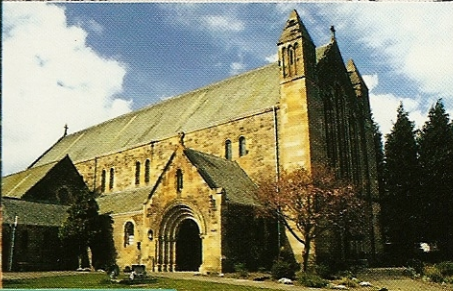
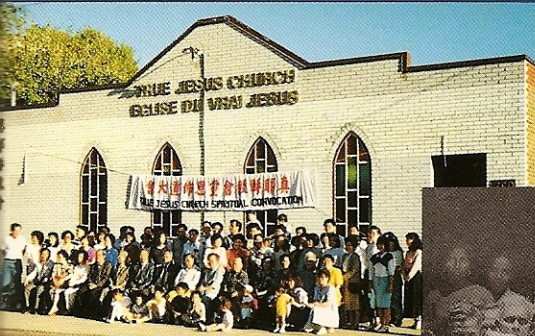


## The Household of GOD



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f r o m t h e e d i t o r

*It is the prediction of the Bible as well as the commission of the Lord that the gospel of salvation be preached to every part of the world before the heaven and the earth pass away (Mt 24:14; Mk 16:15). Since it is the command of the Lord, the event prophesied in the Bible shall surely come to pass.*

*The early true church set up by Christ Jesus in Jerusalem and pioneered by the apostles had undergone great persecutions. As a result of these persecutions which scattered believers far and wide, the gospel of salvation was preached with great rapidity from the city of Jerusalem to the regions of Judea and Samaria. Today, in some ways some of our believers face a similar situation as in the days of the early church; not that they are persecuted but that they have the opportunity to preach the Word in many foreign lands. In the early seventies there was a great influx of the Ap-chow members to the United Kingdom. More recently, many families from Taiwan and the Southeast Asian countries have also migrated to Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, Canada and Latin America. Reports and testimonies received tell of how God has blessed our emigrant brethren richly. Most of them live happy and comfortable lives. For them we give thanks to God sincerely.*

But while thanking God for His wonderful grace, have we, as emigrant children of God, ever seriously pondered why God has sent us here? To enjoy a good life? To receive better education and to build panelled houses? Do we remember our Lord's words to Peter, "Feed my sheep"?

INTERNATIONAL ASSEMBLY  
OF THE TRUE JESUS CHURCH

11236 DALE STREET  
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*You will see how thinly our church is spread in the world from the chart on page 51. We do not have a house of worship in Alaska; no, nor in Johannesburg either. Do we care?*

*In this issue, in the feature article, "**The Household of God**" the author strongly emphasizes church unity. Quoting the prayer of the Lord, "that they may all be one", the author expresses further that church unity is the divine expectation of the Lord. Indeed, there is truth in the common saying, "United we stand, divided we fall". In order to achieve church unity, we require genuine care, such as that of the good Samaritan, to be extended to someone who truly deserves it. The author stresses further that magnanimity, a rare virtue in the end time, should be endorsed in the family of God if we want to live up to our noble status as members of the household of God.*

*In "**Pilate Never Heard the Answer**", Pilate could have learned what the truth was had he exercised more patience in listening a little longer to what Jesus had to say.*

*In recent years Christmas has become so popular in the commercial world that even some countries which predominantly uphold other religious beliefs also declare December 25th a public holiday. Many Christians believe that Jesus Christ was born on the 25th of December. But the Bible is silent. The article, entitled, "**Is Christmas biblical?**" will enlighten you as to why true Christians should not celebrate Christmas.*

*The article, "**How To Apportion Your Time For God**", may, at first glance, suggest some form of priority be given to God. But the author thinks otherwise, because 'the sacred - secular dichotomy crumbles when it comes to real-life situations'. Therefore, sequential priorities are not workable. 'If the life you now live in the flesh is for Christ, then taking care of your physical body is a religious duty. In this way, everything that a Christian does is 'sacred'; nothing is 'secular', asserts the author. Don't miss reading this article.*

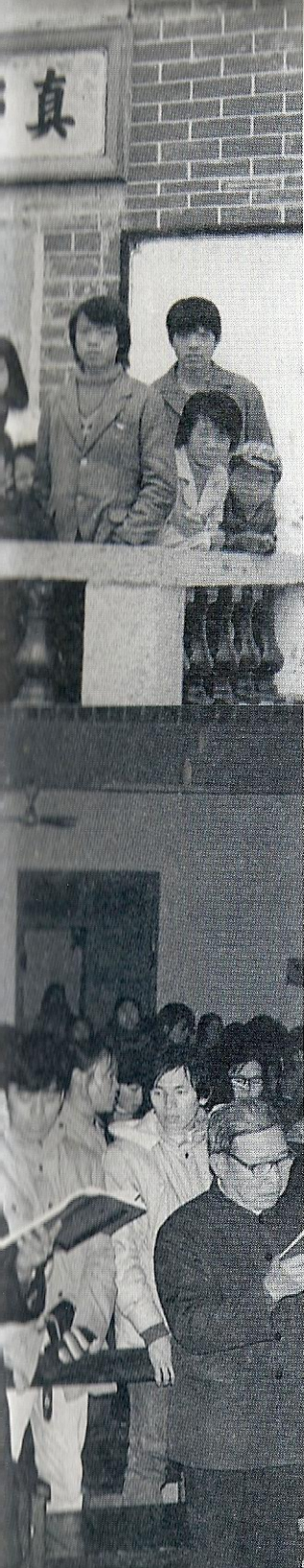
*H.W. Longfellow said, "Nothing is real, but death is certain". An incident happened in Formosa some years ago. There were two youths named A and B who were bosom friends studying in the same school. One day B boarded a ship to Japan to further his studies. Not long after, A was shocked to hear that his friend had suddenly passed away in Japan. A rushed to Japan in time for the funeral. At the entrance to the burial ground A saw a portal with words written, "It is my turn today". After the burial, at the exit, A saw another portal with words written, "It will be your turn tomorrow"! There is some humour in the inscription but the message is clear: death is a reality. In the article entitled, "**Will Tomorrow Surely Come?**", the author reiterated that there may not always be a tomorrow for us to sing, "Seize the day!" So, let us "gather the rosebuds" while we may by focusing our attention on God.*

*In "**Religious Education**" (RE), the writer expounds on the importance of RE and the qualifications one needs in order to teach. The prospects of our church depend largely on the success of RE. Read it as a reminder.*

*Under the Bible Study Section, the article "**I am the LORD in Ezekiel**" depicts the prophet reminding the stiff-necked Israelites that their God is Yahweh who will not tolerate any other god. Incidentally, it is a teaching to us too. At times we conveniently forget, or have doubts, which prevent us from entrusting all our cares to God.*

*In addition to the above, we also present to you special features with photographs of our TJC in different parts of the world. We hope you will be edified by reading them. And that you will also send your articles to us so that we can publish them to edify others.*

*Praise the Lord that we are able to publish some wonderful testimonies in this issue. We also thank God that a few more testimonies have been submitted to us, but were received too late for publication. We will publish them in subsequent issues of Manna.*



# THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

PICK UP ANY TRACT that introduces the church, and you will learn that the True Jesus Church was established in Beijing, China in 1917. Three of the early workers, once affiliated with other denominations, received the Holy Spirit and the revelation of the perfect truth concerning salvation. Under divine guidance, they set up the true church and began to preach the complete Gospel. To date, by the grace of God, the church has spread to over twenty countries, in five continents with over 70,000 members in the free world. New church buildings are being continually dedicated to the Lord, and new members are being added to the fold. It would seem that the church is progressing. But should church development be gauged just by the number of church buildings and the size of its membership? Are they the only yardsticks?

BY LEE JIN [SINGAPORE]

In many cases, church dedication is the result of months and even years of preparation by local members. First, a suitable building has to be found, or designed. Then, there is the construction or refurbishment work which requires funds. Finally, the actual dedication service itself has to be planned, and the logistics carefully worked out to prevent hiccups on the actual day. All these activities require manpower and dedication of the members. The rate of membership growth is indicative of the evangelistic spirit of local believers to propagate the salvation of God through special meetings, leaflet distributions, personal preaching, and so forth. The dedication and zeal of the members should not be belittled.

But surely church progress extends beyond magnificent church buildings and membership size. Rather, the spiritual development of every individual member should be the determining factor. After all, the word "church" refers to a sanctified assembly redeemed out of the world by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus (Acts 20:28), rather than merely a Christian place of worship. When the members of this assembly remain "babes in Christ" (1 Cor 3:1), impressive chapels and expanding congregations are irrelevant. The question is, are we still "babes in Christ"? Where do we stand in relation to the expectation of the Lord Jesus towards His church?



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The Lord Jesus, knowing that He would soon be separated from His disciples and that once He was gone they would encounter new challenges to their faith, did what every teacher who loves his students would do. He turned to the One whom He knew could help; He prayed to His Heavenly Father. And in this prayer, we can see what was uppermost in His mind, because He returned to this point again and again. In John 17:11, He asked His Father to "keep them in Thy name, which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, as We are one".

This phrase appears again in John 17:21 "that they may all be one", in John 17:22 "that they may be one", and in John 17:23 "that they may be perfectly one". The unity of His followers is a key theme of His prayers. They have to be united, "so that the world may know that Thou hast sent me" (Jn 17:23). Today, His followers of the end time have to live up to this divine expectation.

Consider the church of the apostolic era. The author of Acts records how the believers were "of one heart and soul", and that there were no needy persons amongst them because those with the means would take care of those in need, and everyone shared the same community spirit (Acts 4:32-35). Not only that, they also genuinely cared for one another's well-being. So when Peter was arrested, the believers made "earnest prayers" for him (Acts 12:5). Because of all that, the Lord blessed them and worked mightily amongst them. Many received strength and power from above to preach and perform miracles. What about the church of the end time? After all, she is the revived apostolic church, which according to one prophetic pronouncement, is to be even more glorious and splendid than her predecessor (Hag 2:9).



**The experiences of the early church have shown us that unity is a vital key to achieving spiritual excellence. Believers of this common faith have to live together in harmony as the one family of God, with the love of Christ as their guiding and motivating force. If the church fails to be united, individual members would become easy prey for the devil. As the Lord Jesus once said, "the house that is divided will not stand." Indeed, there is much truth in the saying: "united we stand, divided we fall."**

Church unity is a subject matter well expounded on numerous pulpits of the True Jesus Church. Ask any regular churchgoer and he will tell you the need for church unity and quote you bible verses to support this assertion. On the surface, at least, we may conclude that the church is united. After all, are the members not working in church together? We all appear to be working comfortably with each other in discharging our responsibilities. But unity is more

as important is whether we share the same rapport deep in our hearts. How does one really feel about the next person? Is there true unity “in mind and thought” ?

**In a typical church, we will find amongst its congregation, believers of various age groups, with different family upbringing and varying levels of education. Yet, true unity can still exist despite these differences. What it requires is for us to remember that by the amazing grace of God, we are members of His household.**

We are of one spiritual family, and the rapport we have with our brethren within this spiritual family should be even stronger than the one we have with our own physical family. When we truly care for one another the way we would our own flesh and blood, then we are on the right track towards achieving true unity. This is because when we truly care, our actions towards one another will be born of love. When one of our brothers fails to keep the words of God or does wrong, and we have to counsel or even reprimand him, our words, no matter how serious, will be underlined with love and compassion. As part of the process, we will also search our hearts to examine whether we have done our part in praying for him, and in taking care of him. Perhaps if we had spent more time talking to him, and building up a better relationship with him, he would

than just outward. More importantly, it is an attitude of the mind. The apostle Paul understood this and thus he encouraged the Corinthian believers to be united “in mind and thought” (1 Cor 1:10<NIV>). Outwardly, we may appear to get along with one another and serve the Lord together, but just



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*When we truly care, our*  
**words and deeds will be**  
**sincere, reflecting how we**  
**feel in our hearts.**

---

not be in this position now. If we really care, we will not be quick to judge or to condemn. We will not be applying God's righteousness too liberally and forgetting His mercy. Instead we will give equal importance both to the righteousness of God and the mercy of God, and not exercise one without the other.

When we truly care, our words and deeds will be sincere, reflecting how we feel in our hearts. For example, consider the times when we greet a brother at church and ask after his well-being; in our heart of hearts, do we really care how he is doing? Are we really concerned about his well-being? Or is our greeting a mere formality, something that is expected of us as TJC members, but in truth, it does not really bother us even if this brother is going through a difficult period? Every one has his own problems; his affairs are not my concern, we tell ourselves. The way we think and feel will tell us whether we are genuinely concerned brethren, or mere hypocrites who do not mean what we say.

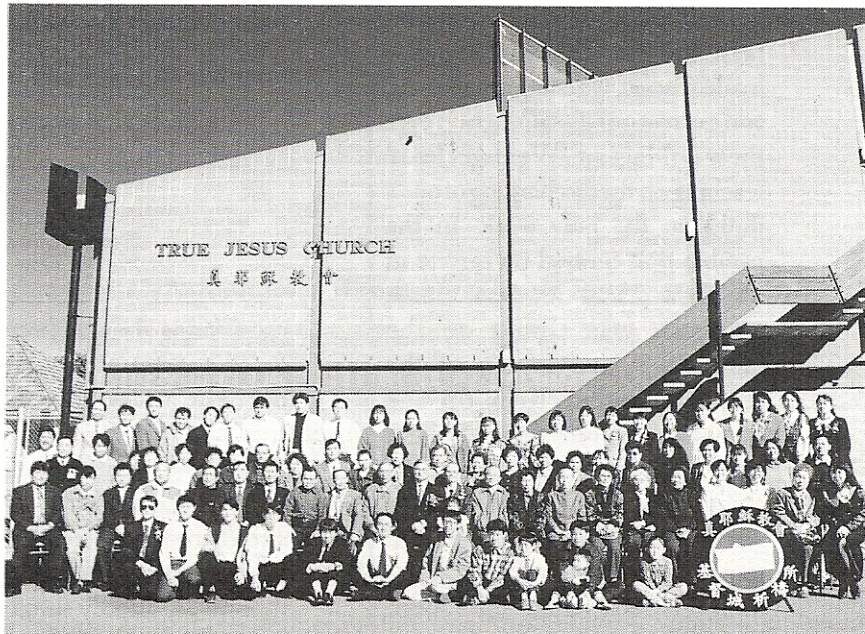
Moreover, as members of God's household, our care has to extend beyond those whom we like, those with whom we can get along better because we share common interests. It has to encompass those whom we do not really like, those with whom we do not always see eye to eye, and even those whom we may, at times, find quite irritating. In other words, we have to reach the stage where we accept our brethren the way they are; it doesn't stop us, for example, if that brother is very conservative in his thinking, or that sister too outspoken. We can still care for their spiritual and physical welfare. If they ever need us, we will be there for them.

