

Pastoral Letter is a weekly Bible reading material published by the Calvary Bible-Presbyterian Church (Singapore). It is freely downloadable quarterly from www.calvaryjurong.com. If you have been blessed by this ministry, do let us know at info@calvaryjurong.com.

03 Oct 10

Since May this year, we have been considering the will of God for the Christian, what it is and how we can know it. It is good for a Christian to desire to know and do the will of God. However, a good desire alone does not reality make. A good desire without good decision making is nothing but a good dream.

I began this series of articles because I have come across many Christians who see doing the will of God as nothing but shooting in the dark. They shoot and hope for the best. They take a particular course of action because it seems right, or because they have prayed about it and they are at peace, or because of circumstances, things sort of just fell into place. This feel-right approach is unbiblical. It is never God's will to leave His redeemed people wandering about what He desires from us. I strongly believe that every Christian who sincerely seeks the will of God, meaning that he wants to obey God's Word, honour His Name, and glorify God with his life, will find it.

I also believe that as believers, we need to know the biblical principles of decision-making. The Psalmist says, "*The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in His way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with His hand*" (Ps. 37:23-24).

Over the next few weeks, we will apply the biblical principles which we have learned to specific issues – marriage, vocation, ministry, missions, and convictions.

To Marry or Not to Marry

There are Christians who believe that God has prepared one particular man for one particular woman for marriage. They also believe that a man is out of the will of God if he marries the wrong woman or if he decides not to marry at all. What does the Bible teach about a person's decision to marry or to remain single?

Our Lord on Singlehood

Oddly, our Saviour's answer to this question comes in the context of a divorce question posed by the Pharisees. They came to Jesus with this question, "*Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?*" (Matt. 19:3). There were two schools of thought in Jewish teaching: the more conservative school taught that sexual immorality was the only ground for divorce; the more liberal school held the view that a man could divorce his wife if she displeased him for any reason.

This was a loaded question. If our Lord denied the lawfulness of divorce, then He would be charged with contradicting Moses, who allowed it (Deut. 24:1-2). On the other hand, if our Lord affirmed the legality of divorce for any cause, then He would be contradicting Himself (Matt. 5:32) and for condoning the wicked custom of Jewish men who put away their wives for frivolous reasons.

Knowing that the Pharisees' intent in asking this question was to trap Him, our Lord simply affirmed God's original purpose for marriage, that it was meant to be a permanent union between one man and one woman, and what "*God hath joined together, let not man put asunder*" (Matt. 19:6). Our Lord's answer focused on God's will and purpose for marriage. The point is that when a man and a woman decide to marry, there must be in the couple, a determined

will to remain faithful to each other. The thought of how they may break up should never be on their minds. In this regard, the modern practice of pre-nuptial agreements is an abominable thing.

The Pharisees then followed with another question, “*Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?*” (Matt. 19:7). Our Lord’s answer came in the form of a rebuke, “*Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so*” (Matt. 19:8).

Our Saviour’s answer was troubling to the disciples, who said to Him, “*If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.*” Perhaps they were thinking of the brawling wife in Proverbs 21:9. The disciples were concerned that if divorce except for immorality was ruled out, there would be no way out for a man who was stuck with a contentious wife. To the disciples, the way to avoid such an intolerable marriage is not to marry at all. To their comment, our Lord replied, “*All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given*” (Matt. 19:10-11).

Our Lord then gave three conditions under which a person may remain single. “*For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake*” (Matt. 19:12a).

The eunuchs born from their mothers’ womb refer to those who cannot marry because of birth defects. The eunuchs made of men refer to those who are rendered incapable of marriage as a result of the cruel actions of others. The eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake refer to those who choose to remain single in order to serve the kingdom of heaven.

However, our Lord added that singlehood is not for every one. He added, “*He that is able to receive it, let him receive it*” (Matt. 19:12b), meaning to say that not every person is able to embrace this way of life. There are some who can live the single life; for others, a wise marriage is better. The point being, both singlehood and marriage are permitted by God. It is the individual person who must make the choice wisely and according to biblical principles.

Paul on Singlehood

The Apostle Paul elaborated on our Lord’s teaching in his first epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:1-40). From the outset, Paul states his preference for singlehood – “*It is good for a man not to touch a woman*” (1 Cor. 7:1). The phrase, “*to touch a woman*” is a euphemism for a physical relationship, meaning marriage.

However, Paul also recognises that those who remain single are more vulnerable to sexual sins. For this reason, Paul says that it is better for persons who are not able to control their passions to marry rather than commit the sin of fornication (1 Cor. 7:2). The decision to marry or to remain single is left to the individual. Paul states that he speaks “*by permission, and not of commandment*” (1 Cor. 7:6). God does not require all to marry, nor does He command any to remain single. Every man is at liberty to marry or not to marry. While his personal preference is for singlehood, the Apostle recognises that every man must determine for himself, “*For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that*” (1 Cor. 7:7).

However, if a man decides to marry, he is bound by God’s laws on marriage. The married person must fulfil his or her conjugal duties (1 Cor. 7:3-5), and the couple must be committed to make the marriage a permanent union (1 Cor. 7:10). God willing, we will continue with this topic next week.

10 Oct 10

Thank you for keeping me in your prayers especially for my last trip to Vietnam. The full report will be out next Lord's Day together with a slide show after the Lord's Day Worship Service. For the last few years, for my visits to Vietnam, I had been cloistered in my hotel room and the place where the training has been held. During this last visit, I was given the opportunity to visit the local churches. Some in the cities are very well built; others, in the rural areas, are more rudimentary. The conclusions that I made from my visits to the local churches is the great need of the churches.

- First, the need for pastoral and theological training; although some of the pastors have been ministering for the last twenty years, their understanding of Scripture and theology is rather shallow. No doubt, God blesses the efforts of these faithful men, but they themselves see the need to improve. That is the reason that there have been more requests for help to train the pastors.

- Second, the need for translation of theological books. There is a dearth of doctrinally sound theological books in the Vietnamese language. This is one of the chief reasons that the local pastors are handicapped. So far, the not so good books are being translated (e.g. *Purpose Driven Church*), which added to the confusion of the pastors.

- Third, the need for English training. This will certainly supplement translation work. The Vietnamese themselves are willing to learn. I have driven by some English training centres, and they are filled to the brim with the local pastors themselves.

- Fourth, in the rural areas, like the mountain church Dn Peter and I visited, there is a need for medical help.

Can you see yourself serving in one of these areas? Please pray that the LORD will give you a burden and the desire to serve.

To Marry or Not to Marry (Part II)

To remain single or to marry is not a moral issue. Our Lord Jesus made it clear that singlehood and marriage are permitted by God. It is the individual person who must prayerfully consider God's will for his life, and make the choice wisely and according to biblical principles.

Paul on Singlehood

While the Apostle Paul states his personal preference for singlehood (1 Cor. 7:1), he says that every man is at liberty to marry or to remain single. Elaborating on what our Lord Jesus had taught in the Gospels, Paul states this decision is left to the individual. Every man is to decide within the boundaries of God's moral will. In this matter, Paul could not impose his apostolic authority because not every one is called in the same way as he, not every man is gifted in the same things. "*For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that*" (1 Cor. 7:7).

Is Paul's personal preference for singlehood proof that the single person is spiritually superior to married one? Absolutely not. "*If thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned*" (1 Cor. 7:28). Paul's overriding concern for Christians – married or single – is that we glorify and serve God in all that we do. If a person decides to stay single because he does not want to be hindered in his freedom to do his own thing, then his reason to remain single is a purely selfish one. That person's singlehood is no more proof of his spirituality than the monk's imposed celibacy is proof of his.

Consider Carefully

Marriage has the privileges and responsibilities; so does singlehood. Paul gives several reasons for his preference for singlehood. First, a single person is free from additional concerns and cares of life. *“If thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you”* (1 Cor. 7:28). By *“trouble in the flesh,”* Paul was referring to the cares that come with starting a family.

