

# MANNA

ISSUE 56 | July–September 2008 | **Holidays**

**Spend The Love • What Do We Hallow? • Friend of Sinners**

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

Dear Reader,

The end of summer is a reminder that change is all around us. As the days get shorter and colder we may look back on the past few months and wish that summer would last just a little longer.

While we know such wishes cannot come true, we often persist in hoping for things that cannot or should not happen. It isn't surprising that we are like this—after all, we are human and therefore flawed. But through the love and mercy of God, He guides us to His way and will.

The writers in this issue share insights on how we can live according to God's will. Whether to help us understand how to respond to holidays, how to repay His love for us, or to recount how a determined runaway was brought back to His fold, the articles remind us that we can find the best way if we seek and trust Him.

THE EDITOR

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## Holidays

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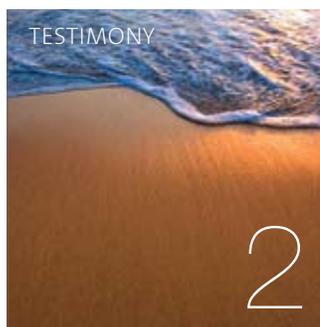
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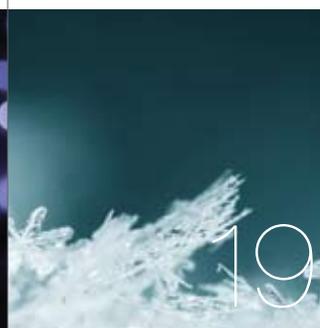
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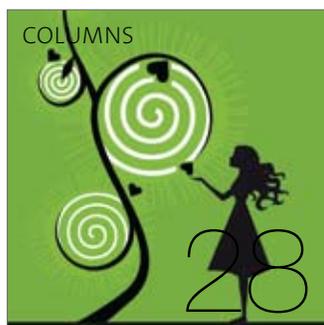
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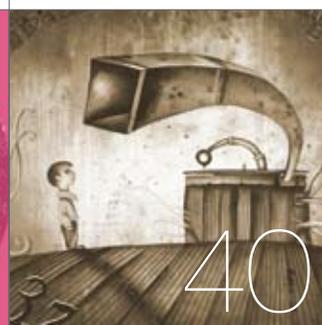
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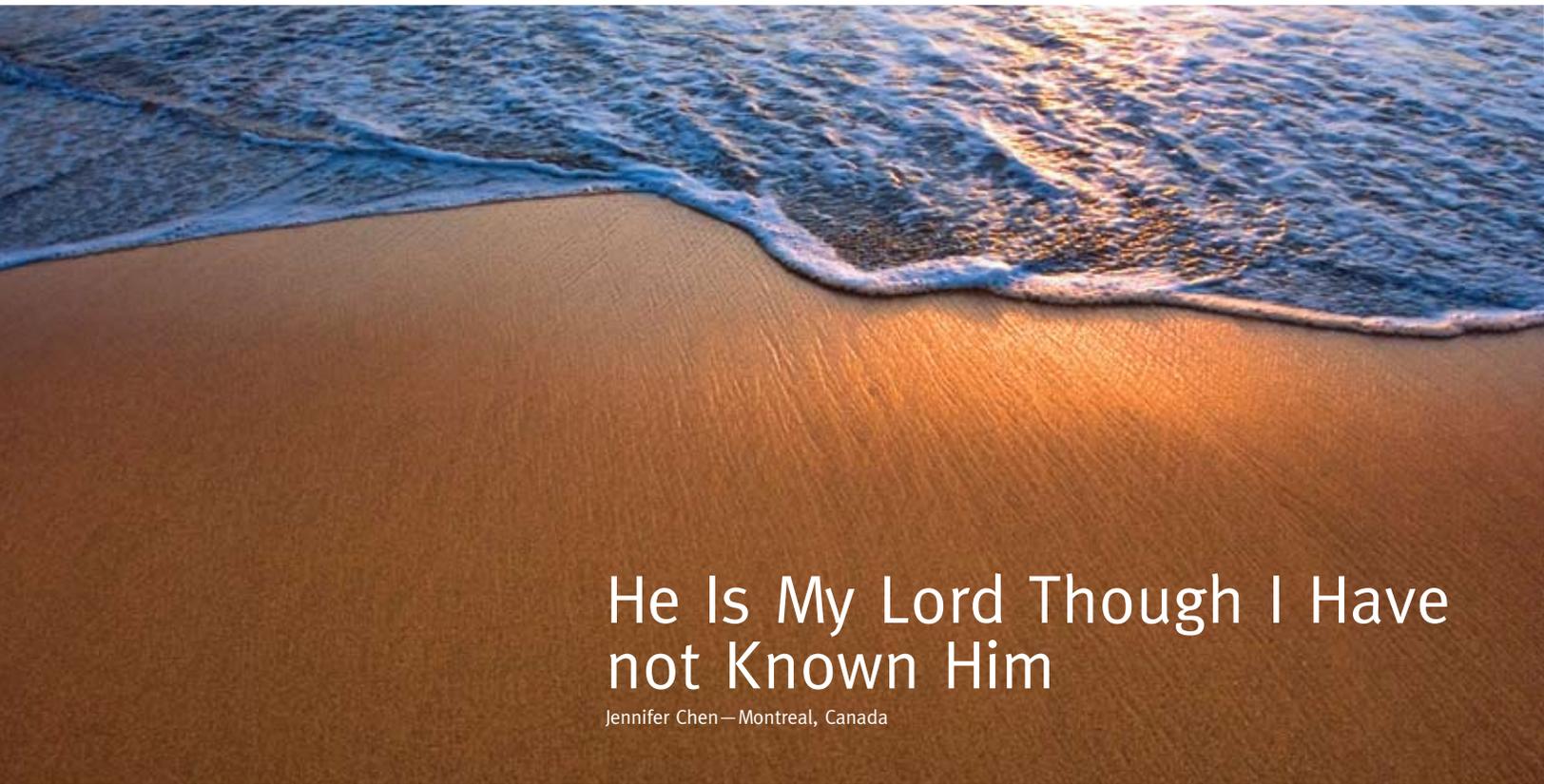
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# He Is My Lord Though I Have not Known Him

Jennifer Chen—Montreal, Canada

*“Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;...when you pass through the fire, you shall not be burned...For I am the Lord your God...you [are] precious in my eyes.”*  
(Isa 43:1-4)

I’m very blessed to have been born into a family that believes in the True Jesus Church. I didn’t fully realize this blessing until much later in life and perhaps still don’t remember it as often as I should.

As a little girl, I did not really feel different from the other kids. I led a simple and happy life in Taiwan and was care-free every day—going to school, doing my homework, watching television, and playing with my friends.

Every Saturday, I would go to church with my parents, brother, and grandparents. But besides Religious Education (RE) class, I never opened the Bible. I prayed very little, usually just before meals and bed time. God was someone mysterious and abstract—I knew He provided everything,

but the love I received from my family satisfied me, so I didn’t think much about His love.

My family was very busy with their work, so we didn’t really have a life of faith at home; we didn’t really discuss our faith openly, even though it was always present as a fact.

## ADJUSTING TO A NEW LIFE

After many years of waiting our immigration application to Canada was approved in January 1993. Within twenty days, we packed all of our belongings, completed all the immigration procedures, and said goodbye to family and friends.

When we arrived in Montreal, it was the middle of winter, and the snow was so deep it covered most of the front door of our house. I had never experienced anything like that before.

The weather wasn’t the only thing to get used to—I was really in awe of the culture and the different things I saw in a new country. In the midst of all the

hardships and adjustments that I had to face, not having the close-knit family network we had in Taiwan was the most difficult.

However, in Canada my parents were not busy with their work anymore. And because of the change of lifestyle, we began to have more family sharing time. The four of us gradually built up a tighter spiritual bond and started to rely on God more together. For the first time, we started to read the Bible as a family. I believe that immigrating to Canada brought us closer to each other and to God.

## FINDING MY IDENTITY

When I entered secondary school, work became harder and social life more complex. I often felt that there were two different worlds, one at home and one outside, and I did not know to which I belonged. My friends at school did not have a similar background, so I kept many troubles and thoughts to myself. But in

my heart, I longed for close friends who would really understand me.

God must have heard my thoughts because starting from 1997, He brought sisters from different places of the world to Montreal to study. They were like my older sisters and spiritual friends. Those were probably the most fulfilling years of my teens, because I finally had a group of people with whom I could share laughter and tears, and not just superficially. It was also the first time that I had companions with whom to pray and discuss God. We attended different church seminars together in Toronto and in the US, where I continued to make many new church friends.

By this time, there were enough youths in Montreal to hold a youth class. Gradually, more and more responsibilities were given to us. But after a few years, right before I entered university, these sisters finished their studies and, one after another, left. Their assignments were distributed among the few youths who remained. Almost every youth had to multi-task—for example, being a hymn leader, interpreter, and RE teacher all on the same Sabbath.