**Genuine care also requires that we be more sensitive towards the needs of others. It requires that we get to know one another. This is because if we shut ourselves away in our own world, oblivious to what goes on around us, we shall never know who is missing from church services, and we shall never notice those "little ones" who do not have many friends, who quietly come and go each week. We have to have fellowship, so that we can understand others' needs. Only then can we become the good samaritan, not the indifferent clerics.**



In this result-oriented world of ours, human magnanimity is fast becoming a rare virtue. Society has taught us that regardless of our efforts, it is the bottom line, the profit margin or the end result, that matters. If we fail to deliver, we are deemed unsuccessful, even though we may have tried our very best and have worked faithfully and loyally to the best of our abilities. If we are not careful, such a mind set will enter the church and hinder spiritual growth.

In many aspects, members today are more blessed. We have more opportunities to study the Bible through organised activities such as spiritual meetings, bible camps, short-term theological seminars, and religious education classes. These spiritual activities enable us to build up our knowledge of God. We develop

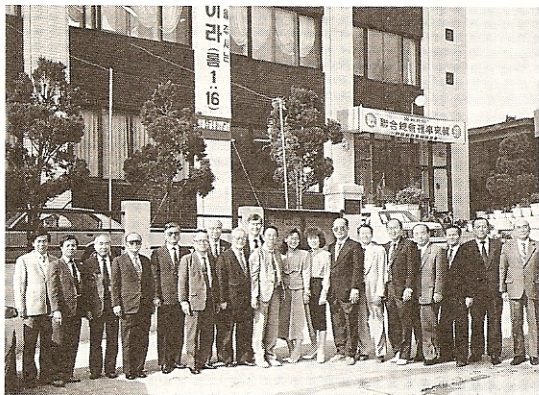


better understanding of our roles as Christian soldiers of the last days. We strive to propagate the gospel, and participate in different aspects of the church ministry. We set high standards of what the church of God ought to be like, in line with the teachings of the Bible.

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*In* this result-oriented  
world of ours, human  
magnanimity is fast  
becoming a rare virtue.

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Over time, as we become more involved in the church and our interaction with other church workers increase, we may come across areas that fall short of our expectations. We do not see the results that we expect. We become impatient with the current condition of the church.



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*M*agnanimity towards  
one another is one virtue  
that cannot be absent in  
any family, let alone the  
family of God.

---

Instead of finding positive ways to help the church overcome her inadequacies, we may just sit there and express our dissatisfaction over the way things are. We forget Jesus' teaching on the discharging of one's duties in the holy work. In the parable that centred on service in Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus' main emphasis was always on the faithfulness and loyalty of the servants, rather than on the outcome, because the servants have been given "each according to his ability" to serve the master. Today, we have to be magnanimous enough to acknowledge that perhaps our brethren have tried their best, based on the abilities that God has given them to carry out the church work, and when we see that there are areas that require improvement, we willingly provide whatever assistance that is needed to help the church prosper. It is easy to give armchair criticisms, but such comments are not beneficial; it may even harm the church.

Magnanimity is one virtue that cannot be absent in any family, let alone the family of God. We have to learn to be more tolerant of the failings of others, whilst upholding the words of God. The strict code of conduct and high spiritual standards that we may set for ourselves cannot be applied to others blindly, without first



considering their different circumstances. Until we learn to practise magnanimity, the church's spiritual prosperity will not be an achievable reality.

The twentieth century is coming to a close, and many signs of the last days, as prophesied in the Scriptures, are already being fulfilled. Whether we realise it or not, time is not on our side. We cannot afford to be complacent, thinking that we are already saved since we are members of the True Jesus Church, and all we need to do now is to build more church buildings and increase the congregation numbers. Quantitative growth in itself is insufficient. It has to be complemented by the qualitative growth of each and every one of us. We have to assess where we stand in this aspect. Are we really united as a church? Do we truly care for our brothers? How magnanimous are we towards one another? Answers to these questions may indicate whether we, as a church, have made any spiritual progress.

Recently, I met a sister who completed her tertiary education overseas. When I asked how she found the congregation of the church overseas, she replied sincerely, "very good", and added, "in fact, members of every church I have been to are good." I could not help thinking that if all of us could let go of our prejudices and bury any past misunderstandings we may have with one another, and have her generous attitude, we will be on the right track towards spiritual progress. We can then live up to our noble status as members of the household of God.

*Pilate never  
heard the  
answer*

*The Cock had just crowed.*

*Pilate was visibly annoyed as he strode into the praetorium. Being governor of Judea was not exactly the cushy foreign posting that he had envisioned. Well, here he was now, being roused from his slumber to listen to the odd words of a man whom the people were accusing of treason.*

*“So you are a king?”*

*“You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.”*

*High words for a carpenter! Pilate thought. Where do these people get their crazy ideas from? He looked at the mob gathered before him, and suddenly felt very weary.*

*Looking back at the prisoner, he spread his arms and asked, “Truth? And what is truth?”*



BY JULIUS TSAI [BOSTON U.S.A.]

Pilate never heard the answer.

TODAY, many people believe in some notion of truth, especially religious people such as Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Many philosophers and scientists also share the general view that there is some kind of truth to be discovered, although for them it is primarily through the use of reason and experimentation. On the other hand, there are those who deny that there is a fundamental truth to be arrived at at all. Many of the Buddhist, Taoist and Hindu thoughts, for example, are based on such beliefs, which are also the preoccupation of much modern philosophy, from the nihilists to the deconstructionists.

Many in both of the above camps hold that our notions of truth are only provisional paradigms that serve us until we discover something that works better. Ptolemy believed that the earth was the centre of the universe, as befits humanity's exalted status. For centuries, astronomers painstakingly invented elliptical orbits and complex systems simply to make the evidence fit that assumption. Copernicus came along with a different view of things, and then it was time to head back to the drawing board. Is that what truth is like?

How do we orientate ourselves in this ocean of alternatives? This essay will not as much evaluate the above positions as attempt to set forth the distinctive way that we Christians view truth - what it is, what it is based upon, and how it affects the way we live our lives.

## *What is Truth and why is it so hard to arrive at?*

OUR FIRST TASK is to clarify what we mean by truth. If we really think about it, do we not mean truth to be the way things *really* are? Truth, in its broadest sense, is simply reality in its untarnished form. Ultimate reality, some people call it. To Christians, it means God, and the existence of a world beyond the one that we currently experience.

Now, if this tentative definition is acceptable, we may move on to the next step. And that is we do not have within ourselves access to the truth, to ultimate reality. Why is this so? An initial reason is the simple fact that we are mortal beings, that we are creatures rather than the Creator, that we have five senses and not more, that we cannot even tell what will happen to us tomorrow or even in an hour. We are inherently limited beings, and although we have built telescopes to gaze upon distant galaxies, have stood upon the moon, descended to the depths

of the ocean, we are still mortal and quite finite indeed. Whatever reality is in its totality and ultimacy, we can see but a portion of it. Paul says it is as if we are looking into a mirror dimly (1 Cor 13:12) when he describes our present glimpse of the world and of God.

The Bible gives us the first important clue as to why we find ourselves in our current situation of imperfect possession of truth. As the First Parents hid, trembling with shame among the orchards of the Garden, God asked, "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Gen 3:11) This story is all too familiar. Humans were originally in a paradisaical state, in which they had a harmonious relationship with God, hence with truth and ultimate reality. They talked to God directly and experienced first-hand the wonders of the Garden, the site of human union with the divine. But with the first act of disobedience, we see failure and the introduction of sin and death into the world. Thus, in the post-Edenic world, we have only intimations of a former world in which we had a direct apprehension of universal reality. Wordsworth's "Ode to Intimations on Immortality" well captures the idea that there is something that we have lost, that "celestial gleam" from which we have been banished for

a time and must strive to return to one day. Paul also expresses the sense of alienation that humanity faces, for the imperfection, the sin is carried down throughout the whole human race; just as David wrote in his Psalm, we are with sin from our mother's womb (Ps 51:5).

*.....remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph 2:12)*

It turns out that our own human frailties, both those that come with simply being a human being, and those failings that are very personally ours, impede our access to truth.

So what is the truth? We can give a provisional answer now. The truth is that we came from God, and must return to God.

Truth, then necessarily involves an act of spiritual transformation.

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## *The return to truth through Christ*

*He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (1 Tim 3:16)*

AS THIS VERSE, and the beginning stories indicate, it is Christ who is the basis of our understanding of truth. While much of human faith is the human effort to transcend itself through an act of the will, our Christian faith is based on the reality of Christ, not only historically but today as well. Being the Son of God, He effectively bridges the gap between the human and the divine, and makes what was unknown known.

Christ's death and resurrection provide the means through which we may enter the truth, to put on our rightful status as the children of God. This is accomplished through the sacrament of baptism, in which we, through our faith, coupled with the working of the divine spirit, become beneficiaries of the blood of Christ, which takes away our sin and guilt so that we rise, as Christ rose, to a new life.

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (Jn 14:6) He is the way because He leads us to God. He is the truth because He makes us know our human condition and how to overcome it. He is the life because through Him we receive the life that is everlasting.

We have reached a higher understanding of truth. Knowing the truth entails spiritual transformation.

## *T* *Truth transforms us*

AFTER BAPTISM, we continue to live a life of constant transformation through the Word of God in the Bible, the Spirit of God, and the accompanying testimony of our living experience of the divine presence. We live up to Christ's command to love God and neighbour.



Loving God means living a life with God as the centre, doing all things for the glory of God. Besides our formal worship, living a life of truth means always striving to keep the consciousness of the divine in our hearts every moment, so that every goal that we set, every action that we perform is done with the knowledge of who we are as God's children, and where we are ultimately going after this short life on earth is ended.

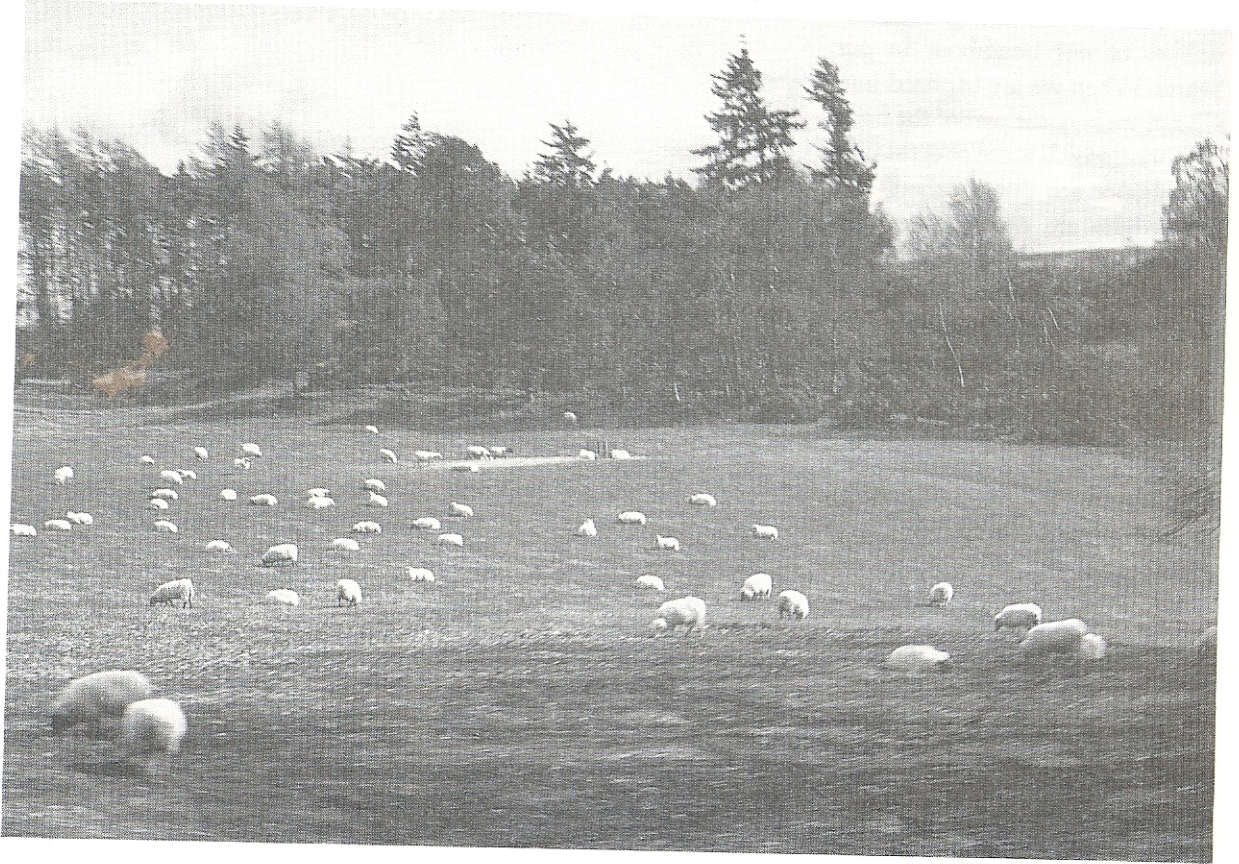
Truth means living with the welfare of our neighbour in our hearts. When we are baptised into Christ, we become part of the body of Christ, which is the church. Our neighbours are our brothers and sisters who are now part of this body with us. Thus, there is love in the church as the transformation of our inner self brings us a new family with whom we live out the life of faith.

