Phil. 2:6-8).

In these verses, Paul describes God clothed in human flesh. A king dressed as a commoner is still king, his position and status does not change. In the case of our Lord Jesus, when he was clothed in human flesh, he was less than a commoner, his life was worse than that of a commoner. When the people failed to recognize him for who He was, and when they did not treat Him as He deserved, He did not retaliate; rather He served and was sacrificed for them.

By His life, our Lord Jesus defines humility as putting the needs of others more important than His own rights. To be of the same mind in Christ is to have the attitude of a servant who is intent on doing the will of God. In a situation where there are differences, it means that both parties should focus on the concerns and reputations of the opposing party than on their own personal rights and desires.

In the case of Euodias and Syntyche, when Paul urges them to “be of the same mind in the Lord,” he is saying, “Euodias, you should look at what you can do for Syntyche instead of what she can do for you. And the same goes for Syntyche.”

The Power of Thought

The Bible warns to guard our minds. “*For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies*” (Matt. 15:19). To the Jews, the heart is not only the seat of our emotions, but it is also our thinking. In other words, we are what we think, and we do what we think. And other than the hours of sleeping, we are always thinking. The question then is what you are thinking about.

When we rehearse a day’s events, we can either be thinking about the person who has stepped on our toes and rubbed us the wrong way, about the driver who cut into your lane, about the person who has been rude to you, about the colleague who ignored you; or you can be thinking about giving the person the benefit of the doubt, and how you can be nice to the other person in spite of how you have been treated. And what you think about a person to a large extent determines your feelings and actions to him.

If you consider a person as a means to achieving your goal, then of course, your main concern will be about how that person should be helping you. And when your expectations are not met, then your feelings and actions toward him would worsen. However, if you consider yourself as a means to help the other person achieve his goal, you will be thinking about how you can help him to help you. And the person will see and learn from your humility.

In the context of the local church, it means that as members, we should not regard other believers as competitors vying for honour or limited resources (funds, space, etc.); neither should we view our ministries as our “turf” and guarding jealously against any incursions. This demarcation of my ministry versus your ministry is unhealthy and a sure recipe for division.

As members of the church, we need to help one another in our ministries so that we can serve God better. As Paul told the Philippians, “*In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others*” (Phil. 2:3-4). This is the formula for church unity. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will give us this mind of Christ.

14 Mar 10

On 27th March, there will be a Combined Bible-Presbyterian Seminar held at Life BP Church. The speaker is Dr Len Pine and he shall be speaking on the Christian Perspective on Suffering and Pain. At some point in life, we will have to come face to face with the frailties of old age (and all its attending sicknesses) and the certainty of death. Christians are, in many ways, best equipped to deal with these issues because we have the instructions from the Word of God, and the comforting ministry of the Holy Spirit. Yet, there are many believers whose faith has been shaken because of sufferings and bereavement in their lives. This seminar will be an excellent opportunity to learn about the biblical response to these real life issues. Please sign up at the notice board.

Please also be praying for a suitable venue for Easter Sunrise Service. So far, our application for Jurong Hill has been met with a wall of silence.

Over the last few months, we have been dealing with the relationship between the Christian and the Church. And we have been dealing with unity in the church. I am reminded daily how precious this unity is and also how tenuous it can be. Some one once said that people's egos are so frail and they are so easily offended that in our dealings with people, it is as if we are walking on egg shells all the time. As God's people we need to be sensitive; we need to be mindful not just of what we say, but also how we say it.

The key to Christian unity is to be like-minded. Paul exhorts us, *"Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 2:2-5).

Let us define what being like-minded is as we have noted previously is to think like Christ in all things, to think of each other in the same way that Christ would have thought of us. There will be differences in opinion in every human organization that have more than one member. However, when differences are presented, they should only be used to promote the cause of Christ, advance the Gospel, and motivate believers to be more effective in our ministry for God, and nothing else.

The Christian with the mind of Christ is one with the totally selfless attitude that seeks only to do the will of God. It is the attitude and mindset of a servant. Here are some characteristics of a Christ-centred servant.

Be Gracious

It has been said that Christians are the ones who shoot their own injured. This is not a very happy description, but sadly there is an element of truth. The Bible exhorts us: *"Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man"* (Colossians 4:6).