Second, a single person has better control of his time to serve the Lord. The single person, being free from the responsibilities of family life, is able to give his full attention to serving the Lord. *“He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord”* (1 Cor. 7:32). The married person has to care for his spouse (1 Cor. 7:33-34), but the single person *“may attend upon the Lord without distraction”* (1 Cor. 7:35).

To balance up the picture, Paul also gives several reasons for marrying. First, marriage, as the matrimonial liturgy tells us, *“is a remedy against sin and to avoid the sin of fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’ body.”* Paul recognises that marriage reduces sexual temptation. *“To avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband”* (1 Cor. 7:2). For a person who is lacking in the gift of continency, Paul says, *“marry.” “If they cannot contain [their passions], let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn”* (1 Cor. 7:9). Between the distractions of marriage and the destruction of sexual immorality, the choice should be obvious to the God-fearing Christian.

When Paul says that the married people *“careth for the things of the world”* (1 Cor. 7:33), he is merely highlighting the added responsibilities that they have to shoulder. Paul is not saying that married are restricted in their opportunities to serve God. Marriage provides opportunities of ministry that are open to singles. The testimony of a loving couple or a God-fearing family is invaluable. The Bible has many examples of married people who served God faithfully. The wife of Proverbs 31 would surely open more doors for her husband to serve God. Aquila and Priscilla were Paul’s most valuable co-labourers.

Serve Faithfully

To marry or to remain single? The principle from the Bible is this – in whatever state – married or single, Gentile or Jew, slave or freeman – the redeemed person is to be a faithful servant for God. *“Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called”* (1 Cor. 7:20). In other words, Paul is saying, *“serve the Lord, where you are, in the state which you are.”*

If you are single, be faithful in serving God. *“Art thou called being a servant? care not for it”* (1 Cor. 7:21a). Paul says that if a man is a slave, he should not be concerned that he is one; he should not use his slavery as an excuse for not serving the Lord. The same principle applies to the single (or married) person; whatever state a person is in, he should serve the Lord.

“But if thou mayest be made free, use it rather” (1 Cor. 7:21b). If the slave should be made free – a change in status – he should be using his freedom to continue to serve God. Likewise, if God provides the opportunity for a person to change his status – from single to married – he should continue to serve God. *“For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord’s freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ’s servant”* (1 Cor. 7:22). Married or single, we are all to serve our Lord Jesus.

Conclusion

To marry or to remain single? Each person must decide on the basis of spiritual advantage. Would the change in status make you more or less effective in the Lord's ministry? Would the change in status help or hinder your service for God? For some, it is better to remain single. For others, it is better to marry. But for all, it must be done for the glory of God.

17 Oct 10

Several ideas emerged from the Leader's Retreat last month. One of the main concerns was the evangelistic outreach of our church. How can we reach out to the people who live and work in or near our neighbourhood? We have identified four groups of people: those who live around the church, the expatriates, the foreign workers, and foreign students.

This coming Friday (29 October) at 8:00pm, there will be a meeting for all tertiary students, lecturers, teachers in our local universities and polytechnics who are members of Calvary B-P Church. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss and explore the possibility of having a Tertiary Students' Fellowship (TSF) to be held in our church. The objective of this TSF is to provide a place for tertiary students (foreign and local) to meet, fellowship and have Bible study. If you study or work in a tertiary institution in Singapore, please come and see how you can serve in this ministry.

Over the last few months, we have been studying the topic of knowing and doing God's will, and we have been considering this matter specifically on the issue of marriage.

Marry Wisely

Whether a man marries or not, it is a decision that he must prayerfully consider. If he decides to marry, the next question is how does he find a wife? Does God reveal the woman to him in a dream? Are there certain formulations that he can employ so that he can know for sure that a particular girl is the one that God had intended?

Why can't God just bring me someone?

Can he rely on God to bring him the girl in the same way that God brought Eve to Adam? The Bible tells us that God formed Eve out of a rib that He had taken from Adam, and He brought the woman to Adam. This was the first marriage in the history of mankind. The marriage of Adam and Eve is to be the pattern for all marriages. *"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh"* (Gen. 2:24). That does not mean, however, that all marriages will be formed in the same way as that of Adam and Eve. Their union was a miraculous event never to be repeated.

Why can't we rely on circumstances?

Can the man rely on God to provide a wife through special circumstances like He provided Rebekah for Isaac? When Abraham was old he sent his servant to the Ur of the Chaldees to look for a wife for Isaac. When the servant reached the destination, he prayed to God, *"O LORD God of my master Abraham, I pray thee...Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water: And let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast shewed kindness unto my master"* (Gen. 24:12-14).

Rebekah did all that Abraham's servant had prayed she would. That was the sign for him that Rebekah was the one that God had prepared for Isaac. Many Christians applied this true narrative as a principle to find out God's will for their lives. If such and such happens, then it is God's will. A boy likes a girl, and he prays, "God, if she offers me a Coca-cola on Tuesday evening, then I will know that she is the one." Foolish though it may be, but many believers look to such circumstances to "justify" that a particular course of action is God's will.

We must bear in mind that the circumstances that brought Isaac and Rebekah together are not normative, meaning to say that we cannot use the incident to derive a biblical principle for seeking God's will. Rebekah and Isaac's union is unique and extraordinary for several reasons: First, the Bible does not promise that every believer must have a wife/husband. Isaac, on the other hand, had to have a wife because it was God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:4-5). For that covenant to be fulfilled, Isaac must find a wife, and his wife must bear children. Second, God promised

special guidance for Abraham's servant to ensure that his mission would be successfully accomplished. God led the servant (Gen. 24:27).

Marry only in the Lord

That God created the circumstances and led Abraham's servant to Rebekah is not a promise that He will do the same for every believer. God's Word does not reveal to us who we should marry, but it sets the guidelines. There is only one command on the question of who should a Christian marry.

The principle is that believers may only marry believers. This is a direct command from God. *"The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord"* (1 Cor. 7:39). The phrase "only in the Lord" means that the marriage partner is a born-again believer.

The Bible also tells us that Christians are not to be *"unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God"* (2 Cor. 6:14-16).

In this passage, Paul applies the Old Testament law that says that the farmer is not to *"plow with an ox and an ass together"* (Deut. 22:10). These two animals cannot be harnessed together because their two natures are radically different. Likewise, the Christian is forbidden to marry an unbeliever because such a union would be a complete mismatch. Paul gives five examples that show the contrasts between a believer and an unbeliever – righteousness versus unrighteousness, light versus darkness, Christ versus Belial, believer versus an infidel, the temple of God versus the temple of idols. Not only are the values and goals between the believer and unbeliever different; they are serving two different masters. The fact is that the believer and unbeliever have different and opposing allegiances.

Marriage is the most intimate of all human relationships. The Bible describes marriage as being of "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:31). For a believer to marry an unbeliever is to sow the seeds of conflict. The ox and the ass may be forcibly yoked together; the fruit of such a union will be seen in its outcome.

Christians who are caught up in the romantic notions of love would argue that there are marriages between believers and unbelievers that turned out fine. Yes, there are, and there are also unbelieving spouses who were converted after marrying believers. These "successful" unequally yoked marriages however, can never be used to justify our disobedience.

Christians must remember that more important than working for the success of our marriages is our obedience to God. The first and most important step for a Christian who decides to marry is to obey God's Word, and then work hard in marriage.

The one and only command that God gives is that Christians should marry in the Lord. This begs the question: is this the only determining factor in choosing a life partner? What if Jane has three different suitors – Tom, Dick and Harry – who are all believers? Does the Bible have any principles on who Jane should choose for her husband? God willing, we will consider this issue next week.