Living out the truth also involves transforming the lives of those beyond the church. For Jesus, it meant being with the poor and the afflicted, the outcasts of society. It means no less for us today. We need to constantly struggle against complacency and the building up of sheltering cocoons around us that would blind us to the reality of suffering in the world around us. Truth is seeing people who are homeless and hungry, who are marginalised by society, and making them our brothers and sisters through our deeds.

Truth does not necessarily demand that we give up all we have, but that we look seriously at what we do have, and use our resources to change society, to love others, and not merely keep them for ourselves and our own small communities. This requires us to step outside of our family, church, race, and even social boundary to embrace all humanity who are the ultimate expression of God's creation.

What would Pilate have learned had he tarried to converse with his prisoner that morning? He would have learned that truth is a spiritual transformation centred around Christ. And not only are we transformed individually, but those around us, and ultimately, all of creation. Thus, we do not claim the mantle of possessing truth lightly. We embody the truth, not only in our rhetoric on the pulpit, but in our actions. With humility, we constantly seek to be worthy of God's truth in our lives.

## *Shepherd's Recipe and Sheep's Tastes*



*"Feed My lambs,...*

*Tend My sheep,...*

*Feed My sheep..."*

THESE WERE the instructions of Jesus when Peter assured the Lord three times of his love for Him (Jn 21:15-17). These same words still have special significance today for those of us who love the Lord, especially those who are involved in pastoral work. Church leaders, sermon speakers, religious education teachers and Bible study leaders who come into direct contact with the sheep when they relay the message of God, fall into the category of shepherds.

**BY SHEE TSE KOON [SINGAPORE]**

Having received the commission to feed the sheep, the immediate considerations should be as follows:

**What is to be fed to the sheep?**

**What has the sheep been feeding on all this while?**

**Have the sheep been led to green pastures where they may be nourished and grow,**

**OR have they been roaming in the barren wilderness where wild beasts lurk and seek their prey?**

In considering what to set before the sheep, shepherds often face an inevitable dilemma because the church is made up of a complex mix of believers. If solid food which is necessary for the more mature were to be served, the spiritual babes would find it difficult to swallow. Conversely, if milk were to be served, the spiritual babes would appreciate it whilst others would be malnourished. The complexity of this dilemma is often aggravated by some who in some ways seem to have matured, who ought to have acquired the ability to take solid food but choose to choke on it deliberately, using this as a cover to demand food that pander to their individual tastes.

In the face of these difficulties, shepherds preparing spiritual food for the sheep must first recognise that their fundamental responsibility is to cater to the needs of the sheep rather than pander to the individual tastes of some. So while preparation involves making food palatable, this should never be allowed to overshadow the indispensable

criterion, which is the actual need of the sheep. In other words, if certain messages are crucial for the spiritual lives and growth of the sheep, shepherds must faithfully deliver them even if they may not suit the tastes of some amongst the flock. Christ Himself, our Chief Shepherd, left us an excellent example. When His disciples were troubled that He was about to depart from them, He *comforted* them, saying that He was going to prepare a place for them (Jn 14:1-3). When He knew that Peter would deny Him in a moment of weakness, He *encouraged* Peter with the assurance that He had prayed for him (Lk 22:31,32) and also further *encouraged* him to pray, so as not to fall into temptation (Lk 22:40). When Peter tried to hinder Jesus from fulfilling His ministry of dying on the cross, Jesus *rebuked* Him (Mt 16:21-23).



Piecing these incidents together with others in the Bible, it is evident that the consistent principle applied by Christ Himself, the prophets and the disciples is that of delivering the messages which are necessary, crucial and timely. **The ignorant were taught, the grieved were comforted, the weak were encouraged, the unrepentant and wayward were rebuked.** There is no evidence that the Bible suggests more of tender encouragement and comfort and less of harsh rebuke, or vice versa. Rather, the use of teaching, comfort, encouragement, rebuke and so on should be according to necessity in given situations (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Tim 4:2).

Applying this principle, the dilemma faced by shepherds in the choice between serving solid food and milk can be resolved. For a newly-established congregation whose members are mostly newly baptised and for younger members in the Religious Education classes, it is more appropriate and needful for milk to be served whereas the reverse is true for a congregation with a considerably long history. However, even for the newly-baptised who are able to consume only milk, the shepherds must help them to grow quickly, so that ultimately everyone is able to consume solid food. Overgrown babies or juvenile adults, whatever one chooses to call them, bring no glory to God.

Having resolved the dilemma of choice, other important considerations arise.

**F**irstly, are meals properly prepared, so that the sheep may grow healthily thereby or are they fixed haphazardly as mere fillers of no nutritional value? In other words, **are the messages really edifying to the congregation, or are they spoken simply for the sake of speaking? Has concern for the congregation driven the shepherds to be faithful in service attendance, prayer and Bible-reading, that they may know the deficiencies of the sheep and be able to provide the much-needed nutrition?**

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**S**econdly, shepherds have the burden of ensuring that no contaminated food gets to the sheep. Unless they have strayed from the truth, it is unlikely that they would knowingly feed the sheep with poison. However, caution must be exercised, for one careless remark may cause disproportionate harm to

undiscerning ones in the flock. The contents of the messages may not be fundamentally heretical, yet sometimes they send confusing signals to the hearers if the shepherds succumb to certain trends that push them to take a softer stand on the Truth and to make compromises in their effort to please men rather than God. That could amount to unconsciously contaminating the food which may have toxic effects.

Whilst shepherds have their responsibilities, we who are the sheep are not free from responsibility.

**F**irstly, we as sheep must recognise that the consumption of milk is not the ultimate goal. Hence, we should seek to grow up spiritually as soon as possible and to learn to take solid food (Heb 5:12-6:1), especially if we have been baptised for some time and belong to a congregation with a long history. Though solid food may be difficult to swallow, we must recognise our need for it. The fear of choking has no real case.

However, if we opt for a milk-only diet, we risk dying of malnutrition.

**S**econdly, we must learn to discern the food that is set before us. Physical tastebuds discern taste, but spiritual tastebuds discern between truth and error. We must reject all heresies. Also, we ought to constantly nourish ourselves through prayer and Scripture reading, so that we may better discern and guard against even contamination in the most subtle forms.

**Just as physical food contributes to physical health and growth, spiritual food contributes to the spiritual health and growth of the church. If our church fails to grow spiritually and healthily and if the progress of our church is below God's expectation, it is indeed time for us to sincerely consider ourselves – whether the shepherds have fed the sheep appropriately and whether the sheep have rejected solid food and opted for food which suit their own tastes. Perhaps, we may then realise that we need to change our recipes, or our tastes, or both.**

# IS CHRISTMAS BIBLICAL?



SOON THE FESTIVE season will be here again. Many homes will be decorated with HOLLY WREATHS, MISTLETOE and CHRISTMAS TREES; departmental stores will be adorned with CHRISTMAS LIGHTS and echo with the sound of CHRISTMAS CAROLS; and post boxes will be filled with GREETING CARDS. Almost universally, shoppers will pack the high streets, gift-hunting for their friends and loved ones. And young children especially, will look forward to receiving gifts from SANTA CLAUS, that benevolent, bigger-than-life father figure who supposedly visits them once a year with his REINDEER.



## BUT WHERE DOES CHRISTMAS COME FROM? IS IT REALLY THE 'BIRTHDAY OF CHRIST'?

Many Christians believe that the Christmas pageant sums up the concept of God and the coming of Christ, the Saviour of humankind. But how valid is this belief? Just take a copy of the Bible. Look for a mention of Santa Claus, holly wreaths, mistletoe and Christmas trees. Look for Jesus or His disciples celebrating Christmas. Look for Jesus' instruction that we should commemorate the day of His birth. Look for proof that He was born on 25th December. None of these things are mentioned in the Bible!

Although the Gospel writers record the nativity story and the events surrounding the Lord's birth, never once did they indicate that this event should be celebrated. The Lord Jesus told His disciples to remember His death by partaking the Holy Communion, but He was completely silent about remembering His birthday. Likewise, there is no evidence in the New Testament that the early church ever celebrated Christmas. If God had wanted us to celebrate Christ's birthday, would He not have instructed us to do so in the Bible?

The Bible plainly does not reveal the date of Christ's birth. And from its records of the nativity scene, Jesus would not have been born in winter at all. Luke states that in the night that He was born, "there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Lk2:8). In October or November, the winter rains and cold weather would begin in Judea. Up to this time, the flocks would have been in the open fields. But once the rainy season began, the shepherds could no longer be out in the field until the winter months were over.

In fact, the celebration of Christmas originated before Christianity. As the Encyclopedia Britannica informs us, "Christmas customs are an evolution from times that long antedates the Christian period - a descent from seasonal, pagan, religious and national practices, hedged about with legend and tradition" (15th edition, article 'Christmas'). Some examples of these are given below.

In ancient times, many depended on the sun for light, heat and for their agricultural activities. Therefore, man

BY LEE JIN [SINGAPORE]



would watch with interest the sun's yearly course through the heavens. Feasts and celebrations were held at different times of the year to help, it was thought, the sun move round the solar system. In the Northern Hemisphere, the end of the calendar year became a significant time. As winter approached, the sun dipped lower and lower in the sky and the days became shorter. It would seem that the sun was deserting the earth. Then at the winter solstice, the turning point came. The sun began to return. The days began to lengthen again. Midwinter celebrations to commemorate the rebirth of the sun would ensue. In the Roman world, this was translated into the week-long celebration of *Saturnalia* which started on 17th December and ended with the feast of *Brumalia*, the birthday, or rebirth of the sun. The feast fell on 25th December.

Moreover, when the Roman Empire began to expand in the early centuries, it also adopted the paganistic practices of its conquered people. One such example was the worship of the Mithraic sun god, initially from Persia, whose birthday was celebrated on 25th December. When this deity was introduced to Rome in the beginning of the third century, it gave a concrete expression to sun worship. The cult was reinterpreted according to the philosophical and popular ideas of that time. In 274 A.D., it was incorporated into the imperial cult, when Emperor Aurelian made *sol invictus* (the invincible sun) the imperial religion and instituted the pagan feast of *Dies Natalis Solis Invincti*, the Day of the Unconquerable Sun, on 25th December.

There is no clear historical evidence when Christendom first celebrated Christmas. Records show that during the first three centuries of the Christian era, there was opposition in the churches to the pagan custom of celebrating birthdays. But by the fourth century, things changed. The Roman Almanac - the Chronograph of 354, which contained a list of Christian feasts, made reference to the feast of the nativity of Christ. This is one of the earliest records of this feast. This information goes back to an earlier writing of the year 336 A.D. and therefore Christmas appears to have already been celebrated in the last year of Emperor Constantine.



By the end of the fourth century, the Christian world was celebrating Christmas. 25th December was the date chosen for the celebration (with the exception of the Eastern churches, which celebrated it on 6th January). Perhaps the church at that time wanted to turn the pagan celebration of the winter solstice into a day of adoration of Christ. Another possibility is that this was one way for the Christians of that time to cling even closer to Christ who was their light and sun, and 25th December was chosen to provide an antithesis to the Roman pagan feast.



What about Christmas decorations? As expected, they are also not of Christian origin. The famous Christmas tree probably had its origin in the medieval German mystery plays, when a tree, the *paradeisbaum* (tree of paradise), was used to symbolise the garden of Eden. Later, when these plays were suppressed, trees were kept in the homes, and gradually, there evolved the custom of decorating them with cookies, fruit and eventually, candles. Some authorities have also traced the Christmas tree to pagan tree worship of ancient Egypt and Rome.

The use of evergreens to decorate the home is also associated with paganistic beliefs. Because evergreens survive the winter months, they were taken as symbols of eternal life, and became objects of worship. The mistletoe was believed to have miraculous powers by the British Druids (ancient Celts), who considered this parasitic plant sacred. To the Romans, it was a symbol of peace, and they believed that when enemies met under it, weapons would be discarded and truce declared. As for the Christmas holly, one legend claimed that Christ's crown of thorns was made of holly leaves, and thus the custom of Christmas wreath began. As it was round, it also symbolised the roundness of the sun.

Then there is the *yule-log*, which probably has its origin in the ceremonial burning of a carefully selected log by the British Druids. The word *yule* originated from the old Anglo-Saxon word *hweol*, meaning 'wheel', a pagan symbol of the sun.