### FROM HOT FAITH TO LUKEWARM

In the summer of 2000, before I started university, I attended the National Youth Theological Seminar (NYTS) in the US for the first time. Two weeks of cultivation and fellowship sharpened my spiritual awareness and opened up my heart of servitude. I was very touched by the members' love as well as God's love.

I realized that faith isn't only something to hold on to. It wasn't enough just to receive the faith that my family passed down to me or to only rely on church friends to lead me. I realized that I had to work on my own faith and make it grow. I started to read the Bible and pray more regularly.

When I went back to Montreal, my enthusiasm for church work lasted for a while. But I was doing it from the wrong

*It wasn't enough just to receive the faith that my family passed down to me or to only rely on church friends to lead me. I realized that I had to work on my own faith and make it grow. I started to read the Bible and pray more regularly.*

source of strength. I carried my load of church work only on my shoulders and not in my heart. So whenever I went to church I felt very tired.

From the outcome, it seemed like I did all of my jobs well, but deep inside, I knew that I did not. I felt no rest at the end of every Sabbath day. My Bible reading and prayers gradually died down.

### FEELING LOST IN LIFE AND LETTING GOD DOWN

Meanwhile, things weren't going very well at school. The program I had enrolled in at university wasn't really what I expected. So after a year and a half, I switched majors and continued in a completely new field. However, I did not get good grades in the second program either.

I was already in the beginning of my third year of university, and I didn't know what to do—should I switch majors again, or should I just finish my degree? In the end, I decided to keep on going. Still, I could not keep up with the workload and did not find interest in the studies. That period of time was filled with academic pressure and changes, which caused me to doubt my abilities and future. I ended up failing many classes.

One Sunday morning in September, I decided that instead of attending youth class, I would run away without telling anyone. I packed my schoolbag and took a bus to the school library in downtown Montreal.

After a few hours of studying, I purposely wandered around the

neighborhood. I went to a very crowded food court to waste more time, knowing that the youths were having fellowship at that same moment. I put my schoolbag on the ground while I ate lunch. Someone walked by pushing a stroller with a really cute baby, and I turned to look at that baby. When I turned back around, my bag was gone. My heart started to pound very fast as I looked around, only to realize that my bag was nowhere to be found.

That morning, I had deliberately put all my ID cards, wallet, and valuables in the bag because I was running away from home. And it was all gone. I didn't know what to do so I called 911 from a pay phone with the change in my pocket. They told me to go to the nearby police station to report my stolen bag.

After filing the report, I had no choice but to call home. When my father came into the station to pick me up, I felt very sorry and ashamed, as if I had committed a crime. I knew that God had punished me for purposely skipping the youth class. I wondered if this meant that He still loved me. I felt very ashamed about my actions and not worthy of God's discipline.

### DEALING WITH LOSS AND SAYING GOODBYE

Not long after these events, my maternal grandfather was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. A few months later, my paternal grandfather got sick because of his advanced age. Within the same month, I lost both of my grandfathers to their illnesses.

I broke down and wept when I erased my grandfathers' names from my prayer request board. At that moment, all the unspoken sadness and pressure that had accumulated in me flowed out with my tears. I could not control it and cried for a long time. I started to feel a great desire to fly back to Taiwan to see my grandfathers' graves, but I was thousands of miles away.

Despite these problems, I still had to continue doing church work. I hid my

weaknesses and kept going. I did not disclose my deepest fears about my academic future or the pain of losing my loved ones. I felt a responsibility to keep smiling, to encourage others, and to teach my RE students.

But I felt like a hypocrite. I felt like I had nothing to give. During this time, I completely stopped praying and reading the Bible at home.

*When I knelt down to pray in the chapel, I realized what a blessing it was to be able to keep the Sabbath! For the first time in a very long while, I enjoyed the rest and peace of the Holy Sabbath day.*

**GOD CORRECTED MY WAY**

I decided that I needed to get away from Montreal and go on a long trip by myself. I wanted to run away from all of my responsibilities in church and from school. So I withdrew from university, started planning my itinerary, and booked everything to show my determination.

I basically told my parents, “No more school for me. I’m gone.” They were worried and sad to see me like that, but they could see how unfit and unhealthy I was spiritually. They let me go. In April 2003 I flew across the ocean without knowing what was ahead.

But God really does work in mysterious ways. Ironically, I began my run-away trip by spending five straight days in church!

I knew only one person in Japan, a sister who had studied in Montreal, and I emailed her to see if she could pick me up at the airport and take me to the hostel when I arrived. I wasn’t planning to go to church there; I just wanted to visit various places around the country.

The sister emailed me back, saying that I was just in time for their spring spiritual convocation and invited me to go. I

didn’t know what to say and ended up attending.

I knew then that God was disciplining me, but I was not ready to give in.

My plan after three weeks in Japan was to stay in Taiwan for one month and keep my grandmother company. Even though SARS had spread there, I did not want to end my trip without visiting my family in Taiwan, especially my deceased grandfathers’ graves.

I stubbornly flew to Taiwan knowing the risk that I was taking. The airport was almost empty; everyone wore masks, and I was very nervous during the entire flight. I realized that my life was not in my hands. No matter how perfectly my escape trip had been planned, I could never have foreseen the dangers and variables involved.

Into my second week in Taiwan, a relative in the US got very sick, so instead of staying in Taiwan when the SARS epidemic was at its peak, I flew to the US to visit my relative. I was back in

North America much sooner than I had planned.

While I was staying with my relative, her condition suddenly worsened and I rushed her to the emergency room. I remember feeling very weak in the knees and in the stomach that night when I returned from the hospital. For the first time in my entire trip, I prayed wholeheartedly to God. I asked Him to give me strength to help my relative in this foreign place. I asked Him to save her life and mine. She was physically sick, and I was spiritually sick. I told Him about all my troubles and asked Him to please pull me out from the bottomless pit.

God heard my pleas. He healed my relative, and He also lifted my spirit up.

I had not gone to Sabbath services for a few weeks, but I found out there was a sister who lived in the same city, and we arranged to go to the local True Jesus Church together. When I knelt down to pray in the chapel, I realized what a blessing it was to be able to keep the



Sabbath! For the first time in a very long while, I enjoyed the rest and peace of the Holy Sabbath day.

### **COMING BACK TO MY HEAVENLY FATHER**

The experience I had in the chapel on Sabbath and the presence of God throughout my trip made me want to draw close to God again. After sight-seeing for another month, I flew to Southern California and attended the 2003 NYTS. It was my last stop, and this time, unlike the rest of my trip, there were no obstacles.

Through prayer and fellowship at NYTS, God softened my heart and gave me strength. He welcomed me back with open arms and with no rebuke. I felt like the prodigal son, coming back home to my Father after discovering where I truly belonged. I had done everything out of my own will, thinking that I knew what was best for me, but God was telling me, No, you don't.

He did not ask me why I had abandoned the blessings I was born with and chosen to leave Him. He just let me go and learn things step by step on the way, to realize that going back to my heavenly Father was the best and only choice.

*"And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him." (Lk 15:20)*

I really thank God because I would not be here without Him. If it were not for His forgiveness and His grace, I would not have learned what God means to me. Not only during the trip but for my entire life, He has guided me and been my light. He has always been my God though I have not known Him. ★



# Friend of Sinners

Lee Gan Wah—Singapore

With my bad habits and nasty character, I used to tell Christians who tried preaching to me that I was beyond redemption. However, God is a truly righteous and patient Father, and His love is beyond human comprehension. The fact that I am still alive today testifies to His unconditional love.

## A SEARCH FOR MEANING

I come from a Taoist family. I am the youngest of six siblings. My father passed away when I was eleven years old and my mother died seven years later. For some reason, after her death, I became very interested in ancestral worship and the worship of the Goddess of Mercy. I kept my parents' memorial tablets in my home, which, according to Chinese tradition, was an unusual practice for a daughter.

Although I was only eighteen then, I zealously observed all the festivals, performed the rituals, and offered sacrifices. One of my brothers was even forced to eat the food offered to my late

mother on the anniversary of her death, in order to oblige me!

Despite my religious fervor, life did not seem to hold much for me. I was despondent and cynical. I partied a lot to beat boredom, but I still did not have direction in life. I even bought a book of 1,000 insults so that I could use them at any given time on those whom I disliked.

To many, including my family members, I seemed to be enjoying myself when in reality I felt empty inside. Before I turned twenty, I attempted suicide for the first time, but I failed. I survived, not with a sense of relief but of despair.

For the next four and a half years, I drifted through life. But life continued to be meaningless, so I decided again to end it. This time, I made certain that it would be successful. After locating the tallest building near my home, I wrote my suicide note. Then, a family problem suddenly popped up that I had to attend to, and I was compelled to postpone the suicide plan.

## LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Unbeknownst to me, God had already started working in His mysterious ways. After the postponed suicide, I was introduced to a person who had been attending the True Jesus Church as an observer. We clicked.

She sought my advice about going to London for further education. In turn, I invited her to a party with my friends. In the middle of the party, she asked to be excused, as she had promised her sister, a member of True Jesus Church, that she would attend the service on Friday evening. Reluctant to let her go, I agreed to attend the next service with her in exchange for her skipping that evening's service. As it turned out, the next service was on the following day, a Saturday Sabbath service.