Resorting to physical violence is rare among Christians, although I have seen near fisticuffs between believers. What is more common is the verbal violence. Rough and unkind words spoken in haste and without much thought can also destroy the unity of a church.

And if we have to watch our words, then we most definitely need to watch our attitude and behaviour to one another. To be gracious means to be quick to ask for forgiveness when you are in the wrong, and be just as quick to forgive when you have been wronged.

"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you...And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour" (Ephesians 4:31-32; 5:2).

"Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of

perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful” (Colossians 3:12-15).

Be Believing

We live in a highly competitive world. Our children “fight” to get into the right schools. Drivers “race” for parking lots. The “I-must-be-first” mindset turns the other person into a competitor, and our correspondent attitude will reflect our mindset.

It is a Christian virtue to always think well of others. The Bible tells us that love “*beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things*” (1 Corinthians 13:7). To believe all things is not a blanket statement. The one who believes all things is not called to suspend his discernment and judgment; rather it is to give the benefit of the doubt until such a time when a situation becomes crystal clear. The Bible tells us: “*Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God*” (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Our sinful nature tends to make us think the best of ourselves and the worst of others. All premature judgment will lead to division within the body of Christ. The Bible exhorts us to judge nothing before the time. Judge only after the hidden things of darkness are brought to light, and after the counsels of the heart are made known. Judge only on deeds and words and not on the motives of the heart.

Thus Christians are to guard our minds and our hearts by not speaking prematurely. Hold back the tongue. Give the benefit of the doubt.

Be Prayerful

It is unchristian to be speaking badly about a person and praying for him at the same time. “*Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be*” (James 3:9-10).

So rather than speaking badly about a person, it would be far better to pray for him. If we thank God for all things, then we would not be so quick to be flustered by people who make life difficult for us. If we confess our sins and ask God for forgiveness, we would not be too quick to be offended by others. If we intercede for others, then we would not be just concerned about our own needs over those of others. So if there are to be words spoken about others, let it be in prayer to God.

Paul exhorted the two ladies in the Philippian church, “*I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord*” (Philippians 4:2). This same-mindedness is only possible if both were to be gracious to one another, to believe in one another, and to pray for one another. Let these be our attitudes in dealing with one another in the church as well.

21 Mar 10

This coming Saturday (27th March 2010), Dr Len Pine will be speaking at the Combined B-P Seminar at Life B-P Church. Dr Pine is the Director of Presbyterian Missions Union, a missionary agency of the B-P Church in USA. Dr Pine will be speaking on *The Christian Perspective on Suffering and Bereavement*. This topic is a pertinent and relevant one. The Bible says, “*Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward*” (Job 5:7). So I would urge you to sign up for the seminar.

I was in Sri Lanka with Dn & Mrs Jeffrey Soh to officiate at the wedding of the Rev Vijayenthiran and Thanuja. Please remember the newly wed in your prayers that God will greatly bless their union and their ministry together. Also continue to pray for the work in Sri Lanka; Bro. Thayanath and his wife Rathi will be starting a new ministry in Trincomalee in April 2010. Trincomalee is on the north-east coast of Sri Lanka.

Please also pray for the following missions trips over the next few weeks. Dn Peter Goh and Bro Willie Quek were in Vietnam to facilitate the training of the pastors under Vietnam Bible Institute. The Rev Colin Wong will be conducting one week of lectures.

Elder Mak and Bro Chuan Yu will be leading a missions team to North Thailand from 23-30 March 2010. They will be visiting the missions stations in North Thailand.

From 12-20 April, I will be visiting Sri Lanka again to speak at their Bible Camp and also, God willing, to visit the missions stations in Hatton, Trincomalee and Jaffna. If you are interested in coming along for the whole trip or even just part of the trip, please let me know.

peace-maker

Over the last few weeks, we have been considering the topic of unity in the local church. Preserving the unity of the church is the responsibility of every member. Paul says, “*If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men*” (Rom. 12:18).

However, when conflicts arise in the church, it is also the responsibility of members to mend the breach and help restore the unity. In Philippians, when he was dealing with the rift between Euodias and Syntyche, Paul called for help. “*And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, **help** those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life*” (Phil. 4:3).