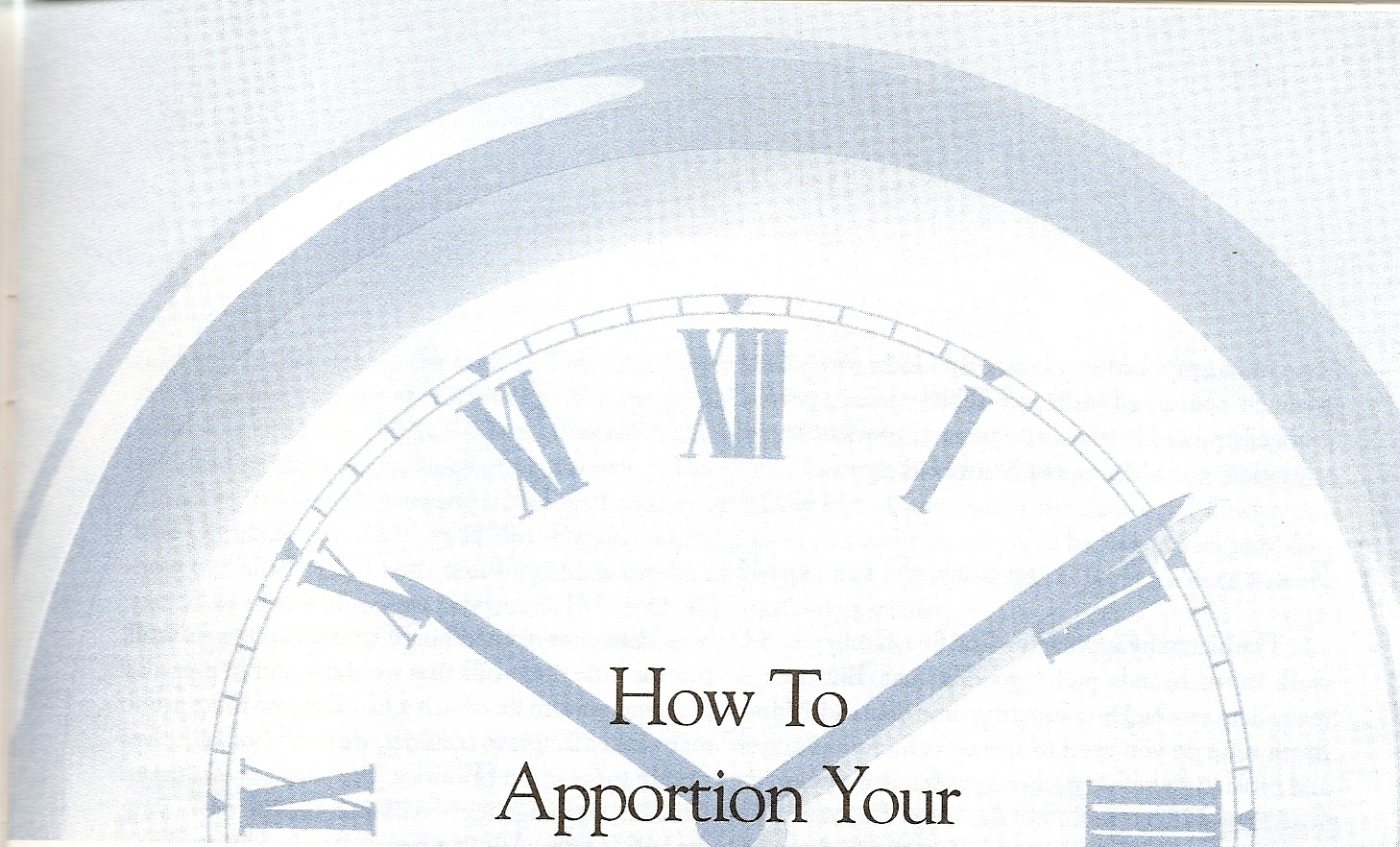
And then, of course, there is Santa Claus himself. He too originated from festivals that had nothing to do with the Christian faith. One important feature of the ancient pagan festivities was the involvement of good and bad spirits. In many lands, such mythical visitors emerged, blending pagan legends with traditions about saints, and one such winter visitor became known in different countries as Santa Claus, Father Christmas, St Nicholas, St Martin, the *Weihnachtsmann*, or *Pere Noel*. Although they were known by different names, their roles were similar – to give varying degree of rewards and punishments to the celebrants.

Over the years, many Christmas customs have developed around the celebrations of Christmas. Some of these are universal, others are peculiar to the region. Irrespective of this, they all share one common feature. None of these is biblical in nature, because Christmas itself is unbiblical. It originated from paganistic beliefs and superstitions, rather than the Word of God, the Bible. As followers of Christ, should we observe an event which is not mentioned in the Bible? Worse, should we celebrate an event which has its roots in paganistic worship? Far from paying homage to the coming of our Saviour, our actions may arouse His wrath instead.

Finally, we may want to take the middle ground and argue that we are not treating Christmas as a religious celebration. Rather, we are just celebrating the season of peace and goodwill. But, take a closer look at how society celebrates Christmas today.

Of all the times in the year, Christmas, to many, is one constant round of partying and merry-making. It is an occasion for over-indulgence in food, drinks and even in acts contrary to the words of God. It is also a time when drunkenness is widespread, and where high rates of drunken-driver-induced traffic fatalities have resulted in the police of many countries running annual “Don’t Drink and Drive” campaigns. In many areas, crime rates too are highest during this period. Statistics have shown that there are more murders and burglaries committed around this time than any other comparable period.

It is ironic that men participate in the very actions that the Bible warn against during this purported period of peace and goodwill. What basis do we have to say that we are actually celebrating the season of peace and goodwill? This argument for celebrating Christmas is flawed too.



## How To Apportion Your Time For God

WE HAVE often heard people say that we have to 'balance our time commitments'. Life seems like one big deadline and demands from different areas of our lives continually fight for our attention. Everyday, we are inundated with options – Do we perform our obligations to the family at the expense of a golden opportunity for enhancing our career? Are we obligated to spend our public holidays clearing the church work that we hardly find time to finish or are we enticed by the opportunity to take the family for a well-deserved trip? What really is a proper balance? More to the point, is balance the biblical approach to time apportionment? Most importantly, how ought we to apportion our time for God?

There are two popular notions that must be addressed before we can see life's demands in proper perspective. First is the hierarchy approach to priorities. There are different areas that demand our time and attention, so we place them in a sequence of importance. Then we live our lives by this list. Second is the arbitrary division of life into 'sacred' and 'secular' components. This seems to be necessary

**BY SHEE TSE LOONG [SINGAPORE]**



if we want to apportion our time for God – surely God is much concerned with our Bible-reading, prayer, evangelism, but He takes little interest in our career, our education, our hobbies, our household chores.

## F I R S T T H I N G S F I R S T ?

The hierarchy approach – God first, family second, work third...sounds pretty good at first. But does it really help you tackle competing time demands? How much time do you need to spend with God in prayer and Bible study before you are considered one who puts God first? Fifteen minutes? An hour? But you work eight hours a day! God must take more than eight hours to be put first! And how much must we accomplish in something before we move on to the next on the list? Thirty percent? Eighty percent? Hundred percent? Moreover, we can never effectively prioritise all the many, many little things that require our attention everyday: washing the car, reading this magazine, calling a friend, bathing the baby, visiting a sick relative, calling the plumber, buying grocery. If we spend time prioritising these things, we would have no time to do anything! The hierarchy approach is good only for *all-or-nothing* situations like choosing between quitting church or quitting your job altogether because your

boss does not want church-goers on the payroll. But the little trade-offs that we encounter in everyday life require more than such a list. Because there are so many other factors to consider, we don't find ourselves strictly *ordering* our priorities. We *situationalise* them. At times, washing the church van comes before buying the baby's milk. At other times, it's all right to skip a Bible-study to see to a family matter.

There is another interesting ranking that people use, outlined by the acronym JOY: Jesus first, others second, and yourself last. While the element of altruism is commendable, the approach is too simplistic and cannot be adopted without qualification. If others come before self, do we build up the spirituality of others before building up our own? Do we place the salvation of others over and above that of our unsaved family members? Is your responsibility to yourself less important than your responsibility to others?

## S A C R E D O R S E C U L A R ?

The sacred-secular dichotomy likewise crumbles when it comes to real-life situations. Is your relationship with Christians more important than your relationship with non-Christians? Will God be more pleased when we are responsible in church work than when we are diligent at the office or school? Are family responsibilities less important than church responsibilities? Is a family

split not as bad as a church split? Is raising a child less important to God than grooming a choir?

Read the Bible and you'll see Christ's condemnation of the Pharisaic Coban – neglecting one's parents by giving to God the money meant for them (Mt 15:5-6). Paul declares that if anyone does not provide for his

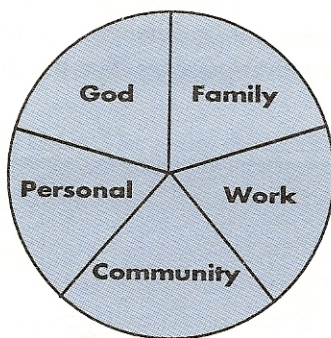
relatives, he has denied the faith (1 Tim 5:8). James describes true religion as the visiting of orphans and widows in affliction (Jas 1:27). Jesus Himself teaches that feeding the hungry, comforting the sick, visiting prisoners, receiving strangers, are all vital aspects of true Christian faith (Mt 25:31-46). He also teaches how our relationship with non-Christians can be as sacred as that with fellow Christians (Mt 5:43-48). The key to understanding all this lies in the motivation

for our actions. Because we are Christians, our motivation in all that we do is Christ (Mt 10:40-42; 25:40). If eating meat causes our brother to stumble, then it is our divine obligation to abstain from meat. If the life we now live in the flesh is for Christ, then taking care of our physical body is a religious duty. In this way, everything that a Christian does is sacred; nothing is secular.

## T H E B I B L E ' S A P P R O A C H

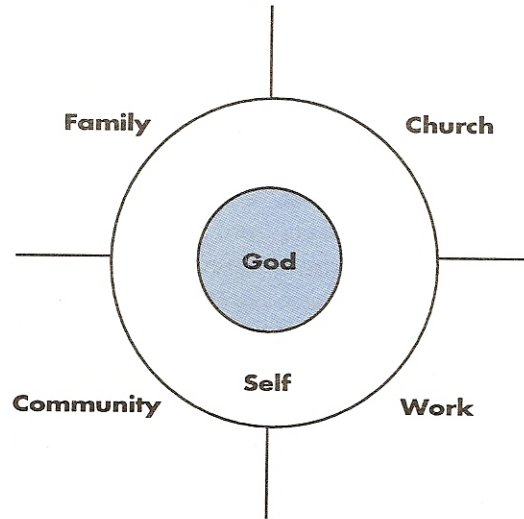
Once we tear down the dividing wall between the sacred and secular, priority lists become more difficult to construct. However, a Christian still needs a model to base his decisions on. Does the Bible prescribe such a model?

For simplicity, time commitments have generally been grouped into five broad areas: God, family, work, community, personal. What easily comes to mind when we talk about time apportionment is a pie-shaped time chart that looks like this:



The Christian's task is to decide what proportion of space each of these five areas should occupy. This is reminiscent of the sacred-secular hierarchy approach which we have earlier found unworkable.

We have agreed that the *whole* of our lives when surrendered to Christ, becomes *totally* sanctified and consecrated (Rom 6:13; 12:1-2). Since *everything* we do is *for God*, He is the Lord of our lives, not just a portion of the pie. Thus we replace the *time* chart with a *relationship* chart:



This chart is boundless, without any surrounding time line to form the circumference. The segments do not represent equal time blocks devoted to particular areas of responsibility. It is meant to show that God is the centre of our lives and He works through us to perform our obligations in different areas, which represent *simultaneous* responsibilities rather than *sequential* priorities. Note that they are all *biblical* obligations:

	Self	Church	Family	Work	Community
<b>ROM</b>	12:1-2	12:3-21 14:1-23			13:1-7
<b>EPH</b>	4:17,5:21 6:10-20	4:1-16	5:22,6:4	6:5-12	
<b>COL</b>	3:1-17		3:18-21	3:22,4:1	4:5-6
<b>1 THESS</b>		4:9-10		4:10-12	
<b>2 THESS</b>				3:6-15	
<b>1 TIM</b>			5:8		

We fail God if we neglect *any* of them, not only when we neglect the church. It becomes immediately clear that there is really no such thing as apportioning our time for God. Everything we do must be for God, and God must have 100% of our time. "Seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness" (Mt 6:33) does not teach us about sequencing; that we can seek God first and seek the world second. It teaches rather, that we seek God and none other; laying up treasures in heaven and not on earth (Mt 6:19-20), serving God and not mammon (Mt 6:24).

It is admitted that there is the danger of abuse. A workaholic can say he's working for God. Newly-weds may give up church duties unnecessarily. Community work can subtly overtake soul-saving. However, such will not be the case if God is truly central in our lives. All areas will be taken care of as God directs, thus *fulfilling His will in our lives*. The following principles will help us understand what this means:

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## T H E P R I N C I P L E O F O P T I M I S A T I O N

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Paul charged the Ephesians: "look carefully how you should walk, not as unwise but as wise, *making the most of the time*, because the days are evil." (Eph 5:15-16) Optimising the limited time that we have to accomplish God's will in our lives involves two key elements. One is *diligence*. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might (Ecc 9:10) before night comes when no one can work (Jn 9:4). Do not take the easy way out by choosing to do things that are more pleasurable and less pressurising.

Next is a *correct sense of value*. The many things that we do may all be lawful, but not all are beneficial (1 Cor 10:23). The value of what a man does with his life can be likened to the grade of material a builder uses for his house – gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw (1 Cor 3:12-15). And value is not measured only in terms of present contribution. It should be assessed with an eye on the overall benefit in the long run (1 Tim 4:7-8). If academic pursuit can help you serve God better in the future, by all means, study hard! On the contrary, if it robs you of time now and would most probably hinder your future service to God, then stop wasting your time on books.

## T H E P R I N C I P L E O F A C C O U N T A B I L I T Y

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Since God is the centre of our lives, we yield to Him as our Master – we are accountable to Him for the way we lead our lives and how we spend our time (Eccl 11:9). Paul lamented to the Philippians about many who “look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:21) and those with “minds set on earthly things” (Phil 3:19). Such people are like the parabolic fig tree which takes in nutrients only for its own growth, without benefitting the owner with any fruit, the prospect of which is to be cut down (Lk 13:6-9).

## T H E P R I N C I P L E O F C H R I S T

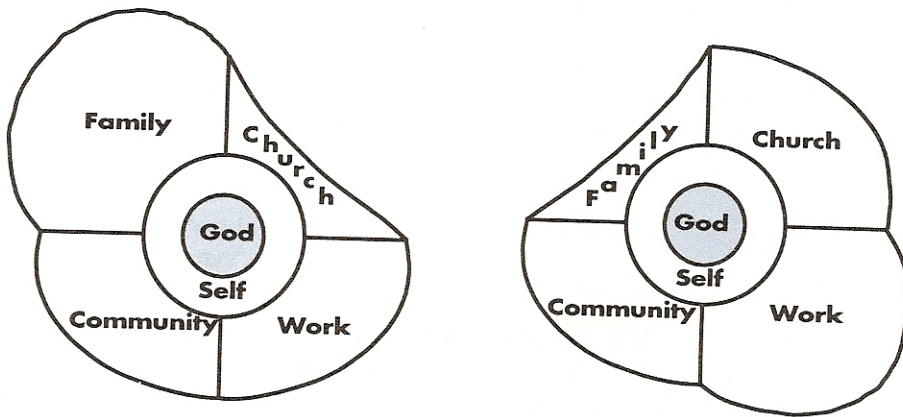
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In all that a Christian does, he must never lose sight of the *ultimate goal* of living: knowing Christ, pleasing Christ, loving Christ, following Christ, becoming like Christ (Phil 3:10-14). This is the overriding principle. For want of a better name, we term it the principle of Christ.