24 Oct 10

Marry Wisely (II)

Several ideas emerged from the Leader's Retreat last month. One of the main concerns was the evangelistic outreach of our church. How can we reach out to the people who live and work in or near our neighbourhood? We have identified four groups of people: those who live around the church, the expatriates, the foreign workers, and foreign students.

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31 Oct 10

THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

This morning, we commemorate the 16th Century Protestant Reformation. On this day (31st October), 493 years ago, an obscure German monk nailed 95 propositions on the door of the Wittenberg Castle and challenged the religious establishment of that day to a debate on the doctrine of salvation. That act was the catalyst that brought about spiritual revival in Europe. For almost one millennium, Europe was submerged and chained in spiritual darkness of superstition and heresy. The Church was as corrupt in its teaching as it is in her morals.

The Reformation brought about a rediscovery of the Bible, a return to the Gospel of grace, a revival of God-centred worship, a restoration of biblical doctrines. Thus we see one of the fruits of Reformation was a systematized presentation of fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith in confessions and creeds. Martin Luther, who translated the Bible into German in 1522, wrote the Augsburg Confession in 1532. John Calvin published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536. The *Belgic Confession* was produced in 1561. The *Heidelberg Catechism* was published in 1563. The *Canons of Dort* which reaffirmed the doctrines of Reformed theology was produced in 1619.

Over in England, a new translation of the Bible was published in 1611, and some 30 years later, the Westminster Confession of Faith was published in 1647.

The Westminster Assembly of Divines — the people who were responsible for framing the Confession — was convened in 1st of July 1643. The word “divines” is just an old English word for “theologians.” By the time of the establishment of the Assembly, the Reformation was over 100 years old. In the century following the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had regrouped and consolidated, and re-established its position, and launched new attacks against the Protestants, in what is known as the Counter-Reformation.

In Europe, the Protestants were persecuted. In France, collusion between the pope and the king of Spain resulted in the massacre of between tens of thousands of French Protestants also known as the Huguenots.

Over in England, the situation was different because the establishment of the Church of England came before the Reformation. And so one of the distinctives of the English Protestantism is Puritanism. Christians — whom we called Puritans — wanted to “purify” the Church of England from within, and to remove any vestiges of Rome.

The Puritans wanted a Reformed Church. They wanted a church to be devoted to the Bible and Christ of the Bible. They wanted a church to be ruled by the Word of God. The crown, on the other hand, wanted to control the church. As a result, there was always conflict between the Puritans and the crown.

This conflict came to a head when Charles I, who believed in the divine rights of kings, wanted to impose his rule over the Church of Scotland. That led to a civil war in England.

With the war going badly against him, Charles I summoned the English Parliament with the intention of asking them to raise taxes to fund the war. But Parliament, which was dominated by Puritans demanded for a vote to remove episcopacy, prelacy and popery out of the Church of England. They also asked the king to convene an assembly of theologians to consider scriptural standards for the church.

There is also a second and theological reason for convening the Westminster Assembly. The theological controversy raging at that time was Arminianism, ideas expounded by James Arminius which were a total rejection of the doctrines of grace. Arminianism had a great following in the Church of England.

The Westminster Assembly of Divines was convened in July of 1643. It composed of 121 Puritan ministers of the Church of England. Most of them were Presbyterians. There were some Congregationalists, some Episcopalians and even a few Erastians. The Erastians were those who believed that the final authority in church matters belonged to civil authorities and not the church. When Parliament convened the Assembly, they had envisioned a national church united in liturgy, government, and Reformed doctrine.

The Assembly met 1,163 times over a period of 5 and a half years (1643-1649), and in the process produced the following documents: *Directory of Public Worship* (1645), *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), *Larger Catechism* (1648), *Shorter Catechism* (1648), a Presbyterian form of government, and a Psalter.

The Confession gives us a systematized form of theology with practical applications. There are three main reasons: doctrine, defence and discipline.

- Doctrine — the Confession is useful for instruction. With the help of the Confession, we have a systematic instruction of the doctrines of the Christian faith. Christians today have an aversion to doctrine. We cannot serve and worship God as we ought to until we know Him as He is.

- Defence — without the Confession, the believer is also exposing himself to the danger of his own private judgements and interpretations of Holy Scripture. It is used as a yardstick to discern between true and false teachings.

- Discipline — the Confession is required for the ordinations of ministers and church officers as well as a standard for godly living. A person lives like he lives because he thinks like he thinks. Truth that grips the heart will be reflected in your life.

What can we learn from the Westminster Assembly of Divines? There are two lessons: First, they were gripped by the Word of God. The Bible says: “*Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set*” (Proverbs 22:28). When they set out to frame the Confession, that was what they did. They did not remove the ancient landmark of biblical truth. That is what we should do!

The Confession was produced to withstand scriptural scrutiny. The readers could search the scriptures to see whether those things, which were written in the Confession were so. As Robert Shaw points out in his exposition of the WCF, “A Confession of Faith is not a revelation of divine truth, but it is a declaration of...the truth which has been revealed. Its object is, therefore, not to teach divine truth; but to exhibit a clear, systematic, and intelligible declaration of our sentiments, and to furnish the means of ascertaining the opinions of others, especially in religious controversies.”

Second, they were united by the Word of God. The fact that such a mixed group of highly qualified and independently minded men could labour together is testimony of their character and humility. They came together for the singular purpose of formulating a body of Christian truth, guided by the Word of God and their own conscience as well as humility of the self and charity for the other. The blessed outcome is the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The Bible tells us that God gave gifts to His people “*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*” (Eph. 4:12-13).

The Westminster Divines were bound by the Word of God. They did not break up because they had the Bible. Even though they held strong opinions on certain issues, they were unwilling to put in print their personal views if they could not put them in the language of Holy Scriptures. They would go as far as the Word of God

allowed them, and no farther. They would not elevate their own personal convictions to be on par with what is clearly revealed in the Bible.

In our defence of the faith in the 21st century, the lesson we take away from the work and character of the Westminster Assembly is that whenever God's people are bound by God's Word and not beholden to persons, whenever we put God's work and God's glory ahead of our personal interests, the fruit that comes forth will be glorious.

The Westminster Assembly had the power of the Word of God to change the destiny of the society in which they lived. Let us pray that we would have the same fire in our hearts not to be as great as they were but to be as faithful to Christ as they were. And may God grant to us a victory of grace and power through the Gospel as great as and greater than anything we have ever seen.

07 Nov 10

Over the next few weeks, there will be several mission teams that will be heading to North Thailand. Rev and Mrs Chan left on Friday, and they will be ministering at the China Evangelistic Mission (CEM) at Fang through to 21st November. God willing, Bro. Alex Wong and I will be joining them on 8th November through to 23rd November. Rev Chan and I will be involved in training the local CEM pastors. Over the weekend (12th-15th November), another team led by Bro. Chuan Yu will join us, and we will be conducting a series of meetings at Maepoon and Samgula.

On 14th November, Bro. Bendick will be leading the first of two mission teams to teach English in a public school in Fang. They will pass the baton to a second team who will be leaving on 21st November. What is heartening is this will be the first missions trip for most of the people going to North Thailand, and many who are going are families.

Dn Peter Goh and the Rev Ho Chee Lai will be going to Vietnam to train the pastors from 22nd-27th November. Pastor Peter Tan will be joining them on 25th November. This will be a busy month of ministry for the church in missions work, which is why we need to pray.

In this regard, there will be a week of prayer from 23rd-26th November (Tuesday to Friday). Every evening at 8:15pm, there will be prayer meeting in the church. It will be like any Tuesday prayer meeting. The only difference is that each night, we will focus on one particular area of ministry in the church and Christian life. We are also planning to have a time for members of the church to testify of God's goodness upon your life. So please plan to come and pray! Pray that God will revive you and the church!

Called to the Ministry (I)

So far, we have been considering knowing and seeking the will of God in the area of marriage. The Word of God gives one specific command in the area of marriage, namely that a believer must marry in the Lord. It also provides wisdom in who a person should marry, and the responsibilities of marriage.