On the following day, as was my daily morning routine, I placed joss sticks on the family altar and two other altars. I then left to meet my new acquaintance in

the city center thinking that we would be visiting a church in the vicinity. I became agitated when I learned that we had to travel all the way to the east on what was a hot Saturday afternoon!

When I was told that the name of the church was “True Jesus Church,” I became even more infuriated. Although I was not a Christian, I thought the name smacked of arrogance.

My acquaintance reacted quite calmly to my irritation, gently explaining that God had revealed this name to the early workers of the church. In hindsight, I think the Holy Spirit must have guided her response. Thereafter, we had a silent journey almost all the way to church.

*The moment I took my first step into the chapel, I felt a pleasant light breeze, which calmed me. For the first time in my life, I experienced peace.*

## BREEZE OF PEACE, FOUNTAIN OF JOY

When we reached the church, just before we alighted from the vehicle, I told her, “This is my first time, but it will also be my last time coming to this church, so don’t ever ask me again!” But amazingly, the moment I took my first step into the chapel, I felt a pleasant light breeze, which calmed me. For the first time in my life, I experienced peace.

I could not really understand the hymns or the Mandarin sermon even though the latter was translated into English. The whole atmosphere seemed foreign to me. And when they started to pray, I couldn’t help noticing the behavior of a lady in the pew in front of me. She prayed with such reverence yet in a very personal manner, as though she was talking to God face to face.

Suddenly, the desire to be a Christian

welled up in me. I immediately chided myself and reminded myself of all my vices that would disqualify me from becoming a Christian.

Then I heard a soothing male voice saying that I could be a Christian if I wanted to. I whirled round, trying to see who said that, but all those praying around me were females! As I continued to struggle with the impossibility of becoming a Christian, the same voice spoke again. He said that I could stop my vices gradually, and the first step was to stop smoking. I was really awed—I had not opened my handbag since I stepped into the church, so how could anyone have known that I smoked? I agreed immediately.

After the church service, I headed off to a pre-arranged dinner appointment with an ex-colleague. I told her about the peaceful feeling I had when I attended the True Jesus Church service. She encouraged me to continue going, but I replied that I could not until I stopped my ten year smoking habit.

That night, as had been my routine, I wanted to have a cigarette before sleeping. To my horror, it tasted foul and bitter when I started to smoke! It seemed to be a sign from God reminding me of the promise I made in church to stop smoking. A great strength filled me and I threw the pack away. Miraculously, I have not smoked ever since.

The next day, I called my acquaintance to tell her of my desire to go to church. She told me the next service was on Wednesday evening. I attended that and continued to attend more services. Each time, I experienced newfound joy from God. It was as if a fountain had been planted in my heart, with waters of joy springing up. It was such a wonderful feeling!

## NEW LIFE AND MEANING

A few weeks after attending services in the True Jesus Church, one of my relatives asked me to take her to the temple that I used to frequent. She wanted to get a

talisman from a medium for her daughter. Previously, whenever I invited her to join me in the temple for worship and chanting, she would refuse. Strangely, this time she was very keen. I refused and she got angry. While she continued to persuade me, something in me kept urging me to keep peace with her, so I finally agreed.

When we met at the temple, I directed her to the medium’s room and told her that I would wait outside. I decided to walk around the temple and look at the idols that I used to worship. When I came to the biggest idol, a sudden enlightenment came upon me. These deities had eyes that could not see, mouths that could not speak, and ears that could not hear my cries for help. Even the clothes on them were made by human hands. Why had I been worshipping these idols?

The truth then dawned upon me—God was in the True Jesus Church. At that moment in the temple, I gave my heart fully to Jesus and I was wonderfully converted. I resolved to be baptized. By the mercy of God, I was baptized three months after studying the truth. After baptism, I felt that I had been given a new lease on life, a life that was now filled with hope and meaning.

I have since enjoyed countless blessings from this God who called out to me and accepted me so lovingly. I strongly believe that He is living and is merciful to all. He waits to give all His salvation grace. Therefore, we should not hesitate to draw near to Him and enjoy His wonderful grace.

May all glory be given to His name. Amen. ★

# How to Lead Hymns



Hymn singing is the time for the congregation to meditate upon God's love, grace, and mercy through the singing of hymns. The role of the hymn leader is to guide the congregation in singing praises to the Lord as well as to prepare their hearts for the service. Music is a divine gift from God, so we should use this wonderful gift to edify men and to glorify His name. Apostle Paul exhorted the believers to "admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord" (Col 3:16).

## Preparation Beforehand

- Pray for the guidance and abidance of the Lord.
- Select hymns:
  - Choose hymns related to the sermon topic, if applicable.
  - 2-3 hymns for a 5-minute hymn-singing session;
  - 4-6 hymns for a 10-minute hymn-singing session.
  - Prepare back-up hymns for unexpected circumstances.

- Consult the Chinese and English hymnals and take note of the following for each hymn:
  - Number of verses – if the number of verses differs between the Chinese and English versions, decide how many verses are to be sung.
  - Tempo – decide upon the speed of the hymn.
  - Fermata – look for the "pause" signs and decide how long they are to be held.
  - Beat pattern – practice in front of a mirror beforehand until you are familiar with the pattern.

## Preparation on the Hour

- As hymn leaders are visible to the congregation, dress and groom yourself appropriately to serve God and represent the church.
- Arrive at least 5 minutes before the hymn-singing session.
- Write all the hymn numbers on the board or projector (or inform the audio-visual personnel).
- Make sure the accompanist is present, and discuss any necessary details (such as the hymn tempo and fermata length).
- Identify the sermon speaker (which will be relevant in Procedure 4).

## Procedure

1. Silent prayer
2. "In the name of Jesus Christ, we begin our hymn-singing session."
3. "Please sing hymn number \_\_\_\_."

  - a. Introduce the hymn or quote relevant Bible verse
  - b. Mention the verses to be sung
  - c. Cue the accompanist on the tempo before each hymn
  - d. Say the number of the next verse prior to singing it (helpful for people coming in late)

4. Make eye contact with the sermon speaker near the end of the hymn to confirm whether the speaker is ready to deliver the sermon; if not, continue with another hymn.
5. "This concludes the hymn-singing session."
6. Silent prayer
7. Erase the hymn numbers written on the board or projector.

## Additional Pointers

- Be prepared to translate if the congregation is multi-lingual.
- During the hymn-singing session, do not be too concerned with conducting; just make sure to lead the congregation through each hymn.
- Be assertive in leading the congregation to praise God.
- Relax and move your arms naturally to the music.

# Questions and Answers



## **What does the term “canon” refer to?**

The word “canon” comes from the root word “reed” (English word “cane”; Hebrew form *ganeh* and Greek *Kanon*). The “reed” was used as a measuring rod and eventually meant “standard.”<sup>1</sup>

The word “canon” applied to Scripture means “an officially accepted list of books.”<sup>2</sup>

## **How can we trust the canon, which was determined by man? Couldn't the canon have left out some of God's words or added books that were not God's words?**

If we believe that the Bible is indeed God's word, as it claims to be, then we ought to also believe these words: “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Mt 5:18). “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Mt 24:35).

The canon was not the result of a rabbinical discussion or church council, as some think it was. It was a gradual process through which God's people upheld certain books as inspired and excluded others as the works of men. We must trust that God oversaw not just the writing but also the making of the Bible.

In addition, we have the endorsement of Christ Himself and the New Testament writers on the validity of the Old Testament canon. The early church also readily accepted the New Testament as the inspired word of God because of its apostolic authority. Therefore, based on our belief that the Bible is reliable and that the words of Jesus Christ, who is God Himself, are trustworthy, we can be confident that the Bible we have in our hands contains the same words that God intended when He moved the biblical writers to set His words down on paper. Nothing has been added or taken away.

1. Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands A Verdict*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), 29.
2. Ralph Earle, *How We Got Our Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971) 31.

# Facts, Stats and **Syntax**



## Polls and Statistics

There are an estimated **39,000** Christian denominations and **3,684,000** congregations (worship centers) around the world in 2008.

Christians make up an estimated **33%** of the world's population.

Taken from <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity/resources.php>

## Word Study

The term "Beulah" ( **בְּעוּלָה** ) occurs only once in the Bible in Isaiah 62:4, and it literally means "married." The Lord promised Jerusalem, "Your land will be married." It is the Lord's way of telling the Israelites that they will no longer be desolate and forsaken because He will take them back.

## Did You Know?

The number seven is often linked with the idea of perfection and completion. General Naaman had to dip himself into the Jordan River seven times. The priests and soldiers marched around Jericho seven times. Seven is also mentioned many times in the Book of Revelation, such as seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls.

## News

### True Jesus Church in Ghana and Togo

From January 31 to March 3, 2008, preachers GH Chen and TK Chin traveled to Ghana and Togo to pastor members and evangelize.