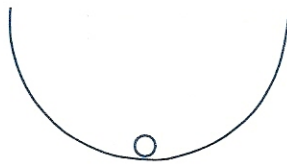
Not losing sight of this goal is not enough. Everything that we do must be in tandem with this goal, and must enhance our ability to attain it: “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I suffer the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:7-8). This powerful conviction caused Paul to make many personal sacrifices for the sake of others. And we know he ultimately did not lose out, for he said, “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?” (2 Cor 12:15). Like Paul, every true Christian would have already made this *ultimate trade-off* when he took Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. Such a realisation would better equip us to handle life’s little trade-offs effectively. So by all means, preach the Gospel in season and out of season, but do spare a little time to attend a wedding feast, or to prepare a special meal. Be devoted to the *soul’s* welfare, but it’s all right to drink a little wine for your *stomach’s* sake (1 Tim 5:23). The important thing is to find Christ in everything you do, and be in union with Him every moment of your life.

## A P P L Y I N G T H E M O D E L

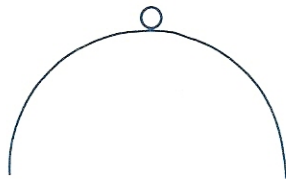
Returning to our relationship chart, and using it to honestly examine how we have been spending our resources in the light of the above principles, we may find that we need much adjustment to put things right. We may have been over-involved in one area and negligent in another:



We have seen that putting things right does not mean having a fixed list of priorities and expecting all our time commitments to fall neatly into place, like a marble that naturally settles at the exact centre of a semi-circular bowl:



Life's demands and situations are constantly changing. A static balance as described above is elusive and unreal. Rather, one should adopt a dynamic approach to time management, like balancing a marble at the apex of an overturned bowl:



Responsibilities and time demands tug from every side, but the Christian remains at the top. This more accurately describes the model advocated in the Bible – a God-centred life achieving *dynamic equilibrium* in all areas of responsibility according to biblical principles. It requires a Christian to be in constant fellowship with Christ, seeking to understand His will (Eph 5:17). It is not going to be easy, but this is what Christian maturity is all about. Paul also experienced being “hard pressed” between two decisions. He admitted, “Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.” But as he allowed God to choose he became convinced of the benefit of that choice (Phil 1:21-25). As a Christian matures, he will be closer to the goal of Christlikeness, tending towards dynamic equilibrium. The actual order in which his responsibilities are discharged is the *consequence* of this equilibrium, rather than a reflection of a rule of thumb, *prior* sequence.

## C O N C L U S I O N

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The Bible’s approach to time management does not call for the rigid adherence to a fixed list of priorities which reduces us to children who cannot be expected to make responsible decisions. Christians are expected to be mature enough to exercise their freedom in Christ as long as they do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (Gal 5:13). And when a Christian subjects himself to the rulership of Christ out of his own free will, his life becomes a fragrant offering.

# Will Tomorrow Surely Come?

*"All flesh is like grass,  
And all its glory like  
the flower of grass.  
The grass withers  
and the flower falls"*

*1 Pet 1:24*

LIFE IS SHORT. We all know that. For each moment of our existence, the clock ticks mercilessly. Philosophers and great poets have expounded this universal theme, leaving behind, as they passed through their short lives, clichés in the likes of "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may" and "Seize the day". Such messages are precisely those which propel man to seek technological innovations so as to be able to do the greatest amount of work possible in the shortest amount of time. Such messages have become the mottos we all cling on to, whether consciously or unconsciously, as we bustle about in worldly pursuits.

Most ironically however, while "Seize the day!" rings behind our backs everyday, we seem to assume that life will go on and on, and that there will always be a tomorrow for us again to sing "Seize the day!" The fragility and unpredictability of human life and the imminence of loss of life seldom, if ever, cross our minds.

Students study hard so that they have better job prospects, that life will be better tomorrow. Adults slog and toil with the hope of sitting back to enjoy life in the future. Many aspire to achieve greater heights with each day and "till when?" is a question they never bother to answer. As it is, the whole world moves along, apparently seizing the day, yet drunk with the notion that tomorrow will surely come. Along this drunken path, we may be rudely sobered by perhaps, the imminent death of someone we know. Maybe, after a while, we fall back into the drunken state. Maybe, and hopefully, we don't.



Just a few weeks ago, I spoke to a sister in church. I talked about visiting her hometown some time next year. She gave me a smile, her sweet, characteristic smile, and replied, "Next year? Maybe I won't be at home." "Where would you be?", I asked. "Don't know, maybe on a tour, somewhere away from home." I found out what she actually meant only a week later. Doctors had told her the tumour removed from her body was malignant and the cancerous cells were fast multiplying inside her. She is only a teenager.

Death – a word we associate with the old, the sick or those in war-torn lands. Normal people don't talk about death. Strangely, but true, the modern man who espouses "Seize the day" as a way of life, and hence slogs and toils, refuses to acknowledge the fact that for every human being, tomorrow may never come.



In Luke Chapter 12, our Lord Jesus spoke a parable about a rich man (Lk 12:16-21). This man typifies the modern man many of us are. He stores up much wealth and plans to build bigger barns for his goods. "Soul," he says, "you have many goods laid up for many years." Sadly, he fails to realise that anytime, even "this night", his soul may be required of him. For whom has he toiled? How shall he appear before God?



If we know we have got 30 or 50 more years to live, we will say many things can wait. Let me earn my first million, after which I'll settle down and serve God. Let me get promoted as Head of Department first, then I'll be free to take up divine work. Let my business pick up first...let me... I do not mean these are what Christians should seek if we really have 50 years to go. The point is, these reflect accurately the attitudes many of us have today, which

are of course based on the presumption that our tomorrows will surely come. But, how can we know what will happen tomorrow? (ref Jas 4:13-15) This is not to say that Christians must not plan and we should only live from day to day. What is more pertinent is how we ought to lead our lives if we have, say, only one year left to live.

If we have only one year more to live, we will probably see ourselves becoming active in divine work. For many of us, serving God in church is something we have always longed to do but which has always been postponed because our secular work needed more immediate attention; and anyway, "we will serve ultimately, not now, but hopefully soon."

We are also more likely to give of ourselves to help others. Someone with 50 years to live has 50 years to lose; he must firmly clasp his dear long life, so he has to do his mental sums and work things out before he decides whether to help. Someone with only one year is more likely to be the good Samaritan to stop and help the wounded passer-by, for probably, he will only pass this way but once.

We are certainly more likely to show those whom we love that we love them. We will not want to waste precious time being angry and unforgiving and lock ourselves in emotional cold wars. We will want to reach out to our close ones to tell them about the goodness of our Lord Jesus. We will feel the urgency to seek those who have wandered far from the flock.

Meditating on the unpredictability of life and the possibility of death catching us unawares is not morbid. It is in fact essential for Christians. Wise King Solomon says, "Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to heart." (Eccl 7:2) The thought of death can jerk us up, from our complacency, from our numb, zombie-like preoccupation with the world.

"The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong... but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish which are taken into an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them." (Eccl 9:11,12). Time and chance are not in our control. So, gather we rosebuds while we may, old time is still a-flying, and this same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying — of course, with the right frame of mind, fully focused on God.

**BY LIM SIOK HONG [SINGAPORE]**

## Religious Education



**R**eligious Education is the training and instruction which leads people to know God (the Creator), and enables them to understand the teachings of God (the Bible), to keep His commandments, to live a life of godliness, of holiness and of love so that they are able to enter the Kingdom of God in the future (ref Col 1:28-29).

## HISTORY

In ancient times, God the Creator commanded His people to place emphasis on Religious Education.

- God wanted Abraham - the first generation of the chosen people - to direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what was right and just, so that the Lord would fulfil the promise He had given to Abraham (Gen 18:19).
- God instructed the people of Israel through Moses saying, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children..." (Deut 6:4-9).
- The chosen people in the Old Testament continued in "telling the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power, and the wonders He had done" (Ps 78:1-7).
- When Jesus was on earth, He taught His disciples; "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones" (Mt 18:10). He told them to pay attention to the little children and take care of them.
- Paul said, "The elder must manage his own family and see that his children obey him with proper respect" (1 Tim 3:4).



## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of Religious Education are three:

- To impart spiritual knowledge and establish pure faith in the believers (2 Tim 3:15; Col 3:16).
- To inculcate good behaviour in the believers and help them cultivate a Christian way of life (Prov 22:6; Mt 5:14-16).
- To train the believers to pray for the power of the Holy Spirit and serve in the Kingdom of Christ (Gal 5:22-23; Acts 1:8).

Cultivating the correct faith, inculcating good virtues and developing the spirit of faithful service to the Lord in the believers are the aims of Religious Education. In the church, by the guidance of God, many youths have been trained to become leaders, church board members and ministers through Religious Education.

## ORGANIZATION

To effectively carry out the program to provide Religious Education, the General Assembly of the True Jesus Church in many countries employs the services of full-time personnel. Religious Education Departments are established in the churches to handle matters pertaining to Religious Education. Religious Education for children is provided at three levels: Kindergarten, Elementary I and Elementary II; and for youths at Junior I, Junior II and Senior levels. There are textbooks for all classes and lessons are tailored to the respective levels. Classrooms are equipped to meet the needs of every class. In addition, there are adult classes which are also divided into three levels: Working Youth, Middle-Aged and Senior Members.

## TEACHER

Although there may be complete sets of textbooks and ideal classrooms, the key to successful Religious Education lies with the teacher. Therefore, the basic training of a teacher should be strict; at the same time, the teacher should also update his or her skills every year. In order to achieve teaching goals, a teacher should have the following three prerequisites:

### Faith

#### ■ *Believe that Jesus is the only Saviour*

Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, conceived of the Holy Spirit. For our sins, He suffered and died on the cross. He was raised on the third day and ascended to Heaven after forty days. He will come again on the last day for the judgement of all humankind (Mt 1:18-23; 1 Cor 15:1-5; 1 Pet 3:22; Mt 25:31-46).

Believe Jesus and the Father are one. He is the True God and the only Saviour (Jn 10:30; Is 9:6; Acts 4:12).

#### ■ *Believe that the True Church was established by the Lord*

We should believe in Jesus as well as the True Church which was established by the Holy Spirit. The True Church is His body and the place He grants His salvation (Eph 1:23; Acts 9:4-5; Mt 18:17-18).





The True Church must have the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12:13; Rev 22:1). The Gospel preached must be in accordance with the Bible (Gal 1:6-9; 2 Cor 11:2-4; Eph 2:19-20). It must be accompanied with miracles and wonders (Mk 16:17-20; Heb 2:3-4).

■ *Believe the Bible is the book of God*

Believe that all Scripture is inspired by God and is the book of God given to humankind (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21).

Believe that the Bible is the only guideline for our faith and the basis for Christian living (2 Tim 3:15-16; Gal 1:6-9; Is 8:20; Ps 119:105; Prov 30:5-6).

**Virtues**

■ *Honesty*

Honesty is the basis of all morality. Worship God with a sincere heart (Jn 4:24; Heb 12:28). Be pure and truthful in our speech (Eph 4:15; 5:4; Mt 5:37). Be honest in everything we do, try to please God. Only an honest person can be a loyal and good servant of God (1 Cor 4:1-2; Gal 1:10; Ex 33:11).

### ■ *Holiness*

A holy man would be used by God (2 Tim 2:21; 2 Kgs 4:9). Be holy towards the opposite sex (Mt 5:27-28; Gen 39:7-18; 1 Tim 5:2-3). Be holy in matters of money (Acts 20:33-35; 1 Sam 12:1-5; 2 Kgs 5:15-16). Be holy in speech, hearing and thoughts. Youths should refrain from sex outside marriage (Eph 4:29; Job 31:1; Is 33:15; Prov 4:23; Lev 20:10-13).

### ■ *Humility*

Imitate the Lord Jesus for He is gentle and humble (Mt 11:29). Being humble means never demanding respect from others, but considering others better than ourselves. Respect the elderly. Do not be arrogant, but be willing to serve others and accept their admonition (Jn 8:50; Lev 19:32; Phil 2:1-3; Mt 20:28; Prov 15:10, 12). Being gentle means not being easily angered, but being good-natured. Do not quarrel with others. Endure injustice and work without complaint despite hardships and criticisms. Youths should especially avoid being arrogant (Prov 14:29-30; Col 4:6; 1 Pet 2:19-23; 2 Tim 2:24-26; Is 50:6; 1 Tim 3:6).

### ■ *Love*

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1 Cor 8:1). All things become vanity without love. Therefore, we should teach our students with love – love for their souls and concern for their livelihood. We should use our wealth and strength willingly for their salvation. Persevere and endure in all things. Neither boast nor envy. Do nothing out of self-interest. Be willing to forgive.





Paul was successful in his work not because of his eloquence and ability, but rather because he treated the believers with the love of a parent. It is easy to be a teacher, but it is difficult to be a teacher with the heart of a parent. We should ask the Lord to help us in this aspect (ref 1 Cor 1:3-13; 4:14-16; 1 Thess 2:6-9).

### **Rendering of Service**

Having the correct faith and perfect deeds are not sufficient for a Christian. The Lord entrusted two commissions to His disciples before His ascension. First of all, they were to go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Secondly, they were to feed His sheep (Mk 16:15; Jn 21:15). Therefore, every one of us should be responsible for the great mission the Lord has entrusted to us. Live for the Lord with thanksgiving for His salvation (2 Cor 5:14-15; Rom 14:7-8; 12:1).

We need to consider our gifts when we serve the Lord. We can either serve God full-time or part-time. If we are not able to dedicate ourselves as a preacher, we should do our best in offering our wealth for the holy work and our time for doing various kinds of church work. If we have a chance to be a Religious Education teacher, we should grasp the opportunity and work with all our heart and all our might. Strive to improve our teaching abilities and enhance our spirituality.

Keep in touch with our students, teach them and help them in every way. Be a good teacher as well as a good friend to our students. Pray for them everyday. "Even if you are a teacher for one day, you will be respected by your students as a father throughout their lives." (Chinese proverb). We should always remember those students we have taught and act as parents – i.e. be concerned for their spirituality, pray to God that they will become useful vessels of God (ref Rom 12:1-8; Jn 21:15-17; 2 Tim 2:15; 1 Thess 2:11-13).