The next area of concern of most believers is how they can know God's will for them in the area of their work. Does the will of God also include our vocation? This is especially pertinent for those who "felt" called into the full-time ministry. What is "call" into the ministry like? How do I know if I am called?

What is a Call?

The word "call" in Greek is used in various contexts. It is often used in the Gospels to indicate an invitation by our Lord Jesus to call sinners to repentance. Our Lord says, "*They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*" (Matt. 9:12-13; 22:3). This is the general call of Gospel, it's also known as common grace. As our Lord says "*many are called, but few are chosen*" (Matt. 22:14).

The word "call" is also used to refer to what the Westminster Divines termed effectual calling, which is "God's free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it" (WCF, Chapter 10). In contrast to common grace, which is given to all; this effectual call is effectual grace which brings salvation to the sinner.

In other words, without God's effectual calling, a sinner having heard the Gospel would not respond in faith to God's saving grace. For a sinner to be saved, the God who offers salvation must also work in the sinner's heart to bring him out of the darkness of sin into His marvellous light.

The effectual call of God is the basis for the doctrine of election. "*For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover*

whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29-30). And this is the reason Christians are known as “the called of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:6; 8:28).

The first two usages of “call” are soteriological in nature; they deal with the doctrine of salvation. There is a third definition which is more relevant to God’s calling of a man to His work. Paul says that he is “called to be an apostle” (Rom. 1:1); Barnabas and Paul were called to be missionaries (Acts 13:2). Later, Paul went to Macedonia because of God’s call (Acts 16:9-10).

Do these passages teach that God has a specific call for every person? Can we expect God to give us the same kind of call that He gave to Paul? No, for the following reasons: First, the “call” in all these passages are supernatural, and they are the exception rather than the rule. Paul’s call to be an apostle was a supernatural call; he heard the voice of our Lord Jesus (Acts 16:16-18). The calling of Barnabas and Paul was also supernatural. The Holy Spirit spoke (Acts 13:2). Paul’s call to Macedonia came to him in a vision (Acts 16:9-10).

Second, these passages are narratives. The Book of Acts is the history of the first century church, before the full revelation of the Word of God was given. Thus, it was necessary in the formative years of the church for the Holy Spirit to work directly by putting the right man at the right place and by directing his ministry.

Third, the calls in these passages were unexpected. Paul certainly was not seeking for God’s will when he was on his way to Damascus. On the contrary, he thought he was already doing God’s will by persecuting the Christians. The elders in Antioch were not praying specifically for Barnabas and Paul when the Holy Spirit said the two men have been called to a specific job. Likewise, the Bible does not teach that believers must seek such a direct leading from God.

How, Then, Can I Know?

It is important for a man who thinks that he has the “call” to go into the full-time ministry to be sure of his calling. The pastoral work is unlike any other, and this is why Paul warns the church, not to ordain a “novice” to be an elder (1 Timothy 3:6). Thus, it is appropriate and necessary for a man to examine himself and be examined by others before he makes the decision.

In my case, I had to give the testimony of my salvation, and to be examined in the area of my service in the church, my doctrinal positions, and my calling into the ministry. However, before the Board of Elders, I did not have stories of bright lights and unseen voices to tell, and the elders did not expect any. What I did tell them were the reasons for my earnest desire to enter the full-time ministry, and the preparations and the commitment that I was willing to make. The examination was detailed, and necessarily so.

One of the first things that most people do when they felt called into the ministry is to ask, “Am I called?” Then, he will proceed to validate that “call.” This validation can come in the form of a special portion of scripture, constant encouragement from well-meaning friends, or even special life circumstances.

“Am I called?” ought not to be the first question. The first question a man who is thinking about entering the full-time ministry ought to be – “Am I ready?” The Word of God has a list of qualifications for spiritual leaders (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). A person who is going into the full-time ministry must

· Be a Christian. This is the most basic requirement. If a man aspires to be an overseer of the church (1 Tim. 3:7), he must at least be a Christian.

· Be able to teach. He is “*apt to teach*” (1 Tim. 3:2). This entails that he be trained. Even the eloquent Apollos humbly sat under the ministry of Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:26). A church leader must hold “*fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince*” (Tit. 1:9).

· Be an example in the home. He is “*the husband of one wife...One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity*” (1 Tim. 3:2-5; Tit. 1:6).

· Exhibit godly character. He is “*vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality...Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous*” (1 Tim. 3:2-3; Tit. 1:7-8).

· Be spiritually mature. He is not a novice (1 Tim. 3:6). Spiritual maturity also means that he has a track record of service in the church. He must be known; “*he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil*” (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

Hence the first question for a man considering the full-time ministry is – “Are you ready?” Are you ready to **be** and to **do** what God expects of His servants? God, willing, next week, we will examine the question – “Am I called?”

14 Nov 10

Called to the Ministry (II)

Ask not, “Am I called?” Do not validate the “call” merely by a special passage of Scripture that has touched your heart, or by some strong inner feeling, or by the words of a well-meaning friend, or by the circumstances in your life.

Instead, ask, “Am I ready? Are you ready to **be** and to **do** what God expects of His servants?” The Bible has a list of qualifications for spiritual leaders that will help you examine yourself, your readiness, and your call into the ministry (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). A person who is going into the full-time ministry must

- Be a Christian. This is the most basic requirement. If a man aspires to be an overseer of the church (1 Tim. 3:7), he must at least be a Christian.
- Be able to teach. He is “*apt to teach*” (1 Tim. 3:2). This entails that he be trained. Even the eloquent Apollos humbly sat under the ministry of Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:26). A church leader must hold “*fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince*” (Tit. 1:9).
- Be an example in the home. He is “*the husband of one wife... One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity*” (1 Tim. 3:2-5; Tit. 1:6).
- Exhibit godly character. He is “*vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality... Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous*” (1 Tim. 3:2-3; Tit. 1:7-8).
- Be spiritually mature. He is not a novice (1 Tim. 3:6). Spiritual maturity also means that he has a track record of service in the church. He must be known; “*he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil*” (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

Instead of just validating his “call,” it will do well for a man considering the full-time ministry to apply these guidelines to determine whether or not he is ready for the pastoral ministry.

Wrong Call or Not Ready?

There are many who felt strongly that they had the “call” to go into the full-time ministry only to give it up as the inner feelings fade with time and perhaps from the frustrations and pressures of the ministry.

I had once spoken to a young man who was seriously thinking of enrolling in Bible college and going into ministry because he found no peace in his work. My counsel to him was to pray and wait on the Lord for six months. Within that time, he had the opportunity to be trained as a teacher, and he has been happily in the job for several years. Did the young man have a wrong “call”?

I also know of men who are well-qualified and are actually doing the work of a pastor, but they have refrained from the full-time ministry because they have not had the “call.” Could they be wrong about the “call”?

The idea of being “called” into the ministry has caused many pastors to stay in the ministry from which they get no joy but only frustration, led many impressionable young people into a work for which they are not prepared, left those who quit the ministry with a sense of failure and guilt because they were mistaken about the “call.” But did the people get the wrong call or were they not ready?

Did Mark Make the Wrong Call?

The Book of Acts gives us several examples of people who were called into the ministry and some who left it. Their experiences give us some precious lessons to consider.

Paul and Barnabas were ordained as the first missionaries. Their call came into form of a voice from the Holy Spirit. Barnabas and Paul were called, but they were also ready. Note that both Barnabas and Paul were already doing the work of the Gospel before they were ordained as missionaries (Acts 11:22-26).

On that first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul also brought along John Mark (Acts 12:25), but the younger Mark abandoned the team and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Some time later, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they should go on a second missionary trip (Acts 15:36). Incidentally, the Bible does not say that God gave another call to Paul to prepare for the second trip. Paul wanted to go because of his desire to see the spiritual growth of the believers. It was a wise choice on his part.