They spent their time in Ghana visiting seventeen of the twenty-five churches and places of worship, where the number of members varies from ten to one hundred. During the trip, twenty-eight people were baptized in Ghana.

With the power of the Holy Spirit, the True Jesus Church in Ghana is progressing steadily. The members' understanding of God's words, their devotion to prayer, and improved willingness to offer and assist in evangelism in nearby countries are a blessing from God.

The Togo ministry began a number of years ago in Kpalime and Badu. During this trip, the preachers spent about one week in Lome, the capital. By God's grace, ten people were baptized there.

However, there are still many truth-seekers who are yet to be baptized. May the Lord Jesus enlarge His Kingdom in Togo.

May all power and glory be to the name of Jesus.

# Five Loaves and Two Fish

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## What Is Godliness?

**"Godliness"**: A genuine reverence toward God that governs one's attitude toward every aspect of life.

To show reverence means to show deep respect and honor to God. It is accompanied by a humble attitude and genuine worship. For example, when God appeared to Abram and talked to him, Abram fell face down (Gen 17:1-4).

*Exodus 3:5-6:*

*Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." Moreover He said, "I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.*

God commanded Moses to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. Moses obeyed and covered his face. God is our friend, but He is also our sovereign Lord. To approach Him casually shows a lack of respect and sincerity. When you come to God in worship, do you approach God casually or as though you are an invited guest before a king? Remember Lord Jesus' parable in which he said, "But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless" (Mt 22:11, 12). We must have the right attitude when approaching the Holy God.

*Exodus 20:18, 20:*

*Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin."*

"His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." At mountain Sinai, the awesome display of lighting and thundering was to show Israel God's great power and authority. God wasn't trying to scare the people. He was showing His mighty power so the Israelites would know he was the true God and would therefore obey Him.

**"Fear of the Lord"**: A loving reverence for God that includes submission to his lordship and to the commands of his word.

To fear the Lord is to recognize Him for who He is: holy, almighty, righteous, pure, all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-wise. When we recognize God for who He is and who we are (sinful, weak, and needy), then we will ask God to guide us. Psalm 25:12 reads, "Who is the man that fears the Lord? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses."

How can our prayer reach God? Be a godly person. Psalm 4:3 says, "But know that the Lord has set apart for Himself him who is godly; the Lord will hear when I call to Him."

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## Holidays

Every country and culture has its own traditions and celebrations. Whether passed down for hundreds and even thousands of years or celebrated only over the past century, holidays are here to stay.

While some observances are patriotic or commemorative, there are others that have complicated secular, sacred, and pagan origins. These holidays present a difficult situation: Is it wrong to celebrate these days? Why should we refrain from participating when they are part of the culture?

As the theme articles remind us, we are the chosen people of God and must shine His light in this world. We can do this well only if we are sure of what we believe and ready to follow God's commands. We should not blindly follow the traditions of men but should understand what they are celebrating. If we sincerely do our best to obey our heavenly Father, we will not be led astray.

# What Do We Hallow?

Rebecca Yuan—Canoga Park, California, USA

My first memory of Halloween was as a six-year-old in Texas. I remember my parents dimming the lights and telling us to be quiet so the trick-or-treaters would believe that nobody was home. That experience became a model for years to come. Like many other True Jesus Church members, my parents believed that Halloween was associated with evil spirits and should be avoided.

However, in recent times, there seems to be a shift in some of our church members' perception of Halloween. We view it as a part of American culture, a harmless community or social event. Our children dress up for school Halloween parades, our youth attend costume parties, and our adults go to work in character. To be a good neighbor (or to appease pranksters), we greet and provide candy for trick-or-treaters. Sometimes, we even let our kids

go trick-or-treating with other church kids.

Is the traditional church stance on Halloween antiquated, just as our former ban on permed hair or the strict division of male-female seating in church?

If yes, then why are so many other Christians opposed to Halloween participation? Are we being overly conservative when avoiding a festivity that promotes community spirit, creativity, and good, clean, fun? What exactly are we hallowing or celebrating when we participate in Halloween?

## ORIGINS OF HALLOWEEN

Although Halloween is a largely commercial holiday, it still contains many influences from its pagan past. As we examine the history of Halloween, we can see the spiritual significances that exist behind its modern-day rituals.

### Samhain, the Festival of the Dead

The roots of Halloween can be traced back to an ancient Celtic festival called “Samhain” (meaning “Summer’s end,” pronounced “sow-en”).<sup>1</sup> The festival took place on October 31 and marked the beginning of the dark season, which was associated with death and the waning of the sun.

The ancient Britons believed that on this day, the boundary between the living and the dead was blurred. The dead could return to visit their family and friends, and the living could be tricked into passing into the other side.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, people did what they could to protect themselves.

Celtic priests called “Druids” built sacred bonfires for people to burn animal, crop, and even human sacrifices to appease Muck Olla, the sun god, and Samhain, the god of death.<sup>1</sup> During the ritual, people wore costumes made of animal heads and skins, danced, sang, and jumped over fires to scare away evil spirits.

At home, food was left outside to appease roaming spirits, and turnips were carved into lanterns with faces to ward off evil ones.<sup>2</sup> If someone had to leave home after dark, they would wear a guise for protection.<sup>3</sup>

For some, it was an opportunity to play pranks on each other since abnormalities could be attributed to the spirits. For others, it was a good opportunity to have one’s fortune told because the presence of supernatural beings made it easier to predict the future.<sup>3</sup>

When the Romans conquered Celtic territory in AD 434, Samhain became

intertwined with the Roman festival of “Feralia.” This was a day in late October in which the dead were remembered. The day following Feralia honored Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and gardens. The symbol for Pomona was the apple, which explains the custom of “bobbing” for apples.<sup>3</sup>

### Hallowmas

Christendom “inherited Hallowe’en from Pagan times” when Ireland was converted to Christianity in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

In AD 835, Pope Gregory IV tried to replace Samhain with a church-sanctioned holiday by declaring November 1 as All Saints’ Day to honor saints and martyrs.<sup>3</sup> By AD 900, the church realized that All Saints’ had not supplanted pre-Christian customs, so it established All Souls’ Day on November 2 to recognize all faithful souls that had died during the previous year.<sup>5</sup>

The celebrations were reminiscent of Samhain, with bonfires, parades, and people dressing up in costumes. To discourage people from leaving food out for the spirits, the church encouraged the practice of giving “soul-cakes.” Poor families would beg for food and families would give them pastries called “soul-cakes” in exchange for prayer for the family’s dead relatives.

Together, All Saints’ Eve, All Saints’ Day, and All Souls’ Day collectively became “Hallowmas.”<sup>3</sup>

### Americanization of Halloween

Large populations of Irish immigrants fleeing the Potato Famine of 1846 brought their Halloween traditions to America. On October 31, the new immigrants would dress up, play pranks, beg for money door-to-door, and tell fortunes with apples and nuts (symbols of Pomona and Samhain).<sup>4</sup> They also carved lanterns out of pumpkins, a New World vegetable that was bigger and easier to work with than turnips.

Unfortunately, the pranks turned into

real destruction of homes and businesses by the 1920’s.<sup>7</sup> This prompted communities to seek more benign alternatives for the night. “Good” children were encouraged to dress up and receive treats from shops and homes that they visited. The phrase “Trick or treat!” was coined as a greeting, and an American version of Halloween came about. By the 1930’s, October 31 was referred to as “beggar’s night” and celebrated nation-wide.<sup>6</sup>

Halloween in America was sanctioned as a neighborhood-oriented children’s holiday until the 1970’s, when adult activities became popular once more.<sup>8</sup> Retail chains and amusement parks joined in and pushed the commercial importance of the “scary” holiday.

Today, Halloween is one of the highest grossing commercial holidays, involving young and old alike.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, there has been some spiritual revival of Halloween in America. In places such as Salem, Massachusetts, modern-day witches gather in the month of October in anticipation of the annual Feast of Samhain on Halloween Eve.<sup>9</sup> The festival is a revival of the ancient Celtic festival, complete with Samhain fire, witchcraft, chanting, and the honoring of Roman and Canaanite goddesses.<sup>9</sup> Modern-day Satanists also view October 31 as their “highest of holy days.”<sup>10</sup>

### HALLOWING WHAT?

Researching and learning about the history of Halloween left me in shock. I was disturbed by the dark, spiritual roots of Halloween. I also recognized the similarities between Halloween and the pagan Chinese Ghost Month.

The Chinese Ghost Month is a period of time during the seventh month of the lunar calendar in which the gates of hell are believed to be opened. Therefore, people parade the streets in frightening costumes of ghosts and gods, burn incense and paper money, and offer food to wandering ghosts (especially those who died unnaturally and cannot

*Researching and learning about the history of Halloween left me in shock. I was disturbed by the dark, spiritual roots of Halloween.*

rest). These idol-worshipping festivities are incontestably unbiblical. However, the same elements are packaged as something fun and child-oriented in the Western world and accepted by some church members.

This causes me to think: If to “hallow” is to “make holy,” what exactly are we hallowing when we celebrate Halloween? Community spirit? Friendship? Conformity? Indulgence? Gluttony? ...God? Are we sending out a message to our children that we truly believe the first part of the Lord’s prayer?