The foundation of Religious Education is established at home. Children are a heritage from God (Ps 127:3). Parents should take care of their children more than their other possessions. Train them in the way they should go while they are young. If there is a godly child at home, there will be a good student in church. Teachers need to encourage and help parents to teach their children, an extension of Religious Education in church.

Whether or not the Church has a prosperous future depends on the success or failure of Religious Education. This depends on the quality of the teacher. May God bless every teacher and help him or her become a "good shepherd," one who loves God and His sheep and sets a good example in everything. Amen (ref Prov 22:6; Num 26:59; 2 Tim 1:5; Jn 21:15-17; Lk 14:26; Jn 10:11; 13:34-35).



BY JOHN YANG [U.S.A.]



# “For everyone who asks receives...”

IN 1984, my family and I were baptised in the True Jesus Church. I was a teenager then. I did not understand the importance of religious education. I was not keen to go to church. As a result I did not know the teachings of Christianity. Believers used to visit me. After each visit, I would attend a service or two, but would stop after that.

When I was in my first year at college, I started to seek God. I learnt that I needed to receive the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of my salvation. But I did not know how to pray for the Holy Spirit. I became worried. A friend I spoke to invited me to attend a Charismatic Church. I went. Much to my delight the talk was on how to pray for the Spirit. The speaker said that the Holy Spirit would fill me if I prayed with my hands raised and face lifted, saying “Hallelujah”. When the pastor laid hands on me, I fell backwards. But I felt no Holy Spirit filling me. I stood up and felt a little ashamed. I watched the others praying. There was a boy who fell backwards onto the floor. He was shouting in agony and was foaming at the mouth. I went home utterly confused.

I related the incident to a religious education teacher in the True Jesus Church. When I heard his explanation, I felt ashamed before God and our brethren. So great were my feelings of guilt and shame that I cried instantaneously. I went home and prayed, asking for the forgiveness of God.

The following morning, I felt my guilt and shame lifted. I thanked God for answering my prayer. I promised myself I would never again attend the services of other churches.

In 1988, I attended a students’ spiritual meeting at the True Jesus Church in Jakarta, Indonesia. On one of the nights, I had a dream. In the dream, I was praying in a field. Suddenly, a strong gust of wind blew, accompanied by a loud sound. I swayed slightly but remained upright. Due to the strength of the wind, my body and tongue vibrated. I had the same dream twice. It was strange. The following morning, I went to church with the confidence that I would surely receive the Holy Spirit. I prayed with faith and great fervour. When I uttered, “Hallelujah”, my body and tongue suddenly started vibrating. I could neither control my tongue nor understand the words uttered. I was crying and my heart was filled with joy for the Lord had answered my prayer. After the prayer, I was very joyful.

I am convinced that the Lord Jesus truly loves His children. We must believe that our prayers will be heard by God and ought to persevere in our prayers. Our God is indeed a living God!

BY HENY [BANJARMASIN, INDONESIA]

# God's grace upon our first born

I GREW UP in a Christian family. My parents are church members of a certain denomination in Taiwan. My wife Helen had also received baptism more than 10 years ago in another church. When we were attending our respective churches, we had never heard of any testimonies of visions, dreams and miracles. Above all, we had very little knowledge regarding the Holy Spirit, let alone experienced this reality. This changed after we were led to the True Jesus Church. By the grace of God, we started to experience wonderful things. At first, we thought these to be very personal, not something to talk about. Later on, a minister told us that we should share our experiences with others to testify for the Lord, to encourage observers in their search for God, and to strengthen the faith of others.

One of the experiences is as follows: –

Andrew is our first born. When he was four, he started having chronic nose-bleeding because of an allergy. Bleeding could occur at any moment, even when he was asleep. It worsened over the years. In the spring of 1993, it became very serious because of the high pollen-count in the Bay Area. It was very painful for him. At school, his nose was always stuffed, his eyes red, and his face swollen. He had difficulty sleeping because he felt like he was being choked to death. He would fuss all night and cry a lot. We tried all kinds of medicine but found no cure for him.

One night, after Andrew had finally fallen asleep at two in the morning, my wife and I could not sleep. We were deeply worrying about Andrew's coming years. In great sadness, we knelt down to pray to our Lord Jesus Christ, asking Him to take care of our son and heal his illness. When we went back to sleep, I had a dream. In the dream, our Lord was holding Andrew compassionately in His arms. When I related this to my wife Helen the next morning, we both felt sure that Andrew would be healed of his severe chronic allergy. True enough, a couple of days later, his nose started to clear and he began to breathe normally. God had indeed listened to our prayers, and had shown mercy to us and our son.

BY GEOFF LEE [SAN JOSE, U.S.A.]

On 25 December 1993, my whole family attended a spiritual convocation at San Jose church. During one afternoon's prayer session, Andrew saw a vision while he was praying. He saw our Lord Jesus dressed in a shining white garment, His head bright and glorious. Jesus walked among the church members and laid His hand on several people, including Andrew. When Andrew saw our Lord leaving, he quietly said, "Pass me not, Lord!" And our Lord Jesus gently replied, "I am here". Then a dove flew out and landed on Andrew's shoulder. Andrew received the Holy Spirit and started praying in tongues. He was in tears but felt very peaceful and cleansed.

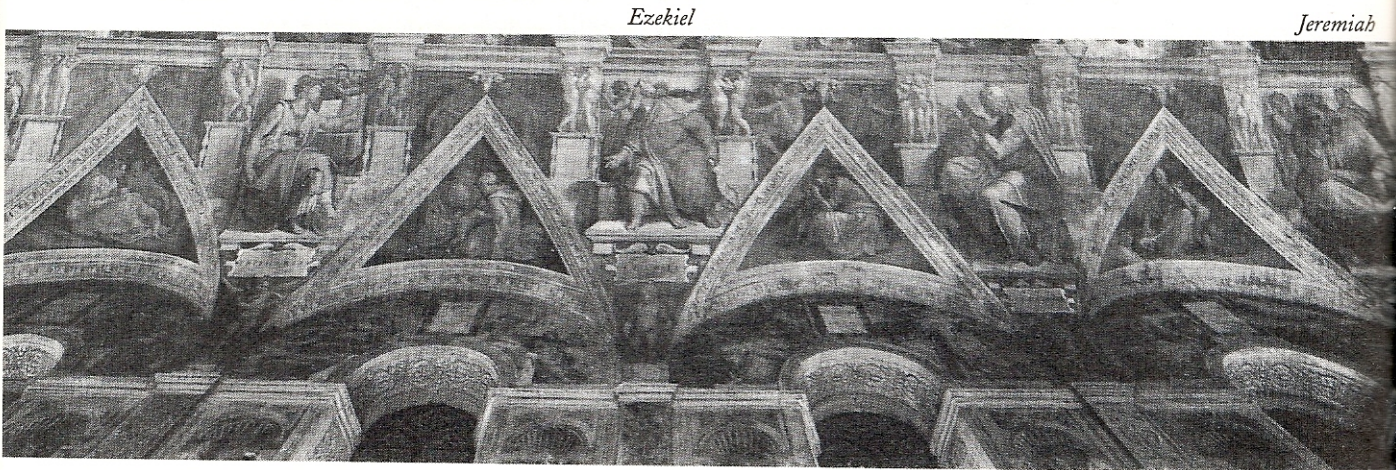
The following morning, when Andrew was praying with us, he saw the vision of our Lord Jesus again. Our Lord came before him and looked at him. Andrew was moved to tears. When Jesus left, a dove with a glorious star on its head flew to Andrew. It was holding a golden gift box with its feet. The dove dropped the gift box before Andrew, and it landed on his shoulder again. The dove flew away when the prayer ended. When Andrew told us his vision the previous night, we did not know what it all meant. But when he related this second vision, we realized Andrew had received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Our Lord has had mercy on our family and blessed us greatly with his abundant grace. We had always worried about Andrew and had always prayed for him. We had asked for our Lord's guidance to bring him up as a child of God. Our Lord answered our prayers with the greatest gift of all—He gave Andrew His Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to our Lord Jesus Christ whose abundant love and grace have given us many edifying experiences. Praise, glory and honour be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!

## “I am the LORD” in Ezekiel

ON THE CEILING of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, Michelangelo (1475-1564) captured the characteristic moods of two great prophets of Israel, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in the exilic age of the Israelite religion. A man cast in brass and tears, Jeremiah sits



*Ezekiel*

*Jeremiah*

MICHELANGELO *Sistine Ceiling*

brooding with hand on chin, his shoulders slumped forward.

Pensively he ponders over a mystery which is beyond human

understanding: why has God rejected Israel, His own people, and

why do the wicked always prevail while the righteous suffer?



MICHELANGELO *Ezekiel*

Ezekiel sits, dynamic and resourceful, a man with a message. In his left hand he holds a scroll, onto which the LORD has commanded him to write down the visions and the prophetic oracles about the destiny of Israel and the nations. His right hand is extended to emphasize his words; his eyes wide and staring, his chin determined. He is a man who pronounces

the divine judgement, but he also embodies a message of hope and encouragement, whose aim is to inspire deeper knowledge about God and stimulate people to action.

God had laid hands on both Jeremiah and Ezekiel and used them in crises of history to fulfil His purposes. Together these two prophets spanned

with their lives the most critical years in their country's history. The fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. was a clarion call for the entire re-thinking of the Hebrew religion. This crisis was unparalleled in all Israel's history. At no time in the four hundred years of the monarchy, with the exception of the campaign of Shishak (ca. 935 B.C.), had the sacred city of Jerusalem been captured, much less destroyed, nor had the theocracy been interrupted. Now the sombre announcements of the prophets about punishment and deliverance had come to pass. It took Jeremiah and Ezekiel to show her that she, in fact, still had everything that mattered - her God and her destiny. Jeremiah in the homeland and Ezekiel in exile take a surprisingly unanimous view about the past and the future of their people, and reveal a similar epic magnitude in visionary report and oracles. It was they who, in the moment of defeat, turned despair into hope by demonstrating the purpose of God in all that had happened. To these prophets and their messages Israel owed her resurrection, the rebuilding of her religious life and the recovery of her spiritual heritage.

But Ezekiel stresses certain lines of thinking more forcibly than Jeremiah. Among these more stringent ideas are Yahweh's assertion of Himself and the majesty of His Name in history and the importance of individual repentance as the turning point of destiny. The following is an examination of how the name of the LORD functions as one of the prominent theological aspects in Ezekiel.



MICHELANGELO *Jeremiah*

The purpose of God's dealing with Israel and the nations dominates Ezekiel's whole message, and finds its proper expression in the statement, "they shall know that I am the LORD". The content of this knowledge is a recognition formula which points back to the primeval history and patriarchal narrative. The knowledge of "I am the LORD" envisaged is an inward realisation of God's will to reveal Himself and affirms the incompatibility of His nature. In Exodus 3:14 "I am that I am" is mentioned. The LORD is the first cause. He is the self-existent Being and the dynamic Becoming. The LORD reveals His name so that people can call Him by it, but He remains free and can be understood only by the freedom with which He introduces Himself. The knowledge also lies behind God's revelation of His name in Exodus 6:2, "I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God the Almighty (El Shaddai)". The formulaic phrase of self-introduction maintains the majesty of Him who issues the law, who encounters people as their LORD. "I am the LORD your God" recurs in the laws of the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18ff.

In Hosea 13:4 we hear the words "I, Yahweh, am your God since the land of Egypt. You do not know any God except for Me, or any Saviour except for Me". This statement corresponds in content with the beginning of the Decalogue (Ex 20:2-3): "I am

Yahweh thy God, who had brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shall have no other gods before Me". This divine declaration states two things:

1

Where the LORD represents Himself in the faith of the Old Testament, He does so as the God of Israel, who will not tolerate any other gods.

2

This "God of Israel" is a relationship that has existed from the beginning of time. The LORD is the God of Israel by reason of certain historical events. The exodus story, which the faith of the Old Testament reflects as a credal statement in Deuteronomy 26:1-11, begins with the great deliverance from the house of servitude. Then comes the theme of "guidance in the desert" which is intimately associated with "exodus" and divine providence. "The LORD your God" is an element of the faith which keeps alive the knowledge of the God who remains with Israel on its journey.

The LORD and His self-motivated action is in substance the great central theme of the prophetic preaching in Ezekiel. The phrase "You (they) may know that I am the LORD", which occurs more than 70 times in Ezekiel, denotes a dynamic process of divine action in history. It points to the *kabod* (glory or honour) of the name of the LORD, which is in turn connected with the absolute holiness and sovereignty of the LORD. Where the statements about Yahweh (the LORD) are made, the definite verb dominates:

I, the LORD have spoken (in My zeal)  
(5:13; 6:10; 17:21; 37:14)

I, the LORD have brought down the high tree  
(17:24)

I, the LORD have kindled it  
(20:47-48)

I, the LORD have drawn My sword from its sheath  
(21:4-5)

I, the LORD have built what was torn down, and  
planted what has been uprooted  
(36:36)

I, the LORD have poured My anger upon you  
(22:22)

The LORD's will is to be known not merely in His being and holiness. Israel and the nations must know this Almighty God in His action.

In Ezekiel, the declaration "I am the LORD" is the absolute ground of all historical and visionary events and thus the only source of authority and hope. The name Yahweh is the driving principle and majestic power which guides the events of Israel and the nations in general, and the prophet Ezekiel himself in particular.

First, the word of God came to the prophet with the introductory formula "Thus says the LORD". The prophet was told to

prophesy ... say (6:2f; 13:2; 34:2; 36:1),  
speak ... say (14:4; 20:3; 33:2),  
pronounce a riddle ... speak an allegory ... say (17:2f),  
preach ... prophesy (20:46; 21:2),  
set your face against ... prophesy (25:2f; 29:2f; 35:2f; 38:2f),  
raise a lamentation ... say (27:2f; 28:12; 32:2).

The concluding words in Ezekiel 3:11 and 3:27 convey the solemn divine warning: "Thus says the LORD he who has ears let him hear, and he who stops let him stop; for they are a rebellious house". The prophet could speak only when God opened his mouth from the seven-year dumbness. He could then say, "Thus says the LORD God ..." (cf 3:4), reiterating what the LORD had already prescribed - speak to the rebellious house of Israel.