Barnabas agreed to go with Paul, but he also wanted to bring Mark along. Paul, on the other hand, was not willing to risk another desertion. And there was heated contention between the two friends (Acts 15:39). The reason Paul refused to have Mark with him for the second trip was that Mark's desertion on the first trip proved that he was not ready.

Later when Mark proved his readiness for the ministry, Paul was happy to co-labour with him. *"Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry."* (2 Tim. 4:11; Col. 4:10-11)

Was Timothy Ready?

On the second missionary journey, Paul took Silas with him and they headed north. At Derbe, Paul chose another young man to travel with him. There was no mention that Timothy received a call. Paul chose Timothy for the same reason he rejected Mark. Timothy was chosen because he was prepared and ready for the work.

Timothy was *"well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium."* (Acts 16:2). He had solid training from his grandmother, Lois, and mother Eunice (2 Tim. 1:5), and *"that from a child [he] had known the holy scriptures, which are able to make [him] wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."* (2 Tim. 3:15).

Ready or Not?

Are you called? We are all called in the sense that all are called to serve. The Great Commission is not given to a select few but to the redeemed. We are all called in the sense that for every specific call to a man, there is also a general command to every Christian. God has given *"some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers"* (Eph. 4:11), but every believer is called to preach the Gospel.

Are you ready? There are some pointers that will help you consider your readiness for the full-time ministry.

- Check your commitment. The first question is your availability and this is settled by your submission to our Lord Jesus Christ who says, *"If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."* (Luke 9:23)

- Do some research. To find out about the nature of the work, and whether or not you are cut out for the pastoral ministry.

- Get involved in the church. They say it is easier to turn a big ocean liner if it is moving. Likewise, your present service in the local church will help you to determine your readiness for the full-time ministry.

· Do some self-assessment. Paul warns us, “*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). The work needs the man, and every man who desires the work must be honest about his own capabilities.

· Seek godly counsel. The advice and views of godly Christians can be a great help as you consider the full-time ministry.

· Be trained for the work. Paul exhorts Timothy, “*exercise thyself rather unto godliness...give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine...meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them...take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them*” (1 Timothy 4:7, 13-16). There is a need to be trained for the work, intellectually and spiritually.

· Prayer. Pray for wisdom. Pray for opportunities. Pray for God’s grace to do His work.

Our Lord says to us, “*The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth labourers into His harvest.*” (Matt. 9:37-38). The Lord will send forth His labourers. Are you ready?

21 Nov 10

The Christian and Work

In the old days, life was much simpler. The kind of work that a person would do very much depended on the family in which he was born. A son took up the occupation of his father. The tools of the trade became part of the family inheritance. Daughters became wives. In the modern age, life is more complicated. Specialization gives rise to a wide variety of occupations. One of the questions that young people ask before they leave school is – what work shall I do? For some, this issue is one of the concerns in their choice of the course of study in the universities.

What is God's will for my work? The basic principles are the same as those we apply to the issue of marriage. Just as no Christian ought to marry outside the Lord, similarly no Christian should engage in work that is outside the moral will of God. There are some work in which Christians should not be engaged. Like marriage, a Christian's choice of work falls within the confines of God's moral will, and the person should exercise biblical wisdom in choosing the work that will afford him the best opportunity to serve and glorify God.

The Bible and Work

When God created Adam, He also ordained work. *"The LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it"* (Gen. 2:15). God assigned work for Adam. Work is not part of God's curse upon mankind after the fall of Adam; on the contrary, it is sin that made work unpleasant and burdensome. In the New Testament epistles, the apostles wrote extensively on the issue of work. A believer seeking to find God's will for his work should meditate on these principles.

- Every believer is to find gainful employment. The Christian who refuses to work is to be disciplined. *"If any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies"* (2 Thess. 3:10-11).

- Every believer must provide for his own family. The Christian who neglects this duty is worse than an unbeliever. *"But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel"* (1 Tim. 5:8).

- Every believer's work should be lawful and scriptural. *"Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good"* (Eph. 4:28).

- Every believer's work must be reflection of his devotion to our Lord Jesus. *"Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men"* (Eph. 6:5-7).

- Every believer must be enthusiastic and passionate about his work. *"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might"* (Eccl. 9:10).

- Every believer must be honest and faithful in his work. *"Not purloining, but shewing all good fidelity; that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things"* (Tit. 2:10).

- Every believer must use his work to provide for himself (2 Thess. 3:10), his family (1 Tim. 5:8), so that he would not be a burden to others *"Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail...that we might not be chargeable to any of you"* (2 Thess. 3:8).

- Every believer must use his work to help others who may be in need. *"Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth"* (Eph. 4:28).

· Every believer must work as a good Christian testimony. *“Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed”* (1 Tim. 6:1).

· Every believer must be submissive to and respect his employer. *“Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward”* (1 Pet. 2:18).

· Every believer must treat his employees justly and fairly. *“Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal”* (Col. 4:1).

· Every believer is finally accountable to God for his work. *“Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven”* (Col. 4:1).

The Christian’s choice of work must be made based upon these Scriptural principles. To the question – what shall I work? – the Christian has to determine what is the work that offers him the greatest opportunity to serve the Lord, bearing in mind that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

28 Nov 10

The Christian and Work

Every man comes to a juncture in his life when he has to decide what he has to do with his life. The options in our day are abundant: university, Bible college, vocational training school, work, etc. The possibilities are limited by a number of factors: aptitude, test scores, financial resources, circumstances, personal interests, etc. There are some who would choose to go on to university. There are others who would go to trade school. And there are yet others who would join the work force. Whatever the decision, it represents one of the major decisions in a person's life. Since we are on the issue of a Christian and his work, let us consider the steps that a man may take to ensure that his decision will be one that is in the will of God.

“What work shall I do?”

“What trade shall I engage in?”

The first principle that a Christian should take into consideration when choosing the type of work to engage in is the moral will of God. No Christian should take on work that violates God's moral laws. In our day and age, there are many types of jobs that our society deems as legal, but in God's eyes, these jobs are an abomination. Most jobs in the entertainment industry would fall into this category because the work vexes the soul of the conscientious believer. There are other jobs that are honourable, such as doctoring, but there are some aspects of doctoring that violate God's moral laws, such as abortion. So the first question that a person should consider before he decides to go into a particular line of work is this – Does my work violate the moral laws of God? If it does, then no Christian should engage in such kind of work. However, if it does not violate God's laws, then the believer is to pray and exercise godly wisdom and discernment in his decision. He is free to make the decision within God's moral will.

There are several questions that a Christian should ask as he prays for God's wisdom. Allow me to illustrate from my own experiences how these biblical precepts can be applied to your life. To be sure, there were times of frustration and fear, but as the wise preacher says, *“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.”* (Prov. 3:5-6).

· ***Is this the work that I really want to do?*** Since young, I have always been fascinated by books, and the first full-time job that I had was an editorial assistant in a publishing firm. It was here that I pick up the technical skills for publishing. *“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest”* (Eccl. 9:10). The lesson is that when a person has the opportunity to do the work of his calling, he should do it with all diligence. It also means that every believer must make an honest assessment of his gifts (Rom. 12:1-3) and present himself as a living sacrifice unto God in the employment of those gifts for God's glory.

· ***Is this the work that I am capable of doing?*** A man may greatly desire to be a painter, but if he is colour blind, then this is a physical impediment that he would have to consider seriously. The first job affirmed in my mind was the kind of work that I would like to engage in, and also one in which I am capable of doing. It also determined my choice of study in the university. Every believer must be willing to be trained so that he can do well in what he really wants to do. The Apostle Paul told Timothy, *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* (2 Tim. 2:15).