*“Our Father in heaven,  
Hallowed be Your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done  
On earth as it is in heaven.” (Mt 6:9, 10)*

### **BIBLICAL GUIDELINES ON HALLOWEEN**

After emailing my preliminary research to friends and church students before last Halloween, I received mixed reactions. Some parents decided to pull their young children out of Halloween festivities. Others were still not convinced of the dangers of Halloween. After all, commercialism seems to have overtaken

the spiritual significance of the holiday, and the Bible does not specifically refute Halloween.

Yet, the Book of Life provides wonderful guidance on matters pertaining to our daily living. Here are some biblical principles that may help us decide about Halloween:

#### **Glorify God and Edify Our Brothers**

We often hear,

*“Everything is permissible”—but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible”—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own*



## THEME

*good, but the good of others. (1 Cor 10:23, 24, NIV)*

Before we participate in Halloween, let us consider the effect of our actions. Will our actions glorify God before unbelievers? Will it edify our fellow brethren?

Jesus tells us that we need to glorify God as the salt and light of the earth. As salt, we need to have the distinct flavor of God so we may season and better the lives of others. If we lose our Christian qualities, we become “good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” (Mt 5:13).

*When we hand out sweets to trick-or-treaters, do we guide others to the peace and joy of Christ? Or does it cause the flavor of our faith to appear bland and indistinctive from those of the world?*

Jesus also says to us,

*“You are the light of the world...[l]et your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Mt 5:14, 16)*

Yes, we may show community spirit and befriend others by joining local Halloween activities, but do our actions reveal the glory of God? When we hand out sweets to trick-or-treaters, do we guide others to the peace and joy of Christ? Or does it cause the flavor of our faith to appear bland and indistinctive from those of the world?

Let us remember that we are ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor 5:20), representing an unseen God to the people in this world who need God's salvation. As “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people,” our job is to “proclaim the praises of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9) and lead



others to eternal life.

We also need to make sure that our actions are edifying to others. Even though our own participation in Halloween may not affect our faith, we may signal to a new or young believer that it is harmless to participate in other activities that are unedifying or even dangerous.

For example, although we may know to avoid tarot card reading at a Halloween event, a new believer who doesn't fully understand God's abomination of divination may be led to believe it is benign. When our children receive permission from us to dress up as their favorite fantasy character, they may not be able to distinguish fictional witchcraft from real occult practices. Whatever we do, the exercise of our freedom should not become a stumbling block to the weak (1 Cor 8:19). Scripture encourages us,

*"[W]hether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved." (1 Cor 10:31-33, NIV)*

### **Avoid What Is Detestable in God's Sight**

Before the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, God told them,

*"When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God." (Deut 18:9-13)*

Although most participants in Halloween no longer practice human or animal sacrifice, the themes of divination, witchcraft, and consultation of the dead have been, and still are, staple elements of the holiday. Divination in the form of fortune-telling is viewed as popular and harmless. Witches and their black cats are ubiquitously honored on Halloween decorations. The return of the dead is portrayed through characters such as zombies, vampires, mummies, ghosts, and goblins.

To not inadvertently promote or involve ourselves in witchcraft, divination, or the returning dead, we must be even more careful to separate ourselves from things that are detestable to our Lord Jesus during Halloween. As Peter reminds us,

*[B]ut as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Pet 1:15, 16)*

*The danger in participating in Halloween activities is that we may give Satan a foothold by unwittingly doing something with spiritual meaning.*

### **Be Aware that We Are Fighting a Spiritual Battle**

Lastly, we need to be aware that we are constantly fighting a spiritual battle. Ephesians 6:12 tells us,

*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

Therefore, our physical acts often have spiritual consequences. For example, when we participate in sacraments

such as baptism, footwashing, and Holy Communion, we are united and take part in Christ (Rom 6:5; Jn 13:8; 1 Cor 10:16); when we eat food sacrificed to idols, we become affiliated with demons (1 Cor 10:19, 20); when we commit sexual immorality, we sin against the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:18, 19).

The danger in participating in Halloween activities is that we may give Satan a foothold by unwittingly doing something with spiritual meaning.

As a holiday that emphasizes material gratification and abnormalities, Halloween may also be used by Satan to tempt us to sin. The devil "walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet 5:6). He tempts us with the same things he tempted our Lord Jesus with—"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 Jn 2:16).

For children, these temptations may be manifested in massive amounts of candy and the ownership of a cool costume. For youths and adults, they may take form as sensual indulgence (drunkenness and dancing) and visual stimulation (provocative costumes), or the satisfaction of social acceptance.

For us to live a spiritually victorious life, we must flee from these temptations. We must not have "even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (Eph 5:3, NIV).

Instead, we need to fill our mind with the following:

*[W]hatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy. (Phil 4:8)*

This means that sometimes we have to sacrifice a sense of belonging and feel like "aliens and strangers in the world" (1 Pet 2:11, NIV). However, if we are able to truly live for Christ, our reward will be worth it. As Hebrews 10:36 tells us,

"[Y]ou have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise."

**W**hether or not to participate in Halloween is often a difficult decision. On the one hand, we do not want to feel excluded from society or have our children harbor resentment toward our beliefs. We also feel that it is a secular holiday that does not harm our faith. On the other hand, we don't want to disobey our Lord Jesus, intentionally or not.

Hopefully, by learning more about the background of Halloween, we can make a better-informed decision regarding the holiday.

If we still have a hard time deciding about our family's Halloween participation, let us ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom and discernment. As the Psalmist prayed:

*"Teach me, O LORD, to follow your decrees;  
then I will keep them to the end.  
Give me understanding and I will keep your law  
And obey it with all my heart.  
Direct me in the path of your commands,  
For there I find delight." (Ps 119:33-35) ★*

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# Should We Keep Christmas?

Vincent Yeung—Cambridge, UK

## CHRISTMAS IS A BIG DEAL

Christmas is the biggest event on the UK calendar. Even in early December, the main themes in conversation are Christmas shopping, preparations for Christmas meals, and arrangements for family gatherings.

Two weeks before the fateful day, Christmas decorations start to emerge in the office: bucket-loads of Christmas cards arrive through the mail or in the in-tray, and inexhaustible supplies of mince pies and chocolates accumulate in the tea room. Teams of carol singers, organized by charities and churches, ambush people for donations at train stations. Whether we like it or not, Christmas has arrived.

For those who don't celebrate Christmas, what can be done to ward off these intrusions? If someone were a Muslim, it is not unreasonable to say, "I am a Muslim, I don't celebrate Christmas." People could even claim, "I am an atheist," or "I am a

Jedi Knight, I don't celebrate Christmas." It is hard to say, "I am a Christian, but I do not celebrate Christmas."

As Christians, we actively engage and participate in and contribute to society. We spend most of our time with non-True Jesus Church friends, fellow students, clients, and colleagues (1 Cor 5:8-10).

The dichotomy between what Jesus described as "out of the world" (Jn 15:19) and yet "in the world" (Jn 17:15) troubles many believers: How far do we integrate with society? Should we be involved in local customs and cultural activities? If we are involved, where should we draw a boundary that we would never cross? How should we respond to the disagreements among True Jesus Church members on this subject?

These issues must be resolved as well for Christmas.

## A Mixed Bag of Pagan and Religious Traditions<sup>1</sup>

Christmas as we know it is an amalgamation of practices, customs, and stories that have been memorized and passed down for generations. The diversity of these traditions lack coherence and connections with Christian belief, to say nothing of the practices originating from pagan roots.

A typical Christmas-observing family might have a Christmas tree in the living room. The youngsters in the family take part in re-creating the Nativity at school. Family and friends exchange gifts that parents and children attribute to a character called Santa Claus.

Some people trace the origin of the Christmas tree to before the Christian era; trees and boughs were used in ancient cultures for ceremonial purposes. The ancient Egyptians, in celebrating the winter solstice (the shortest day of the

year), brought green date palms into their homes as a symbol of life triumphing over death. When the Romans observed the feast of Saturn, part of the ceremony was the raising of an evergreen bough. The early Scandinavians were said to have paid homage to evergreen trees.

Mistletoe has a special place in British Christmas celebrations. A branch of mistletoe is hung up in the house and, according to the custom of Christmas cheer, any two people who meet under it are obliged to kiss. This tradition has roots in the belief that mistletoe could grant fertility.

Today, schools and churches arrange visits to nursing homes where they sing familiar Christmas songs. Many families enjoy Christmas traditions that focus on community events, such as attending a Christmas parade.

Religious Christmas celebrations marking the birth of Jesus usually center on Christmas Eve. Roman Catholic churches celebrate the first Christmas mass at midnight, and Protestant churches hold Christmas candlelight service late on Christmas Eve.

*The lack of clarity in our faith and lack of trust in the Lord often lead to the adulteration of our belief and practices.*

### Tradition Without Faith

Despite the religious background of Christmas, the holiday has become nearly devoid of religious content in the UK. To the majority, Christmas has become watered down to a godless excess of presents, food, and partying. Even atheists enjoy the music of the season, delight in receiving special gifts from family and friends, and wish everyone a "Merry Christmas."