Second, God revealed His will to Ezekiel through visions, corresponding to the prophet's life and thoughts. They are:

### 1

In the inaugural vision (Ezek 1:1-3:15), with the appearance of the glorious throne in the unclean land of Babylon, there is a shattering realisation of God as Lord of the universe, the controller of human destiny who is all-powerful, all-knowing and omnipresent. Ezekiel is commissioned to be a prophet.

2

Vision of the abominations (Ezek 8-11), which epitomizes the message of doom prophecy before 587 B.C. The Temple vision depicts the throne vision, cultic abominations, the command to slaughter the wicked and destroy the idolatrous city, and the departure of the divine glory from the Temple.

3

Vision of the revived dry bones (Ezek 37), which speaks about the post-exilic restoration. The people of Israel have been wasting away in their own sins, which prevent them from living (33:10). The people of God have complained that Yahweh is unjust, and that they are crushed by their sins. Their despairing cry, "How then can we live?" (33:17) expresses Israel's misgivings about theodicy (i.e., justice of God) and Yahweh's inscrutable ways. But by divine grace the dry bones are able to come to life. It is through the divine words and His Spirit that the people of Israel can come out of the grave of bondage and establish a restored community of faith.

4

Vision of the New Temple and new community (Ezek 40-48). The prophet is shown the measurements of various parts of the temple chambers and descriptions of altar, gates and holy district with strict priestly prescriptions; vision of the river flowing from the Temple and flourishing Dead Sea and the vision of the redistributed land and the Holy City. This vision describes a splendid theocratic government of the future.

All the ecstatic visions are introduced by "the hand of the LORD upon me".

In the "visions of God", time and space are obliterated, and scenes change rapidly and illogically. Ezekiel, though physically in Babylon, is suddenly in Jerusalem, or on a very high mountain (40:2), or in the valley (37:1). More significantly, in the visions, dialogue is carried on between God and the prophet. Sometimes there are also vivid directions, visual (as in Ezekiel 1 or 40) or auditory, to communicate what he is seeing (40:4).

Third, the divine judgement of the LORD upon the abomination of Israel is disclosed in Ezekiel through symbolic actions. As indicated in Ezekiel 36:20-24, Israel had profaned the holy name of the LORD.



She must encounter defeat and exile. Ezekiel's mission began with a series of spectacular illustrations of the message of God. Just as Isaiah walked in Jerusalem "naked and barefoot" for three years as warning to its inhabitants not to rely on Egypt and Ethiopia (Is 20), or as Jeremiah buried a linen waist cloth and later discovered it "spoilt" to symbolise the eventual degeneration of the pride of Jerusalem (Jer 13:1-13), Ezekiel (Ezek 4) was moved to draw a map of Jerusalem upon a mud brick and construct toy battering-rams and other siege implements. He tied himself up and lay down first on one side and then on the other, for periods which indicate the length of captivity in exile of Israel and Judah.

In a further piece of acted parable (Ezek 5), the prophet shaved his head and beard - the sign of mourning, divided the hair into three lots, and by his treatment of it, vividly illustrated the future of the people of Judah - plague, famine, massacre and exile.

The symbolic action of "packing up for exile" in 12:1-6 represents the deportation of the populace of Jerusalem. The two roads in 21:19-22 represent the advance of Nebuchadnezzar against Palestine and the decision of the king to attack Jerusalem. In 24:15ff the sudden death of the prophet's wife at the command of the LORD becomes a symbolic representation of the fall of Jerusalem and the inability of the people to mourn in extreme grief and anguish.

Now in Ezekiel's view of the restoration, Israel is restored not for its own sake, but so that it may be a witness to the saving power of the LORD. It is here that the history of the glory of God undergoes a peculiar development:

*"And there you shall remember your ways and all the doings with which you have polluted yourselves; and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for My name's sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt doings, O house of Israel," says the LORD God.*

*(Ezek 20:43-44)*

The restoration is done because of Yahweh's holiness, which means His zeal for His name, and this in turn means that He must safeguard the recognition of His divinity.

*But when they came to the nations, wherever they went, they profaned my holy name, in that men said of them, "These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of His land". But I had concern for My holy name which the house of Israel caused to be profaned among the nations to which they went.*

*Therefore, say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the LORD God: It is not for your sake O house of Israel, that I am about to act but for the sake of My holy name which you have profaned among the nations to which you went.*

*And I will vindicate the holiness of My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations will know that I am the LORD," says the LORD God, "when through you I will vindicate my holiness before their eyes. For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land."*

*(Ezek 36:20-24)*

The vision of the dry bones (37:1-14) and of the two sticks are assurances that the LORD will restore Israel and make the two parts of the nation one entity (37:15-28). The metaphor of sheep and shepherd (Ezek 34) tells how the LORD Himself will be the Shepherd caring for the weak and checking the aggressive. He will raise a Son of David as a good Shepherd to feed His sheep and protect them. It was through such visions and aspirations of the new community that Israel was encouraged after the exile to reshape her much more prosaic social order to maintain the glory of His name. The LORD would take away the people's hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh. So with a new heart and a new spirit, a penitent and dedicated people would, by the power of God, be fit to begin afresh the task to which the God of old had called them (Ezek 36).

Chapters 40-48 contain the sequel to Ezekiel's vision of a reunited Israel restored to her ancient home: a transformed community, committed to the service of God in deeper loyalty and fuller obedience. The reconstruction of the ruined Temple at Jerusalem serves as the focus of the life and worship of the returned exiles. With the return of His glory, the LORD takes possession of His house in glory (43:1-5). Yahweh is envisioned as a manifest divine

presence in the glory-suffused world. So organized, the redistributed land and the rearranged twelve tribes will be fit for the position they occupy. Purity, holiness and justice (45:9-12) are the essential marks of the people. They take up the task of witnessing for God in the world.

These memorable thoughts significantly conclude the book. The prophet sees the Temple as the source of the well-being of both land and people in his image of the great river, reminiscent of the garden in Genesis 2 and the holy city in Revelation 22; which has its origin in the sacred place and flows from there through the land, a veritable God-given water of life and healing. Then when the fruitful acres, once again flowing with milk and honey, have been divided among the restored twelve tribes, the city of God will stand in the centre of the promised land, and its name will be even more identified with the glorious name of the LORD, for it is written: "Yahweh Shammah", which means that "the LORD is there" (47:13-48:35). This is a realisation of a much-cherished divine promise: God will set His dwelling in the midst of people (37:24-28) and the LORD exercises His absolute sovereignty in history and the religion in the ideal Temple.

**BY MEISHI TSAI**  
**[WALLINGFORD, PENNSYLVANIA, U.S.A.]**



# THE TRUE JESUS CHURCH

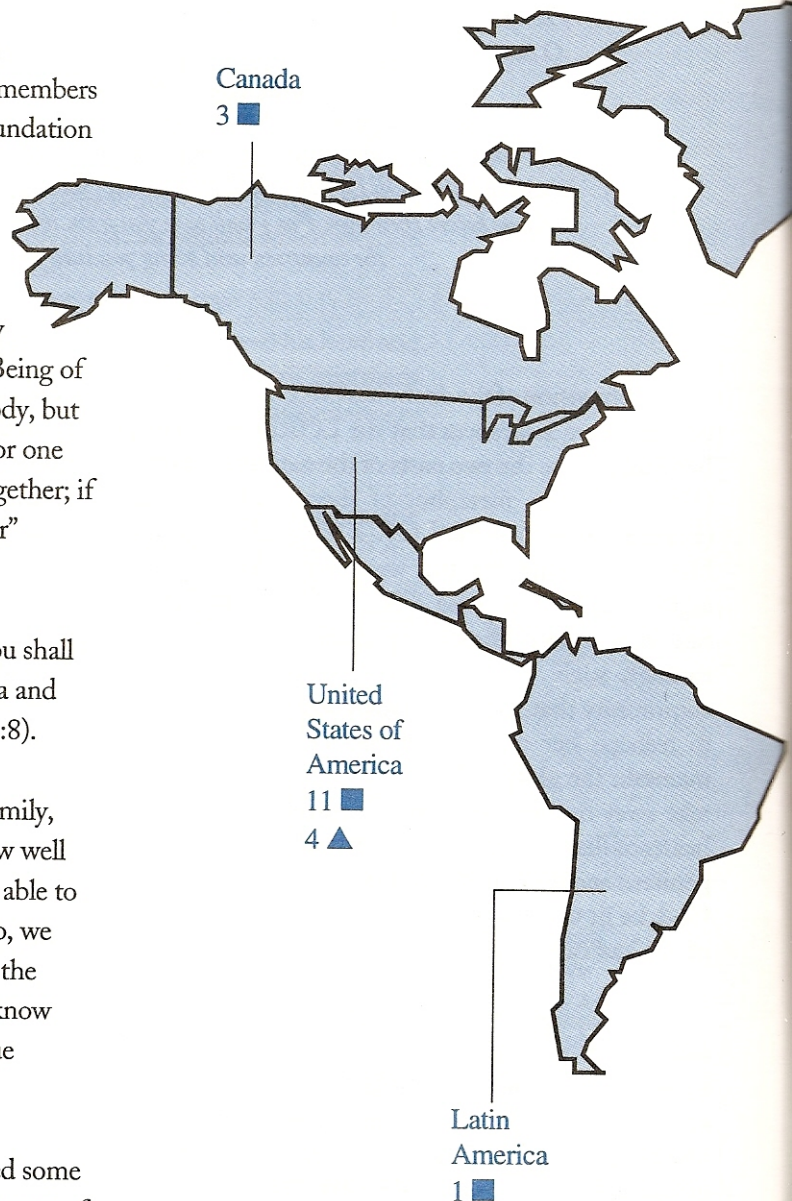
MEMBERS of the True Jesus Church (TJC),  
 “you are fellow citizens with the saints and members  
 of the household of God, built upon the foundation  
 of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus  
 himself being the cornerstone”  
 (Eph 2:19-20).

Within this family, “you are the body  
 of Christ and individually members of it....Being of  
 one body, there may be no discord in the body, but  
 that the members may have the same care for one  
 another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if  
 one member is honoured, all rejoice together”  
 (1 Cor 12:27, 25-26).

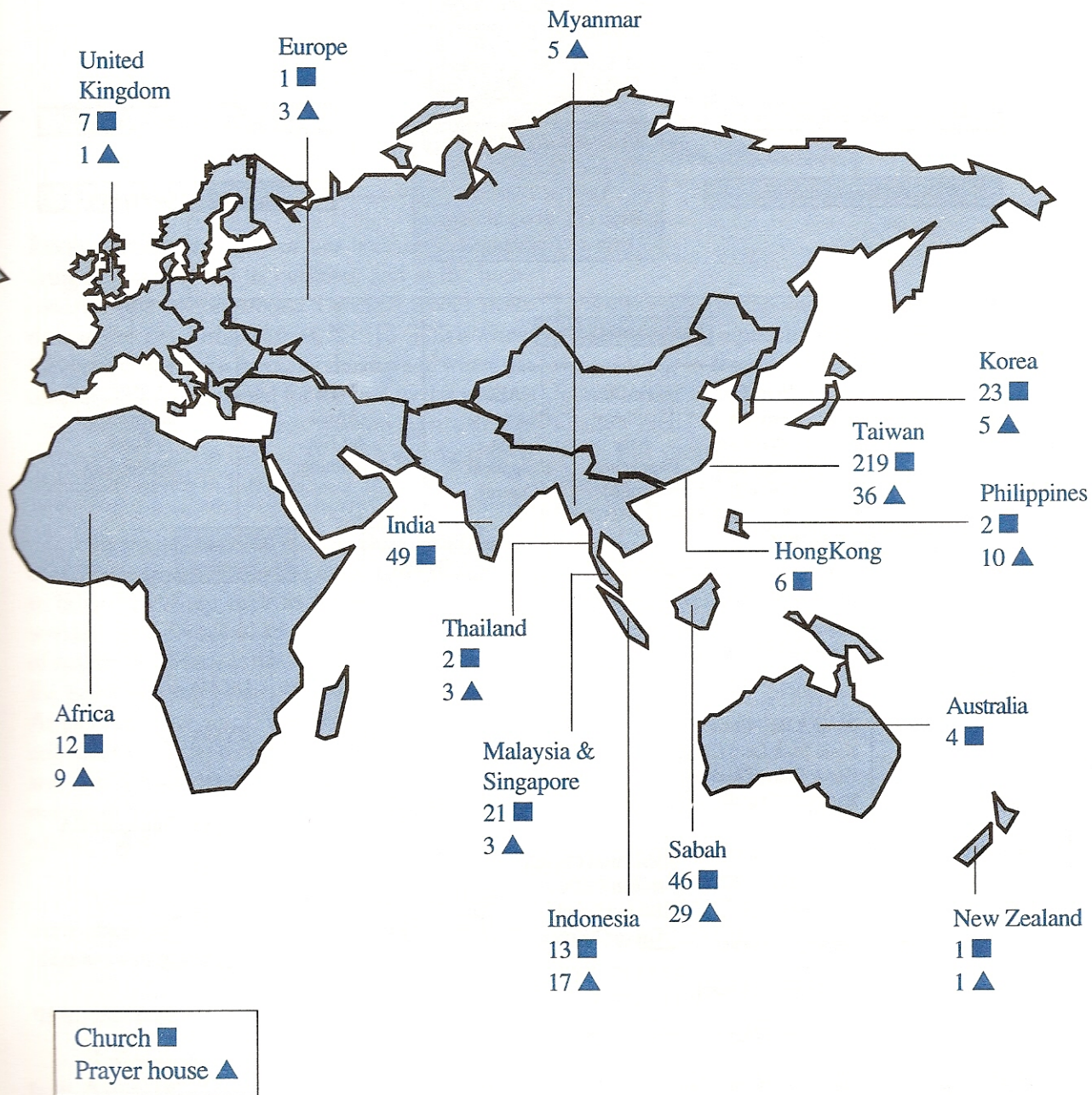
The Lord Jesus has commanded, “You shall  
 be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and  
 Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The message is clear: we are of one family,  
 and we have to care for one another. But how well  
 must we know our brothers and sisters to be able to  
 care? Do we even know where they are? Also, we  
 have to evangelise. But are we in touch with the  
 evangelistic activities of the church? Do we know  
 how many nations have yet to hear of the true  
 message of salvation?