· ***Is this the work that I can make a living doing?*** A man may have the desire and the ability to be a poet, but if he cannot support himself and his family writing poetry, then he should be doing something else. When I first started working, I really did not care too much about the wages that I was paid for my work. However, in hindsight, I should have paid more attention to this aspect of work. As Christians, we must remember that we are stewards of God's gifts; the more that we have, the more responsibility we shoulder. *“For 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). Paul also teaches us that a Christian is to use his financial rewards for his work to help those who are in need, that *“Let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth”*

(Eph. 4:28). I have known many Christians who are blessed with the ministry of giving (Rom. 12:8). Vancouver BP Church is the beneficiary of such a Christian. Having said that, we must be careful not to allow the “money” factor be the key determinant in deciding what we would like to do. I worked as an oil-reporter for which I was paid a handsome salary, but the nature of the work was somewhat contrary to my personality, and even though I was well-paid, I did not enjoy my work. Besides, the working hours also kept me away from church prayer meetings. And as I sought the Lord’s help, He gave me the opportunity to be a foreign news editor in a TV station, which paid me just as well, and allowed me more time to serve the Lord.

· ***Is this the work that I can enjoy doing?*** This question encompasses every aspect of your work – What is the working environment like? Lot was doing well in his career but his working environment was detrimental to his spiritual well-being. Lot was “*vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;)*” (2 Pet. 2:7-8). Who are your colleagues? The Bible teaches that a farmer should never “*plow with an ox and an ass together*” (Deut. 22:10). Who is your immediate supervisor? We must remember that when we take on a job, we take on a boss. The Bible teaches us that submission to authority is a biblical imperative for the Christian, and experience teaches us that it is easier to submit to authority when the person in charge is competent, patient, and kind. Amos asked, “*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*” (Amos 3:3).

· ***Is this the work that I can honour God doing?*** A Christian’s first allegiance is to God, not his work. The Bible commands us to “*present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service*” (Rom. 12:1). Every Christian must regard his work as God’s ministry for him. Many Christians neglect to consider this aspect when they are deciding on their work. I was working as a news editor when God reminded me of the desire that He had put in my heart to go into the pastoral ministry. It was hard to attend Bible college while working full-time as a journalist, but the Lord opened the way. I was asked to help set up an early morning news channel, meaning that I would need to work from midnight to nine the following morning. This arrangement gave me time to attend classes in the seminary after work. In hindsight, I can look back and thanked God for His leading, but it was one small step at a time, as Eliezer praised God when he was led to Rebekah, “*Blessed be the LORD God of my master Abraham...I being in the way, the LORD led me to the house of my master's brethren*” (Gen. 24:27). Does God give us wisdom when we ask Him? Yes, He does (James 1:5), but He does not make us omniscient. To all who seek Him, God will give grace and wisdom sufficient for a sound and biblical decision. We do not need to know everything about a situation before we make our choice, but we do need to have Christ in focus, so that the type of work that we engage in would be one in which we could best serve and glorify our Lord and Saviour. May the Lord help us!

05 Dec 10

It has been a busy month of missions for our church. If I am not mistaken, there are 35 Calvarians who were in North Thailand at one time or another in November. The first to head for Thailand were Rev and Mrs Chan who left on 5 November (Friday). Preacher Alex and I joined them on 8 November (Monday). Then we were joined by Chuan Yu, Liang Fang, and Yin Fan on 12 November (Friday). Two days later – 14 November (Sunday), the first team to teach English at the elementary school arrived in Fang. As I write (21 November, Sunday) the second team is about to arrive in Chiangmai, and they will be there till the end of the week. I am sure those who came had many interesting stories to tell, and God's wondrous blessings to testify. I will leave them to share their own testimonies.

Many Places: China Evangelistic Mission, Fang

As for me, Alex and I arrived in Chiangmai on Monday afternoon to be greeted by Rev David Li and his wife Sarah, and Rev Godman Fu and his wife Iris. From Chiangmai, we made the four-hour journey to China Evangelistic Mission (CEM) in Fang.

Training of the local pastors began the next day (8 November). I was supposed to be teaching homiletics. The subject itself was challenging enough but on top of that, I was to be teaching in Mandarin. My notes were translated from English into Mandarin, and then in Thai. One could only imagine the loss of meaning as the notes were translated. To compound the problem, I have had not enough time to look at my own notes in Mandarin. When I did, I found, to my horror, that I could not recognize half of the Chinese characters.

The first section of my course ended just after 40 minutes, after which my interpreter turned to me and said, "So quick finished?" Over the next few days, I spent the rest of the afternoon retranslating my own notes so that I could manage them. Standing in front of the class, I felt I was thrown into the deep end of the pool. I did not drown, but I certainly took in a lot of water.

By the end of the first day, by God's grace, I was able to hold the attention of the class, and even managed a short discussion at the end of each class with the local pastors.

The class ran from the morning till noon, and Rev Chan's class on adult counselling ran from 1:30 to 3:00pm. The evenings were spent talking with CEM missionaries and visiting preachers to learn about the work of missions.

Maepen, Maepoon

On Friday, Alex, Mrs Chan, and I went down to Chiangmai to meet Chuan Yu and team. From Chiangmai, we went to Phrao, the last town before Maepen to stock up on food supplies before heading up to Maepen. The last time I visited Maepen was over ten years ago. The roads are now paved; the ride was far more comfortable. Nevertheless the journey from Fang to Chiangmai to Phrao and then to Maepen took nearly the whole day. We left Chiangmai at 10:00am and by the time we reached Maepen, it was close to 7:00pm. We had a brief time of Bible study with the church members.

The next morning, we visited the members, and managed to round up a good number of people for a short training course. In the afternoon, we visited some of the members who were harvesting the rice that they had planted. It was supposed to be a short trip – as the local preacher told us – but his idea of "short" was a two-kilometre trek downhill. At the foot of the hill, the option was: a two-kilometre trek back or an eight-kilometre walk around the hill back to Maepen. Most of us could not make the hike, and it was by the mercy of some passing driver that we managed to get a ride back to Maepen. Saturday night ended with a prayer meeting with some 30 members present.

Samkula, not Sankula or Samgula

Sunday morning began with a ladies' fellowship followed by worship service. After lunch and a short rest, we headed to Samkula (official Thai name), literally it means "the place of three valleys." The ride down to the valley was most interesting. The road was not paved. The deep tracks left by heavy trucks during the rainy season had hardened into bumps and ridges. Riding on the back of truck down to the valley and up was literally a bone-shaking experience. It felt that some of my joints had been loosened.

After the worship service, we visited some of the homes. Most of the people in Samkula are Lisu who still lived in split bamboo huts.

We returned to Fang on Monday morning. The evening, we had a brief meeting with the first team of Calvinists. They had come up on Monday, and immediately, they had to conduct the first class because schools in Fang would close on Thursday for Loi Krathong (Water Lantern festival).

Liu Jia Chun

Tuesday, we attended a wedding of a Lahu preacher and his Yao bride. After the wedding lunch, Chuan Jeng – a NJC classmate of mine – drove me to Liu Jiachun (village of Liu), where he has a drug rehabilitation ministry. Liu Jiachun is about an hour and a half from Fang, set in the midst of a valley surrounded by high mountains; the drug rehabilitation centre is a place of refuge for those whose lives have been enslaved by drugs – heroin, opium, and methamphetamines, which the locals called *yaba* (mad drug). They also called heroin *yang yen* (literally, foreign smoke). All come to the centre voluntarily, and most of the people who come here are in their middle ages; some are in the 60's. The younger ones will stay for six months. The elderly do not leave.

To sustain themselves, they grow their own vegetables, plant tea and lychees which they sell. But the bulk of the support comes from overseas churches.

The day begins at six in the morning with a bell. Another bell at seven summons the people to morning devotions and prayer; another at eight for breakfast, another at nine to assemble for work assignments. Work meant tending the vegetable farms, picking tea, clearing land. At six in the evening, a bell sounds for dinner. Another at seven summons the people again for evening devotions and prayer. During the time we were there, Alex spoke at the morning devotions, and I the evening.