The question is, Is there a problem with

taking part in a celebration that is devoid of religious content? We can hardly be rebuked for remembering, respecting, and taking part in Remembrance Day.\*

Many True Jesus Church members consider everything that is associated with Christmas as taboo. If we follow such reasoning, we should not engage in any aspect of Christmas: no Christmas lunch at the canteen, no receiving Christmas cards, no attending Christmas functions.

Undoubtedly, such a "scorched earth" policy would insulate members from all harm. However, blind adherence devoid of true knowledge and understanding is no better than superstition and ultimately cannot stand the test of time. Only when we are able to rationalize and internalize our belief through the word of God and the Holy Spirit can we stand firm and act responsibly and sensibly.

### OBSERVING GOD'S COMMANDS

The Bible unequivocally and unreservedly reminds us to adhere to the commandments of the Lord. The chosen people must not follow the ways of the other nations in worshipping their gods. As an illustration of this principle, the Lord did not allow pillars and images near His altar (Deut 16:20, 21). We cannot supplant God with other gods, nor are we allowed to set up a way of worship in addition to what He has commanded us (Deut 12:2-4).

Worshipping idols and burning their children (Deut 12:31) were religious acts in which the users believed that they could evoke a response from their gods. The 450 prophets of Baal cried loudly and cut themselves (1 Kgs 18:28), but there was no effect. Even though the false prophets truly believed in what they were doing, their gods did not grant their request. Although Satan may use such opportunities to carry out his work, false beliefs do not bring any benefit and have no effect.

The Lord commanded His chosen people not to cut themselves nor make any baldness between the eyes for the

dead (Deut 14:1). As God's children, we shall not do to the Lord as the other nations have done to their gods.

Moses told the Israelites,

*"You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it." (Deut 12:31, 32)*

The prohibition can be examined on three levels.

### False Beliefs

Any system, belief, or practice that establishes its own righteousness in place of God's righteousness is false and not acceptable to God. Any system of belief that operates in parallel with or supplements the traditional doctrines and common faith should be abandoned (Col 2:16-23).

Neither Christmas nor the observance of the birth of Jesus has biblical justification. If we believe that attending Christmas service or celebrating Christmas is a must, then it is a false belief. We should not take part in such activities because our faith will be compromised.

The lack of clarity in our faith and lack of trust in the Lord often lead to the adulteration of our belief and practices. This could be as subtle as carrying a lucky charm that gives us peace of mind. It could be in the form of active participation in religious rites and acts (Gal 4:9, 10; Col 2:16-23) or active avoidance of certain food (Rom 14:2).

If anyone doubts his own belief, it is not of faith, and that is sin (Rom 14:23). Similarly, believing that eating mince pies or hanging mistletoe in our homes brings luck is in opposition to the Bible's teachings. Such beliefs are false and can bring no benefit, only harm.

### Symbolism

Symbolism, whether religious or secular, plays a significant part in our lives. Prestigious brands are symbols of wealth, status, and exclusivity. Wearing a poppy or a wrist band of a certain color signifies solidarity and support to a common cause or value.

Symbolism also plays a very important part in the Bible. Circumcision is a token of the covenant between God and Abraham (Gen 17:11); the rainbow is a token of the covenant between God and the earth (Gen 9:12, 13). Binding the word of God on their hand, between the eyes, writing it on the post of a house and at the gate signify an absolute adherence to God's word (Deut 6:8, 9).

Symbols by themselves bring no value if the holders do not actualize such values in their life; rather it inculcates a sense of false security. The Pharisees made their phylacteries broad and enlarged the borders of their garments (Mt 23:5) as a symbol of their piety; this brought them no praise from Jesus because they were more interested in man's praise than in putting the commands of God into practice.

Joel reminded the people to tear their hearts and not their robes (Joel 2:13). We must be sensitive to what we wear, carry, and do.

Putting a Christmas tree in the living room may symbolize that we are sharing the values of the holiday, which may mean drinking excessively, attending wild parties, going to festive family and social gatherings, or celebrating Jesus' birth.

As a True Jesus Church member, we need to ask, "Do I share these values?" and "Why am I involved in things that I do not agree with or subscribe to?" If we do not share these values, what is the point in celebrating Christmas?

### Physical and Spiritual Harm

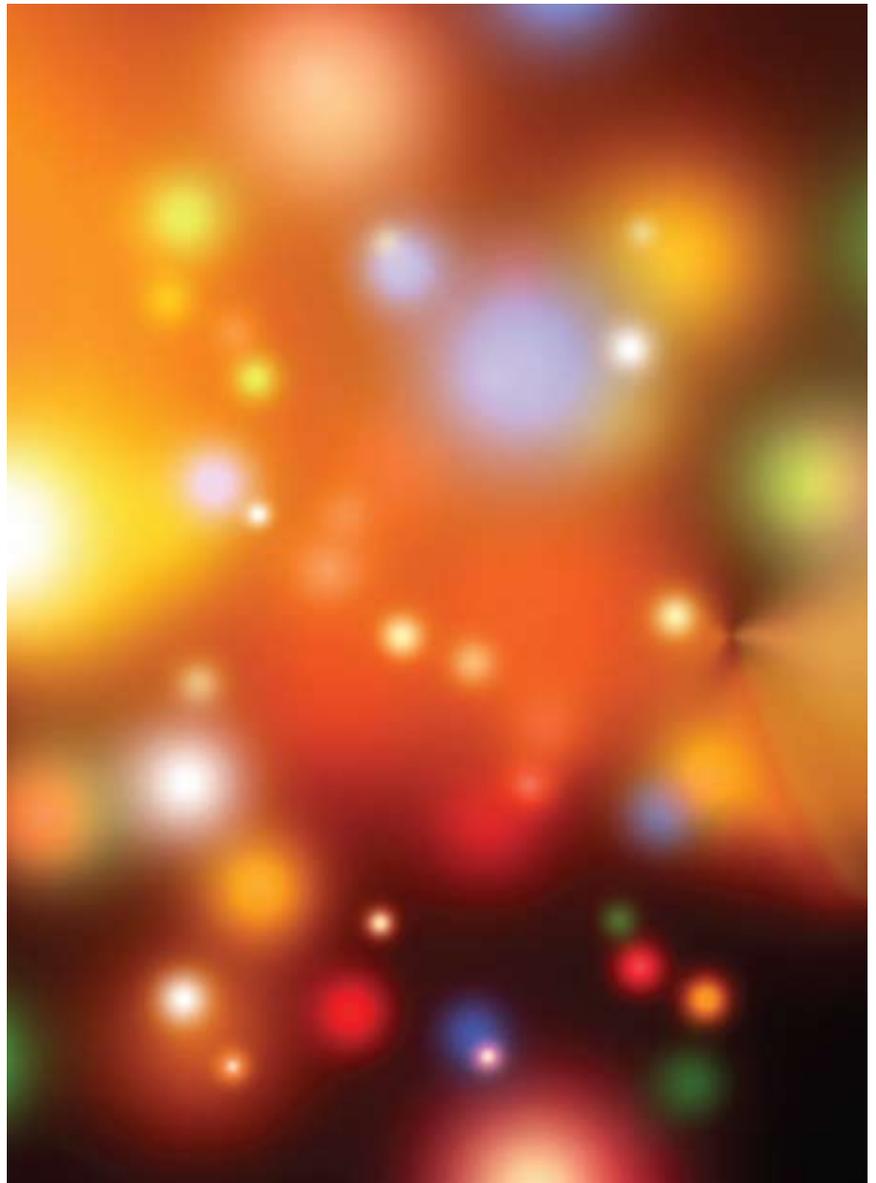
*For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Cor 6:20)*

God has chosen us out of the world and the world hates us (Jn 15:19), yet Jesus did not pray to take us out of the world (Jn 17:15). It is human nature to want to be liked by people around us: our family, friends, and colleagues. But our "otherness" as the children of God sets us apart from the world and is the reason why the world hates us (Jn 15:19). The more we assimilate ourselves with this world, the more we are liked by it. We must be aware of the spiritual harm and danger we expose ourselves and our brethren to by participating in Christmas activities.

The act of exchanging Christmas gifts or installing a Christmas tree in our living room is not a sin. However, it is part of the process of assimilation that we are subconsciously subscribing to.

God warned His people vociferously over the ages not to follow the practices of the nations (Deut 8:19). The pattern of sound words has once and for all been entrusted to the saints and passed from one generation to the other (Jude 3; 2 Tim 1:13, 2:2). We cannot ignore or change God's words.

Satan is used to changing God's commandments subtly and successfully



causing people to sin (Gen 3:4; Jude 4). We must be alert to avoid giving ground to the devil by understanding that apostasy is a process—like Lot gradually moving his tents towards Sodom (Gen 13:12), we slowly drift away from the truth while picking up the traditions and practices of the world.