Paul’s appeal for other Christians to help the two women shows that he recognizes that on their own, it is extremely difficult for them to be of the same mind. The reference to the “names in the book of life” is perhaps an indication that both women had forgotten that the other party was a Christian. It could even be that they were calling each other names that questioned the other person’s faith in Christ.

Under such situations, it is wise to sought for help from a caring and loving third party. Such is the ministry of a peace-maker. Our Lord Jesus says, “*Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God*” (Matt. 5:9).

John Calvin describes peace-makers as those who “labour to settle differences among others, who advise all men to live at peace, and take away every occasion of hatred and strife.”

But is that not meddling in another person’s affairs? It can be if the motives are not right. Peter warns, “*Let none of you suffer as...a busybody in other men’s matters*” (1 Pet. 4:15). “Busybody” in Greek refers to a person is an inspector of the things of others; one pries into the affairs of another. The purpose is to satisfy his own curiosity without any intention to help. A gossip would then be a busybody because he loves to talk about other people and their affairs without any intention to help.

One example is the media's obsession with a local director who had committed adultery. It was front page news in the newspaper. It was on the television news and internet, and I am sure that there will be more reports and follow-up stories. But what is the point of keeping up with the juicy details of the downfall and sin of a man and the sorrow that he has brought to his wife and children? Frankly, there is not much value in knowing more about his lurid past. To pry further is to be a busybody.

A peace-maker, on the other hand, is one who sincerely wants to help mend the differences between two persons who are at odds. Matthew Henry says that "the *making of peace* is sometimes a *thankless office*, and it is the lot of him who parts a fray, to have *blows on both sides*; yet it is a good office, and we must be forward to it." The Bible says blessed is the man who is a peace-maker.

Peace-making — reconciling persons with differences — is the work of a mediator. It is the work of Christ — the Son of God — which is the reason peace-makers are "*called the children of God*" (Matt. 5:9).

To do the work of peace-making therefore requires one to have the attitude of Christ. The Bible says, "*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ*" (Gal. 6:1-2). The peace-maker must come in the spirit of meekness.

In the case of Euodias and Syntyche, Paul could have asserted his position and authority as an apostle. He could have told off the two ladies, "Stop quarrelling or else..." Rather he said, "I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche..." (Phil. 4:2). Paul was appealing to them from a position of meekness, pleading with them lovingly.

Peace-making is not the work of the pastor alone. It is also the work of every member in the church. Is every Christian qualified? Do we need some training in psychology? The answer is no!

However, the peace-maker must know the Word of God. He must have the spiritual maturity and spirit of meekness. Peter tells us that God, "*according as His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness*" (2 Pet. 1:3). Paul says, "*And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another*" (Rom. 15:14). All Christians are competent to counsel.

peace-Pursuer and peace-liver

Preventive measures are always more pleasant and less painful than curative counter-measures. The psalmist says, "*Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it*" (Ps. 34:14). Charles Spurgeon says that Christians are to "with zeal and care endeavour to promote [peace]. Peace with God, with thine own heart, with thy fellow man...Nothing can more effectually promote our own happiness than peace; strife awakens passions....Anger is murder to one's own self, as well as to its objects." He adds that to pursue peace is to "be resolved not to be of a contentious spirit."

This is the principle of peace that Christians must adopt in our lives. The reality is that we have no control over what other people say about or do to us. What we have control is our reactions to words and actions of others. We can hit back when we are offended which is the natural thing to do; or we can "*depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it*" (Ps. 34:14).

Paul also teaches the same thing. "*If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men*" (Rom. 12:18). There is a proactive approach in Paul's exhortation. Let it not be said of Christians that we are trouble-makers. Christians are not to be sowers of strife and designers of divisions. Rather we are to be pursuers of peace. Christians are to do our utmost to preserve peace.

However, it is also true that there are others who oppose and persecute us. While we are not able to prevent a troublemaker from making trouble, we can choose not to retaliate in provocations. The Word of God says, "*Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord*" (Heb. 12:14).

Dear beloved, as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of peace, let us also be peace-makers, and peace-pursuers!

28 Mar 10

We have, on numerous occasions, considered the importance of prayer to the body of Christ over the pulpit and in this weekly. No Christian would deny the importance of prayer to his/her spiritual life. And no church would deny the importance of its ministry and growth.