We hope the following charts will shed some  
 light on the present situation of the TJC, in terms of  
 where we are, and how we have organised ourselves  
 for the propagation of the Gospel.



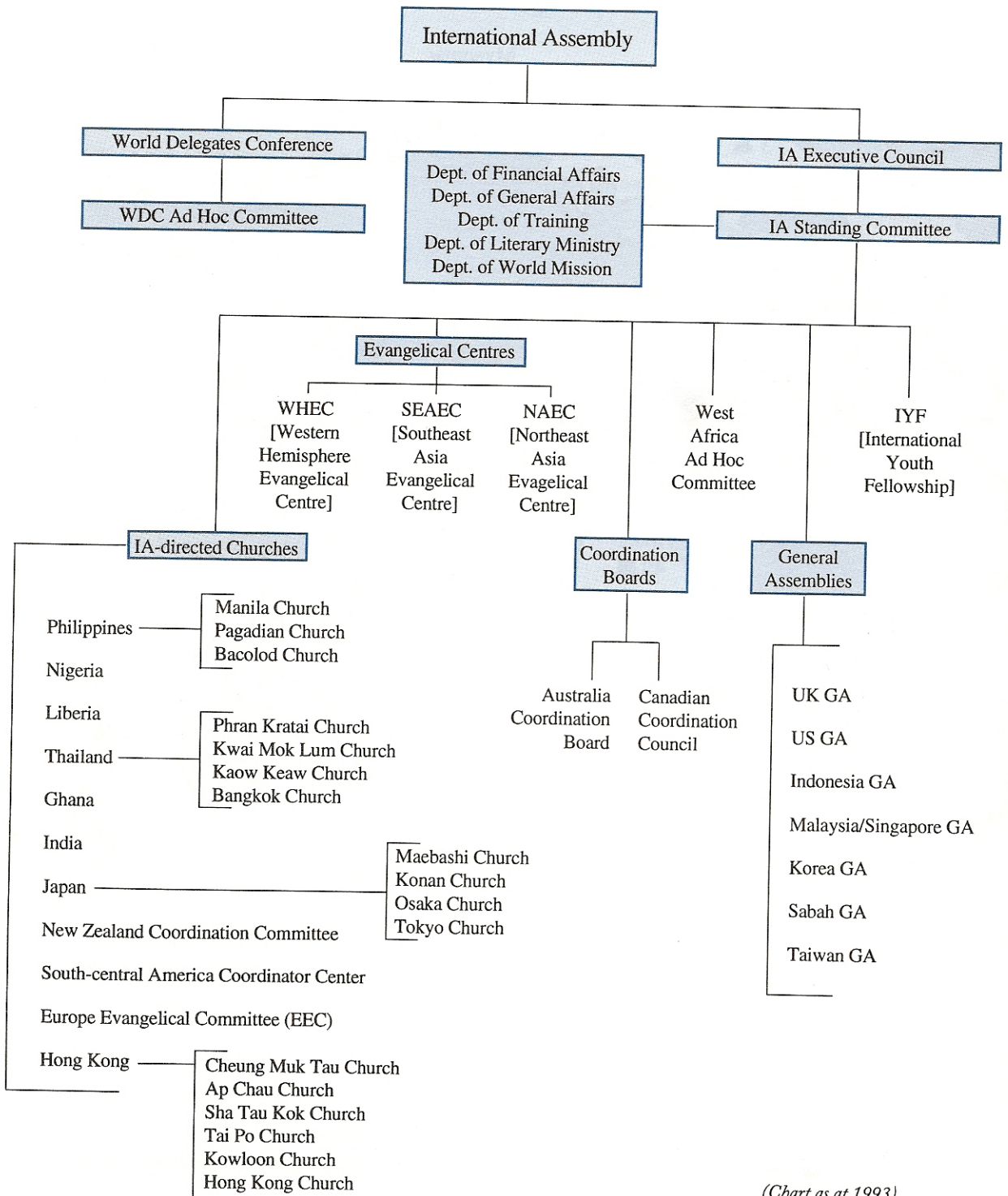
# 1993 SITUATION REPORT OF THE TRUE JESUS CHURCH



Source: International Assembly: 1993 survey.

Please note that the figures exclude Mainland China, of which we do not have any official information.

# Organization Chart of the International Assembly of The True Jesus Church



(Chart as at 1993)

# Our church in London

From Every Tribe, and Language, and People, and Nation



Joanne Jones



Bernard & Berin Leacock

EVERY SATURDAY, many of our brethren-in-Christ living in London and its outskirts, and in the home counties (the region around London) would make their way to 194, Pitfield Street, N1 5JB. This is where the church premises is currently situated and where the congregation has gathered for the past twelve years to keep the Sabbath. (The first worship service at this premises was held in November 1982, and the church dedication service in July 1983).

By the grace of God, the membership of London church now approximates 180, and the Lord continues to bring His sheep back to the fold. What's more wonderful, the door of salvation is open to all, irrespective of nationality. Many of the 37 baptismal candidates in the past three years were of different ethnic origins. At present, there are 23 London members who are non-Chinese. They include West Indians, Ghanaians and Turkish Cypriots. It would seem that in this cosmopolitan city of London, God has established His cosmopolitan church.

We invited a few of our London brethren to share their experiences and aspirations with us. Here are some of their responses to our questions.

*"What convinced you to believe and be baptised?"*

I already had a background in the Christian faith. A member of the TJC preached to me. God also confirmed the message through dreams. Even after I was baptised, I still asked God why there were so many denominations. I also wanted God to reassure me that I had done the right thing. Then I had a dream where

I was surrounded by thousands of people. To me, these people seemed to represent different denominations. I was standing in front of the True Jesus Church and found myself uttering the words "This is the True Church", and I repeated it "This is the True Church". With this dream, God removed my doubts as to whether I had made the right decision.

(Bernard Leacock, baptised in 1987)

Initially, I had some doubts, but God helped me by showing me a dream in which I saw part of Jesus' face. Blood was dripping from it – showing me that through His blood, He has washed away my sins. He also convinced me by giving me His Holy Spirit.

(Berin Hingi, baptised in 1993)

*Did you face any obstacles when you decided to get baptised? If so, how did you overcome them?*

My parents objected to my conversion, basically because the members were Chinese. I decided not to argue with them. Over time, I found that they changed their attitudes. My father even came to the church on one occasion and later told me that he liked what he saw.

(Bernard Leacock)

Yes, I did. I felt that I would hurt my mother. My father passed away two years ago when I was in London. My mother is always reminding me to return home to Malaysia to show my respects to my father in the traditional Buddhist way, an act which I can no

longer perform because I am now a Christian. I believe that it will take a while for my family to understand my conversion to Christianity.  
(Debbie Tan, baptised in 1994)

The main 'obstacle' was an inner struggle within myself about having to give up my old ways of life.  
(Joanne Jones, baptised in 1987)

*Do you feel that your life has changed since believing in Christ? If so, in what way?*

Oh definitely. The spiritual experiences speak for themselves, you have ups and downs in life, but you know that you have hope at the end of it. God has showered His grace upon me. He has brought me happiness and joy. I was on dialysis, but thank God, I had a successful kidney transplant. Also, I now have a job.  
(Berin Hingi)

I have a better understanding of myself and the purpose of life. I have perhaps become more patient and understanding towards others. There is less desire in me to be part of the world.  
(Joanne Jones)

Yes, in all ways my life has totally changed for the better.  
(Joseph Ofori Duah, baptised 1988)

I was born into the church and before I moved to London to further my education, I must admit I didn't really know whom and what I believed in. Believing in Christ was more of a decision laid upon me, even though I had received the Holy Spirit and knew the Bible to a certain extent. The realisation that the Bible is the 'living' word of God had not yet come about. But since moving away from home to London, I have personally experienced the God that we believe

in. This period has increased my faith and made me more reliant on God. I have learnt to trust in Him particularly during the most stressful times of study. It has been a worthwhile experience for me, the change of my faith from one of mere habit to something 'real' or 'living'. Thank God.  
(Angela Shek, baptised in 1974)

*Do you have any hopes and aspirations for the True Jesus Church?*

Yes, basically that people from all nations and different backgrounds will come to know the truth.  
(Bernard Leacock)

I would like to see more Turkish members in church, as well as other members of my family.  
(Berin Hingi)

I hope that the church will grow and house an international congregation; that it will be the True Church not only in name but one where all members, including myself, will be able to live according to the words we preach; that the True Church will eventually reach the Caribbean, South Africa and all other places where she has no presence.  
(Joanne Jones)

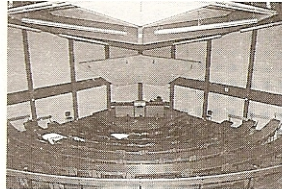
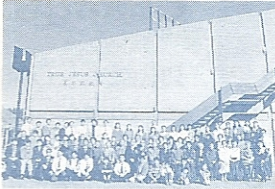
Yes, I hope that the True Church will be established and spiritually firmly rooted all over Africa.  
(Joseph Ofori Duah)

*Through the grace of God, our London church was able to purchase new premises in February 1992. This five-storey building is at 57-63 East Road, London N1, a three-minute walk from the Old Street tube station, the very heart of the city of London. At present, refurbishment work is still in progress. The delay is partly due to the shortage of funds. May the Lord continue to inspire everyone to contribute financially as well as through their prayers.*

# Little lambs in the South

*A testimony of God's grace upon the members in Christchurch, New Zealand*

*In the mid-80s, the New Zealand Government changed its immigration policy and made it easier for citizens of Asian countries to reside in her land. Several of our Taiwanese church members took advantage of this change and decided to make New Zealand their new home. Thus, the seed of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ was sown in New Zealand.*



In 1989, some Taiwanese members of the True Jesus Church arrived in Christchurch, a city on the South Island of New Zealand. They began holding Sabbath Day family worship services together in their homes. Adjusting to a new environment was not easy for them, as they had not only to overcome cultural differences but language barriers as well.

In mid-1991, the work of the Holy Spirit began. Many truth-seekers came of their own accord to attend the family services. By the grace of God, the number of believers increased, and the house where these family services were held could no longer accommodate the whole congregation. Therefore from June 1992, a primary school hall was rented weekly as a temporary place of worship. Still, there were many inconveniences as well as the lack of proper classrooms for conducting religious education classes. Consequently plans were made to acquire our own church building.

The search for a suitable building started in early 1993, after a period of prayer. In April 1993, the Lord gave us a wonderful opportunity. We came across a suitable property. Its facilities were ideal for use as a church building. It was also located near the city centre. The price offered was also exceptionally low. Nevertheless, we were still worried as the price exceeded our budget by a lot.

We kept praying, believing that if it were the will of God for us to purchase that building, He would prepare the funds for us too. Thank the Lord,

within a short period of time, offerings came from churches of different places. With adequate funds, we were able to purchase the building. Present membership is only about thirty. Therefore to be able to have such an ideal and spacious building is all due to the amazing grace of God.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”  
(Ps 23:1)

“Oh, fear the Lord, you His saints.  
For those who fear Him have no want”  
(Ps 34:9)

We thank the Lord for guiding us by His mercy; we pray that He will continue to help us, and that through us, His name will be glorified and His church prosper, in this city called the “Church of Christ”.

*Thanks to the grace of God, our church in Christchurch was dedicated to the Lord on 24 April 1994. The dedication ceremony was attended by almost one hundred people, comprising local as well as overseas members, and other well-wishers. Presently, the church holds services on Friday evenings and Saturday afternoons. Attendance averages around thirty-five members and regular observers. Youth services are conducted fortnightly on Saturday mornings with a programme of hymn singing and Bible study.*

(Contribution from the Church in Christchurch)



## Middle-Aged Members' Fellowship

SEVERAL TYPES of fellowship programmes have been set up in our church; the most prominent being the youth fellowship. Most churches have set up youth fellowships. The age of members range between 19 and 40 years, with the majority of the participating youths actively engaged in church work. Where the congregation is large, that church may also have a sisters' fellowship. In this fellowship, age is immaterial. If the congregation is even larger, in addition to the youth and sisters' fellowships, there may also be a senior members' fellowship. In Taiwan, such a fellowship is called the "969 Fellowship", because Methuselah of the eighth generation after Adam, lived for 969 years (Gen 5:26). Another important fellowship is one for the middle-aged i.e. those who are between 40-60 years of age.

In November 1993, a fellowship programme for the middle-aged was organised under the auspices of the Southeast Asia Evangelical Centre in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. The three-day seminar drew middle-aged members from Brunei, Indonesia, East and West Malaysia and Singapore. There were altogether 218 participants. The fellowship enabled the participants to understand the role of middle-aged members in the church. Elder Heng-Tao Chen, Chairman of the International Assembly, when addressing the participants said, "People who dislike middle age are actually afraid of entering it. They regard it as a period



*Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, East Malaysia*

when everything will come to a standstill. Actually middle age is the golden era of a person's life. It can be compared to the sun at its highest when it is at its strongest and most glorious. This is the most prosperous period of one's life. In short, it is the age of achievement." Elder Chen stressed further that a man's life was like climbing a high mountain. Middle age is likened to the mountain top. After we pass this peak, some descend rapidly while others go on to climb even higher mountains. We ought to treasure every period of our life, and live it meaningfully, to the glory of God.



*Lecturers, graduates and staff. Also present were the relatives of the graduates.*

## Graduation ceremony of the Southeast Asia Theological College

PRaise THE LORD. On June 25 1994, the congregation of the church at Adam Road, Singapore, witnessed the first graduation ceremony of the Southeast Asia Theological College. The three graduates, who came from different parts of Malaysia, were Brother Juperin Sumil (Keningau, Sabah), Brother Chin June Cock (Gombak, Kuala Lumpur) and Brother Paul Chong Wing Fook (Petaling Jaya, Selangor). By the grace of God, they had successfully completed three years of full-time instruction at the theological college based in the church premises at Adam Road. Their training also included two months of field work in Taiwan, undertaken at the end of their theoretical studies. From now on, they are trained and ready to be sent out as soldiers of Christ. May the Lord be with them in their ministry.

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# THE WORD

echo [letter to the editor]

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