*We must be alert to avoid giving ground to the devil by understanding that apostasy is a process—like Lot gradually moving his tents towards Sodom, we slowly drift away from the truth while picking up the traditions and practices of the world.*

## ENGAGE POSITIVELY IN THE WORLD

In Deuteronomy 22:9-11, the Lord warns us not to mix different types of seeds, animals, and fabrics. Why would the Lord worry about these material things? Is He not referring to something more profound?

Jesus has set a good example for us to follow—He was in the world yet did not belong to this world. He was accused of wine and dining, indicating that He engaged occasionally in worldly activities, such as attending a wedding feast. Yet at other times, He led an ascetic life, fasting and praying.

He was sensitive to the physical and emotional needs of others and did not mind breaking the rules (human traditions) and raising a few eyebrows. Such pragmatism is what we should emulate. We do not actively embrace Christmas traditions by sending out Christmas cards, by putting up a Christmas tree or decorations in our lounge, or by organizing Christmas parties at work or

university; neither should we shrink from an engagement during the Christmas period.

If we are participating in Christmas-time activities, such as attending a Christmas meal or allowing young children to be part of their school Christmas program, we need to ask these questions: Does the activity have any religious meaning both to us and to those who invite us to take part? If the answer is no, then it is no different from any other secular event. Then we should ask, Are we exposing ourselves to any physical or spiritual harm? Are we sending the wrong signal to those who are weak or confused in their faith? If so, it is better not to take part in such activities.

With the correct mindset, it is not a sin to participate passively in certain Christmas-time events, knowing that it is not true. For example, it is not a sin to receive a Christmas card as long as we know that it is just a gesture of goodwill from a fellow member of society.

Nevertheless, we do not want to be perceived to hold false values. So, if a friend invites us to a get-together during Christmas, we need not be afraid to accept. But we must remember that we should put on the image of Jesus wherever we go. ★

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.history.com/minisite.do?content\\_type=Minisite\\_Generic&content\\_type\\_id=1284&display\\_order=5&mini\\_id=1290](http://www.history.com/minisite.do?content_type=Minisite_Generic&content_type_id=1284&display_order=5&mini_id=1290)

\*Remembrance Day is an annual holiday observed in the UK on the second Sunday in November in memory of those who have died in war.



# Origin of Easter

Audrey Chan—Leicester, UK

For many Christians, Easter is a season to commemorate the death, but especially the resurrection, of Christ. In the UK, there is little danger of anyone forgetting this holiday. Each year, at least a month ahead, high street stores and supermarkets remind consumers by displaying a veritable assortment of chocolate eggs and rabbits, greeting cards, and other Easter products.

As Christians in the True Jesus Church, we do not celebrate Easter. But just how much do we know about this festival? Could we confidently explain to others the reasons for our non-observance? Our friends from other churches may well wonder why we seemingly overlook what they view as the most important festival in the Christian calendar. Do we know what to share with our children, to redress some of the messages that they receive in school about Easter?

## HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF EASTER

The name “Easter” is linked to the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, known variously as Eostre,<sup>1</sup> Ostara,<sup>2</sup> or Eastre.<sup>3</sup> The Saxon people in Northern Europe dedicated an annual festival to her to give thanks for newness of life after the winter. In the ancient Near East, people used to worship female deities with similar sounding names and who, again, were linked to spring and fertility rites. They include Ishtar in Babylon and Astarte (Ashtaroth) in Phoenicia. It is possible that they were worshipping the same deity, albeit by different names.

History also tells us that when the early missionaries started evangelizing in Northern Europe, they allowed the Anglo-Saxon people to retain their pagan practices to limit any adverse reactions to the Christian message, and to make their conversion easier.<sup>4</sup> The missionaries won their converts, and by the eighth century,

the Anglo-Saxon Christians began commemorating the resurrection of Christ with the festival they called Eastrā, later changed to Easter.<sup>5</sup>

Leading up to this development was the deviation of the post-apostolic church from the biblical truth. Step by step, it altered the original message of Jesus and the apostles. The changes included replacing the Saturday Sabbath with observance of the first day of the week (Sunday) as a weekly celebration of Jesus’ resurrection, known as the “Lord’s Day.”<sup>6</sup> This was followed closely by the institution of an annual Christian Passover, the Pascha,<sup>7</sup> to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus, most likely in the second century.<sup>8</sup>

At the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325, it was decreed that all churches should observe the Christian Pascha on the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox. Today, Christian churches in the West continue the practice decreed at Nicaea and celebrate Easter on

a Sunday between March 22 and April 25.

### Easter Traditions

The legacy of early missionaries accommodating the pagan customs of the Northern European converts remains to this day—Easter is full of customs linked to spring and fertility rites. In addition, over the centuries, Christians have added numerous other local customs:

- The Easter rabbit came from the tradition that the goddess Eostre's favorite animal was the hare. In pagan cultures, the hare represents love, growth, and fertility—all of which have obvious associations with spring.
- Exchanging eggs symbolizes rebirth. In pagan cultures, they are linked to the rising or birth of the new sun. The reappearance of spring after winter was a cause for great celebration. Anglo-Saxon mythology says that Eostre's hare laid brightly colored eggs for the children. Later on, eggs were associated with the rebirth or resurrection of Christ, perhaps because it was associated with the rock tomb from which He emerged. Many rituals were developed during the medieval period, including decorating, throwing, rolling, or hiding eggs for children to find. The term "Easter egg" entered the English language around 1825, and the first chocolate eggs were introduced around 1880.
- In England, the making of hot cross buns on Good Friday<sup>9</sup> came from Tudor times when they were called "cross buns." They were made with yeast, currants, and spices and marked with the symbol of the cross. These probably started off as wheat cakes made during pagan spring festivals. In the Bible, we come across the people of Judah preparing such cakes for the "queen of heaven" (Ashtaroth) in the time of Prophet Jeremiah (cf. Jer 7:18). Other customs include:

- Wearing a new hat and clothes on Easter Sunday to symbolize rebirth.
- Eating fish on Good Friday, and all Fridays, by Christians who decreed a day of fasting (or at least refraining from meat) to mark the day that Christ was crucified.
- Eating lamb, which has been associated with Easter, because Christ was the Paschal Lamb.

### IS EASTER BIBLICAL?

Nowhere in the Bible can we find the teaching to observe an annual Christian Pascha or Easter. So, the simple answer to "Is Easter biblical?" is "No." The origins of Easter reveal that it is actually the product of an evolving early church, religious politics, and acquiescence to pagan culture. It illustrates how significantly the teachings and practices of the church altered shortly after the apostles died.

The Greek church historian Socrates of Constantinople (born 380) wrote that it most likely evolved from local practice in some churches. He acknowledged that neither Jesus nor the apostles instructed believers to observe this feast:

*...each individual in every place, according to his own pleasure, has by a prevalent custom celebrated the memory of the saving passion. The Saviour and his apostles have enjoined us by no law to keep this feast... the feast of Easter came to be observed in each place according to the individual peculiarities of the peoples inasmuch as none of the apostles legislated on the matter.<sup>10</sup>*

### Returning to the Teachings of the Bible

The Bible does not teach us to observe Easter; what it does tell us is that Jesus instituted a sacrament for believers to keep. During the final Passover meal with His disciples, Jesus broke unleavened bread, telling them that it was His body, and then passed round the cup of the fruit of the vine, indicating that it was His blood (Lk 22:19, 20; Mt 26:29; 1

*Nowhere in the Bible can we find the teaching to observe an annual Christian Pascha or Easter. So, the simple answer to "Is Easter biblical?" is "No."*

Cor 5:8, 10:17). In doing this, He gave the meal a whole new significance and methodology.

Jesus particularly instructed,

*"Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me... This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." (1 Cor 11:24, 25)*

The apostle Paul later wrote,

*"For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." (1 Cor 11:26)*

In other words, Jesus wanted us to keep this sacrament (the Holy Communion, cf. 1 Cor 10:16) to commemorate His death—to remember that He offered up His body for our sake and shed His blood for us.

Importantly, we note that Jesus gave no instructions or instituted any practices for us to follow in relation to the following:

- the frequency of holding the Holy Communion
- the need for an annual feast to commemorate either His death or His resurrection
- the designation of any or all Sundays as days of special significance in light of His resurrection.

Jesus' words and Paul's words are, "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup," indicating that we are simply to hold the Holy Communion on a regular basis. And each time we do, we have the

opportunity to remember the sacrifice and grace of salvation given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. Any other requirement falls outside of the truth, as set out in the Bible.

**Worshipping the True God**

As Christians, we worship the one true God—a jealous God who detests idols (Ex 20:3-5). This accounts for why the Bible repeatedly tells Christians to avoid all things connected with idols (Acts 15:20; 1 Cor 10:14-22; Gal 5:16-21; 1 Jn 5:21).

But while no God-fearing Christian would wittingly commit outright idolatry, the fact is, customs long-associated with paganism, including those associated with Easter, have become intermingled with Christian culture. The problem is that it has been all so insidious that most Christians either have not noticed or do not understand its significance.