The treatment for drug addiction was simple – cold turkey (meaning total abstinence) and lots of prayer. During the time I was there, I have heard testimonies of true conversion. One man, Lao Da, has been there for 15 years. He and his wife were both addicts. Both were converted, and now they serve in the centre. Another was a man in his late 60's who fought for the Kuomintang army, but they were abandoned. He too came to the centre some years ago and would never leave again. There is nothing in the world for them. At the centre, he said he had friends and Christ.

During the trip, we also visited the surrounding villages. There are many churches in the minority villages. The Akha, Lahu, Lisu people are more receptive to the Gospel. The Yao tribe is not. Each of these tribes has their own spoken languages.

One of the villages we visited was Cha Fan (literally Tea House) because there used to be a huge facility for drying and frying tea leaves. In the small village of less than a hundred households, there is mosque, a Shan temple, a Buddhist stupa, a Taoist temple and a church.

The church runs a hostel for young people from the mountains to stay while they go to school. That seems to be the way most of the churches operate here – open a school or student hostel or provide some form of social service – as a means of outreach.

Thoen in Lampang Province

Friday morning, we left Liu Jiachun and headed down to Fang for a three-hour bus ride to Chiangmai, and we were met by Rev David Li, the field director of CEM. He drove us to CEM's newest outreach in Thoen, in Lampang province. Thoen is about three hours south of Chiangmai. A road marker says that if we continue on the same highway, in another 2,574 km, we will reach Singapore.

The New Sky Home Foundation Adult Education Centre is really a correction centre for juvenile delinquents. The facility is located in the midst of a jungle. Rev David Li, his wife, and another couple came here seven years ago. They built their first bamboo hut. Now they have a nice facility but no students as yet. They are working with the local authorities to send the young people for training.

As we toured the facility, it dawned upon me the work that had to be done before the first brick is laid. They dug their own well, and ponds to collect water because there is still no piped water. They grow their own vegetables. The first bamboo hut also had bamboo pipes to collect rain water. Water was so precious that a single drop of water is used three times – to wash face, and then to brush teeth, and finally to flush the toilets. I counted the various fields of knowledge that is involved – agriculture, animal husbandry, civil and mechanical engineering, water conservation, special culinary skills to cook snakes and field rats.

That night Pastor David Li and his co-workers met for a time of fellowship and devotion. It was a moving experience as they shared their burdens and vision.

Saturday morning, we drove into Lampang city and with the help of a retired judge – a Chinese Thai who could speak Mandarin and English – we visited the Lampang juvenile observation centre. This is really a holding facility for young people who ran afoul of the law before they are brought to court. Thai law allows these young people to be held for 90 days without trial.

We were able to mix with them freely. Pastor David's team teaches here every week. Here is one place where the Gospel can be preached freely. The irony is that the Bible is denied in every public school, but never in the prisons.

Chiangmai

Sunday morning, I preached at a CEM hostel in Chiangmai. The boy's hostel with some 30 boys going to primary and secondary schools are under the charge of Rev Godman Fu and his wife, Iris. They and a team of co-workers drive, feed, give tuition to the children. Most of them are from the tribal villages. The first team – visibly tired but joyful – also joined the worship service.

In the evening, we joined David and Sarah Li and Jenny Kwok for dinner at the CEM office in Chiangmai. CEM has been in Thailand for 35 years, and their four main core ministries are:

- social services (hostels in Fang, Chiangmai, New Sky Home Orphanage, etc.);
- church ministries (eight Chinese churches, nine Thai churches, twelve tribal churches, and one Thai-Chinese church)
- training ministry (where Rev Chan and myself are involved),
- Bible seminary (which is still in the planning stage)

There are now at present 18 foreign CEM missionaries in Chiangmai, all from Hong Kong. Over the two weeks, we have been to many mission stations in North Thailand, but it was not the scenery that moved me, it was the people – those who need the Gospel and those who gave themselves to preach it. God willing, next week, we will look at three persons who would go where God wants them to go.

12 Dec 10

Three People

During these few weeks, I met many people – all of them are involved in the Gospel ministry in North Thailand. But three people stood out, not that the rest were not important but these three represented the whole age spectrum from a young couple in their prime to a retired businessman.

Passion of an unbeliever. The first is a retired judge named Ma Li. She is a Thai-Chinese who speaks Thai, Mandarin and English. Ma Li is a non-believer. However, she was instrumental in helping Pastor David Li set up his ministry in Thoen. She lived in the city of Lampang in a rich neighbourhood. Her passion for the young people was most admirable. I have never seen a person who was driven in this work for which she not only gets no remuneration but also had to donate her own money to the project.

In the observation centre, she mixed freely with the boys; she treated them with respect. She was always looking for something good to say to them. There was a boy who was an expert at making lanterns, another who was very good at playing the Thai traditional drums. She would exploit these talents for the good of the children. Pastor Li and his team are praying that they would be used of God by giving them training and the Bible. Some would argue that this is social work and not missions. I would say this – The irony is that we have the good news of salvation that is able to save a soul from hell; Mrs Ma Li only could offer these young boys another chance at life on earth. I pray that Christians who have the Gospel would be as passionate about evangelism as she is about providing these boys a second chance.

As I interacted with the boys, I am reminded that God always gives second chances. Failure is an event, and never a life. Like these 60 boys, they have strayed from the law once – some may be even several times – and so have we strayed from God's commandments repeatedly but there is always mercy with the LORD. Sin – like failure – is redeemable if we would return to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Last lap of a widower. The second a retired businessman from Bangkok. David Wang is also a Thai Chinese in the mid-70's who speaks English, Mandarin, Teochew and some Thai. He has a big mansion in Bangkok, travelled the world as businessman. But now he left his house in Bangkok to a domestic help, and lives in a small room, ministering to the Chinese churches in Fang.

He also spends his time with the orphans at New Sky Home, teaching them English, praying with them, leading in devotions, fetching them to the doctor when one is sick. There is nothing that this rich man would not do for the weak and helpless. Our Lord Jesus told the disciples, "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me" (Matthew 25:45).

What moved David to give the last part of his life to serve God? The world would say that this is silly. This is retirement. It is the time for golf and afternoon teas. It is time to smell the roses. His friends could not understand him. I am sure there are Christians who also could not understand him. But David says he always been faithful in his service for God, and now is not the time for doing less. He says that this will be his last ministry for our Lord Jesus Christ. And he certainly lives like one who was very sure of His calling, and has given heart and soul to his work.

Prime of a young couple. The third is really two persons – a young preacher and his wife from Hong Kong – Wang Quanyong and Anne. He joined Pastor David Li's ministry at Thoen a year ago. It is hard to explain the challenges of living in the training centre in Thoen. You have to be there to experience in order to know the difficulties. Pastor David gave us a room on the second floor because snakes were common. They caught three in the week that we were there.

However, as hard as the living conditions, it was the easier part because it is a matter of making do with less and adapting to the physical surroundings.

What is even harder is the spiritual challenges. As Pastor David says, they are like Moses in the second forty years of his life – waiting in the desert. The waiting part is hard for God's servants on the ground for two reasons. First, it lends itself to doubt – "Why am I here?" "Why is God not sending the students so we can get on with the work?"

Second, it tends to invite criticism from supporting churches who are keen on results. Seven years is a long time to wait. “Why are we supporting six missionaries who really have no real ministry? Should they not be deployed to somewhere else?”

But for Preacher Wang, he was absolutely sure that Thoen is the place where God wants him to be. So despite health problems, Wang and Anne remain resolute in Christ.

Are there Calvinians as passionate as Mrs Ma Li in the building and nurturing the lives of young people for our Lord Jesus Christ? Are there retired people, like David Wang, who are willing to devote the final lap of their lives to the Lord’s work? Are there young people – in their prime like Preacher Wang – who are willing to give up their lives to serve Christ in the full-time ministry? I certainly hope so, and I pray that there will be some who would say, as Isaiah did when God called, “Here am I, send me!”