The New Testament church was birthed by prayer. Luke tells us that the apostles and some 120 other people huddled in Jerusalem “all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication” (Acts 1:14). That was the beginning, and from there, the early church was characterized by prayer. After Pentecost and the downpouring of the Holy Spirit, where 3,000 were saved, the disciples “continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

When the early church became too big, and the administration of the church distracted the apostles from their ministry, the apostles said, “It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables” (Acts 6:2). So they appointed the first deacons to take care of the work of relief so that they could “give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). The Apostles’ decision emphasized the priority of prayer in the early church.

In the writings of the Apostle Paul, we also see the importance of prayer in his life and work. Example: “Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power” (Ephesians 1:15-19).

Paul Prays for the Church

The church is instituted by God. It was part of His redemptive plan. While it is true that salvation is personal, the Bible also teaches that God deals with the body of believers. The Bible tells us that our Lord Jesus prays for the church. “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word” (John 17:20). Even now at the right hand of the Father, our Lord Jesus continues in His ministry of prayer for the church. “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25, see also Romans 8:34). Our Lord Jesus has a continual intercessory ministry for the church.

The Apostle Paul caught this spirit by also praying for the church. We see that in his various epistles. “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy” (Philippians 1:3-4, Ephesians 1:15-16).

This prayer for the church and with the church is the reason for unity of the early Christians, and the success of their ministry. As they prayed, they served, and God blessed their labour. “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers....And all that believed were together...[and] did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

Paul Prays for the Ordinary People

In prayer groups, it is natural to pray for those people whom we know and care about, and those ministries of which we play a part. However, we see in Paul’s salutations in his letter to the Ephesians, he prayed for those whom he did not have direct contact. Paul had founded the Ephesian church (Acts 19), but when he wrote the Ephesian epistle, Paul had not been to Ephesus for several years. Despite the lack of direct contact, Paul prayed for the ordinary

people in the church. He said that he had “heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints” (Ephesians 1:15).

It is interesting to note that while early Christians came under a great deal of persecution, most of the prayers in the early church were devoted to spiritual concerns and not personal and physical deliverance. When Peter and John were arrested, the church prayed, “Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word” (Acts 4:29).

As far as the Ephesians were concerned, Paul prayed for their spiritual growth. He prayed “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints” (Ephesians 1:17-18).

It is equally interesting to note that even though Paul heard many good things about the faith of the Ephesian Christians, he continued to pray for them. The reason is that there is always room for spiritual growth and improvement in a Christian’s life. We can all learn to love God more whole-heartedly, serve Him more zealously, study His Word more diligently, pray to Him more fervently.

As Calvinians, we must also pray for our church, that God will keep us faithful to His Word and work; that He will deliver us from the sin of complacency and apathy, that we may – individually and collectively – grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul Prays Unceasingly

Paul writes “[I] cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers” (Ephesians 1:16). Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul says, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Surely, it would be absurd to think that Paul did nothing else but pray. It would also be wrong to think that Paul was exaggerating and stretching the truth.

To “cease not to give thanks” and “pray unceasingly” meant that Paul’s prayer for the church was not an occasional exercise. It meant that Paul was praying for them regularly. Prayer was part of Paul’s routine. This is the routine that we should emulate in our lives. We must learn to make prayer a part of our daily living.

When Paul said that he “ceased not to give thanks” for the Ephesians, it also meant that Paul persevered in prayer. He never gave up on praying. Paul did not stop praying for believers when they are doing well spiritually. And he did not stop praying for them when they fell.

To “pray without ceasing” means that prayer ought to be instinctive to the Christian. Just as a child cries instinctively for mother when he is in need, so must every child of God cry to God. Our daily lives must be filled with and injected by brief moments of prayer. It could be a short prayer of thanks to God, a quick praise, a short plea for help and guidance.

Dearly beloved, let us learn from Paul, to pray for and with the church always. Pray for the leaders of the church. Pray for the ministry. Pray for one another. God is faithful. He promises: “Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not” (Jeremiah 33:3). “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). To slacken in our praying is unbelief. To cease praying is not just to give up on prayer but also to give up on God. May the Holy Spirit continue to help us to be constant in praying with and for the church.

Your Sincerely in Christ
Pastor Isaac

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