19 Dec 10

Calvary will be starting a new outreach to foreign tertiary students who are studying at our local universities and polytechnics. The purpose of this new ministry is to reach out to the foreign students who are studying and staying around the church with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The prayer is that when these students return to their home country, they will be the contact point for our missions in the future. With this, I will invite all tertiary students to attend a short meeting on 26 December after the worship service at Room 3.10. Members of the church who would like to help out in this ministry are also welcome to this meeting.

THE TRUE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

Greetings to you in the Saviour's Name! We are so happy this time of the year to commemorate the Birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Let me share some thoughts with you so that all of us can be better geared towards this special Christian event of the year.

Luke 1:28-30 "And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God."

During this month of December, lights along some shopping belts along Orchard Road and Chinatown have been well lit to welcome the festivities of Christmas and the New Year. There have been innumerable advertisements of special offers everyday since then. Shoppers are going on their shopping sprees to purchase new clothes for themselves and those they intend to give away Christmas' gifts. What a season for giving! The world will all try to get you to have a "Merry" X-mas – that is leaving the "Christ of Christmas".

But what is the true spirit of Christmas that we should have? There is a beautiful suggestion for us to have a "MARY CHRISTMAS"! We need to look into the life and thoughts of virgin Mary, the mother of this little babe who was to be born King of the Jews in Israel.

MARY'S EXPERIENCE

It all started in the city of Nazareth with the announcement from an angel to her, that she will be with child. This message came as a great surprise to her as she confessed that she had not had any relationship with any man (v.34). Mary is indeed a faithful person who is only committed to one man, Joseph. She had kept herself from any defilement or infidelity, and will soon be presented as a pure virgin for her husband-to-be. And while she was troubled in her heart as to the significance of the message, she is encouraged with God's favour upon her (v.28) and that she will be God's instrument to bear the unspeakable gift, Jesus Christ, for the world (v.30). Thus, she readily gave herself to the Lord to carry God's Son in her womb (v.38). Mary's good spirit was praiseworthy and commendable as she willingly surrenders her will to the will of God which is much bigger and far better.

MARY'S EXULTATION

Mary was further encouraged by her cousin, Elizabeth who speaks prophetically of the seed in her womb (v.42). She would be the most blessed among women for being "the mother of my (our) Lord" (v.43). Instead of making any boast of herself, she is careful to lift her heart in praise for her wonderful Saviour who is to be born. Mary acknowledges her low estate and yet God should look down upon her and choose her as His holy vessel for this unprecedented event in her life. Oh, what a privilege and blessing for the Lord to have chosen us to have His begotten Son to be born in us! Therefore we hymn,

How silently, how silently The wondrous gift is giv'n!

So God imparts to human hearts The blessings of His heav'n.

No ear may hear His coming, But, in this world of sin,

Where meek souls will receive Him still The dear Christ enters in.

Without doubt, God will not send the spiritually hungry away without His blessings of salvation, but He will certainly fill them with good things. However, for the spiritually impoverished rich people He sends them away empty (v.53)!

MARY'S EXPRESSION

Here is a delicate and beautiful expression of a mother's heart that seems to know all the little secrets of a child's life ahead of him. While the 'outsiders' are wondering with perplexities and amusement as regards to the angelic announcement (Lk. 2:9-14), Mary's mind is one of holy contemplations (v.18-19). This is because she knows who actually this Child is and what are the purposes of His birth. Mary's inward expression like this is again being displayed later in v.51, "but His mother kept all these sayings in her heart" (cf. 1:29). Her motherly silence and reservation reveal her true affection and warmth for the Lord, her Saviour. This I would reckon is the true spirit of an individual who is near and dear to God.

May I encourage all readers to adopt this quiet and contemplative spirit in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the Christmas festivities and celebrations, lest we forget the Christ of Christmas. May we allow God to warm our hearts as we commemorate the birth of our wonderful Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ! The Lord bless you with a "Mary Christmas"!

26 Dec 10

A MISSION TO VIETNAM

John 4:35 “Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.”

My first impression of Vietnam is that it is a land of oppression, war and poverty. Indeed it was a country in Southeast Asia that once was most feared because it was a communistic nation and still is today. During my Bible college days, I had opportunities to minister to the “boat-people”. They came in hundreds and packed into their dingy boats they arrived on our shores from South Vietnam. This was in the late 70s. These people had fled their land and had risked their lives travelling often over treacherous waters. I heard stories of their starvation and of deaths in the open seas. Those who survived the watery graves and managed to land in Singapore were housed in Woodlands. Many were thankful to be alive and their hearts began to be open to the gospel of Christ, and many believed and were baptized.

However, Vietnam today has prospered economically as it has opened its doors wide to foreign investments. Today, we can see skyscrapers and high tech buildings around the city. And thank God a door has also been opened to our church to co-labour with a registered Evangelical pastor in this land. What an opportunity for the preaching of the gospel to these needy and deprived souls!

VIETNAM BIBLE INSTITUTE

Upon arriving in Ho Chi Minh City (previously Saigon) on the 25th Nov (Thursday), I was happily greeted by Bro. Lawrence Tan who had gone a week earlier to make all the necessary preparations for us. Immediately, we proceeded by taxi to our meeting place for the training of local pastors and preachers who had signed up for the course. They have come from all over central Vietnam and they are known to our missionary Phan. One will not fail to see that there is such a spiritual hunger in their hearts for biblical reformed truths. Rev Ho Chee Lai was the teacher for this course on the Epistle of Hebrews. After each lesson, there will be such a barrage of questions for Rev Ho to answer and thus indicating their eagerness to devour the Word of God. Even Rev Ho has expressed his joy and excitement teaching this group of dynamic church leaders who are zealously serving the Lord. Through interaction, they have become more responsive and open to the training.

The next day, we met in a conference room in a hotel in the city for the students to sit for their final exams. The papers were marked and graded and to our surprise all of them did very well exceeding our expectations. This only shows their willingness to learn and also their ability to grasp the lessons taught even through an interpreter. Prizes were awarded to 3 of the best students who have done exceptionally well. Before we parted, I exhorted them to remain faithful to God and carry what they have learnt back to their congregations so that they too may be fed with God's Word. They are already looking forward to more training in the near future!

BIBLE STUDIES AND FELLOWSHIP

On both Saturday and Sunday evenings, factory workers gathered for a time of Bible Studies and fellowship in their respective hostels. There are literally thousands of workers just outside the next district of the church. These present good opportunities for evangelism and discipleship. Thank God for the good work which has been done by Phan's assistant, Truyen and another lady who are supported by Calvary. Another area of opportunity would be the thousands of students who are flowing into Ho Chi Minh City. Phan showed us numerous universities which are located around the vicinity of his new church which will be operational this December. Every Saturday afternoon, a group of university students gathers in church to study English. Who will be willing to go and help them read the English Bible?

KINDERGARTEN MINISTRY

After the completion of the last class, Phan brought us to see the kindergarten ministry not too far from church. For the last few years this ministry has been ably and profitably run by his wife, Hau. The kindergarten is located in the heart of a small town. In this rented semi-detached house, children are taught the same curriculum like JCK. Recently, the number of children has dwindled due to steep competition from other newer kindergartens and childcare centers around this town which charge cheaper rates. The lease of this rented house will expire next year and the owner may want to take it back. Another problem which further complicates the difficulty is that a telecommunication company has built a large antenna just meters away from the kindergarten premises! Let us pray for an alternative location to continue with this children ministry.

Finally, this trip has been an eye opener to me as I saw the teeming millions right in this largest and populated city of Vietnam. It is certainly too overwhelming for anyone of us to do anything for the Lord; we really feel a sense of helplessness to render help. But thank God that through the training arms of the Vietnam Bible Institute we are able to equip the national leaders to reach their fellow countrymen for the Lord. Amen!