The actions of the post-apostolic church remind us of the warning given by God to the people of Israel concerning the need not to emulate the Canaanites:

*“Take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way”... (Deut 12:30, 31)*

The Israelites did not heed the warning and became influenced by the surrounding nations, such that they brought idolatrous practices into their worship of God. In doing so, they provoked God’s wrath time and time again.

**DEALING WITH EASTER CELEBRATIONS**

We know that God wants us, as believers, to remain within the boundary of the truth, which is His word (Jn 19:17). We should not add to it nor deviate from it. Therefore, with regards to Easter, which we know to be unbiblical, the obvious



course of action is not to celebrate it and to carry on with life as normal. But this approach is probably more straightforward for some of us than others. For those of us with children, for example, there are issues such as school activities, Easter parades, invitations to egg hunts, and Easter gifts to negotiate. So many of the activities during this particular season seem to focus on youngsters. What can we do?

**Easter Products**

Firstly, concerning seasonal products, we will do well to bypass them in the shops. There is really no need to buy chocolate Easter eggs or bunnies when there are plenty of other alternatives to satisfy a sweet tooth. And, by explaining to our children the reasons for not celebrating Easter, they will learn not to ask for them.

Some people may argue that chocolate

Easter eggs are just confectionary, nothing more. But if we deliberately sought them out and bought them, we would be giving our children mixed messages, setting a poor example to the brothers and sisters around us, and be actively supporting the Easter trade.

However, there are also issues of proportionality and common sense. This means that, should friends give us or our children Easter eggs, there is no need to over-react! We need to be mindful that, in the majority of cases, people give Easter eggs out of seasonal habit rather than because they actually celebrate Easter in a religious way.

So, in the case of those friends we know well enough, we may feel we can decline their gifts graciously while explaining why. In other cases, a polite thanks followed by a brief explanation about why we cannot reciprocate will

suffice. It does not need to be a big issue. Hopefully, they will understand and not repeat the gesture the following year. In a multi-cultural society, most people are very accepting of different beliefs. Moreover, it is a good opportunity to start a conversation about Easter and to share our faith. And who knows where it will lead?

*We know that God wants us, as believers, to remain within the boundary of the truth, which is His word (Jn 19:17). We should not add to it nor deviate from it.*

### Easter Activities

With regards to school and community activities, if we have young children, we can explain to the teacher or relevant person about our faith and what we wish or do not wish our children to participate in. If we have older children, they can explain to the teacher themselves but may need help from us in preparing what to say. Nowadays, schools and other organizations are culturally aware and accommodating and would not force any child to do anything that is against his faith.

There are some obvious activities that you may wish to consider withdrawing your children from—these include church services, egg hunts, or Easter parades. But with regards to school plays, some parents may not mind their children taking part when they involve straightforward re-enactments of Bible stories, or if the event is not celebratory in nature.

State schools in the UK seem to have adopted quite a balanced approach in terms of how to deal with religious festivals—they tend to organize activities in such a way as to inform, rather than to promote or celebrate. But if this is not the case where your children are educated, or

if you do not feel comfortable with your children taking part in the activities, then you can always exercise your right to withdraw them from those activities.

From personal experience, I think that children who go to church schools will face greater challenges during the festive seasons because they work to a religious ethos, and parents need to factor this in when selecting a school for their children.

The best approach of all is to equip our children with the correct information about festivals such as Easter. They need to be aware of what the Bible teaches and what are simply human traditions and add-ons.

The church has an obvious role to play in addressing the issue of festivals as part of the Religious Education curriculum, as do parents. This will serve to counter-balance any erroneous information that they might receive in school and elsewhere and will help them to be able to share their faith with others. Having said this, as parents we also need to equip ourselves with the right knowledge if we are to guide our children and set good examples.

Looking into the history of Easter, we find that it evolved from practices within the post-apostolic church, which had strayed from the truth. It is not a festival that was either instituted or taught by Jesus or the apostles. We also see that, over the centuries, people have incorporated pagan practices that are now part and parcel of the way the festival is celebrated.

It is therefore with good reason that the True Jesus Church does not observe Easter. But we need to address practical issues, including how to deal with the social elements of the holiday season and how to guide our children to stay within the truth.

May God grant us His wisdom so that we can do what is pleasing in His sight and glorify Him in our lives. ★

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May 2008

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### Of Love and Seals

How much do you love me?

Isn't this a question we often ask? We ask our parents, siblings, friends, spouse, and sometimes even Jesus Himself. We want to know how much we are valued, how much people are willing to do for us, and how far they are willing to go for us. Who do you think loves you the most? [Read more...](#)



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### Christian Living



#### Why I Got Rid of Cable TV

It is reported that the average American watches more than four hours of television each day—equivalent to twenty-eight hours per week—making it the third most consuming activity behind sleep and work. [Read more..](#)

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### Our Stories



#### A Life-Changing Year

In January 2004, while everybody was making New Year resolutions, I received some upsetting news from my gynecologist. He told me that the results of my last physical showed the presence of abnormal cells in my uterus, and the worst case scenario pointed to the the possibility of uterine cancer. [Read more...](#)

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# Is it Acceptable to Date an Unbeliever?

Seraphim

At a recent church seminar, thirty-two youths were asked to anonymously write down on a piece of paper their answer to these questions: 1) Do you believe it is OK to marry a Christian from a different church? 2) Do you believe it is OK to date a Christian from a different church? Here is a summary of their responses:

## DO YOU BELIEVE IT IS OK TO MARRY A CHRISTIAN FROM A DIFFERENT CHURCH?

|          |    |     |
|----------|----|-----|
| No       | 25 | 78% |
| Not Sure | 1  | 3%  |
| Yes      | 6  | 19% |

## DO YOU BELIEVE IT IS OK TO DATE A CHRISTIAN FROM A DIFFERENT CHURCH?

|          |    |     |
|----------|----|-----|
| No       | 19 | 59% |
| Not Sure | 3  | 9%  |
| Yes      | 10 | 31% |

Although a majority of the youths surveyed believed one should not marry outside of the church, about one-fifth of the youths do not share this same conviction. When it came to the question of dating, only a small majority of 59% believed it improper to date someone from a different church. It is interesting to note that more sisters than brothers (70% vs. 50%) believed we should only date inside the church.

This was a small and informal survey, but it validated my perception that many young people are confused about what constitutes a proper relationship with those who have not been baptized in our church.

Let's say a dear brother (or sister) in Christ confided in you that he really likes someone at work or school they really like. He believes this may be the person of his dreams, except there is one huge problem—she is not a member of our church. Torn between his desire to serve God with a clear conscience and his attraction to this person, he asks for your trusted council. How should you guide him?

This is a sensitive topic as it not only speaks to delicate matters of the heart but also forces us to delve uncomfortably deeper into personal convictions about faith and the Truth. It is a complicated matter within the larger context of a diverse church body and an important issue that requires discussion.

The intent of this article is to candidly present biblical teachings to help guide young people in making relationship decisions that will always honor God.

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*In any dating or courting relationship, inside of the church or not, we must honor God and refrain from such activities that the Bible permits only married people to do.*

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## HOW DID PEOPLE “DATE” IN BIBLICAL TIMES?

If we search the Scriptures, we will not find the command, “Thou Shalt not Date an Unbeliever.” In fact, the Bible does not talk about “dating” at all, because dating and courtship were viewed differently than in modern times.

The people of the Bible did not entertain the idea of having a trial and error period in their lives, where one could enter into casual relationships before finally committing oneself to matrimony. Such “loose” behavior would be shunned by the community at large, and persons conducting themselves in that way would be branded as promiscuous.

It was more typical that a young man

who esteemed a young woman would discuss the matter with his parents, who in turn would approach the family of the young woman. If there was acceptance, the two were betrothed or publicly contracted to soon enter into the solemn and sacred rite of marriage. And not a few of these unions were in fact pre-arranged before the young man and young woman even met—a thought inconceivable in today's day and age!

Although the central topic here is dating, we cannot have a meaningful discussion about dating apart from marriage because the goal of all dating and courtship activities is to be married.

## FIVE BIBLE PRINCIPLES ON MARRIAGE

Although the Bible does not offer direct references to dating, it does provide a clear definition and direction on what constitutes a proper sexual and marital relationship, which we can employ to guide our actions. Here are five biblical principles that are worthy of review:

### 1) Sexual activity outside of God's prescription of marriage constitutes sexual immorality and is a serious offense

*Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge. (Heb 13:4)*

*Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (1 Cor 6:13b)*

*Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Cor 6:18-20)*

From these verses we understand that

the only circumstance in which the bed is undefiled is within the sacred union of marriage. Any sexual thought or deed outside of God's marital parameters would constitute *porneia* (the Greek root from which we get “pornography”), which is translated “fornication” or “sexual immorality” in the English Bible.

This is a serious sin against the most Holy God and the body of His temple, for which the Bible forewarns no such practicing person shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9, 10). Hence, the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” can be better applied as “You shall not fornicate or commit sexual immorality” to encompass all sexual sins, including adultery, premarital sex, rape, incest, homosexuality, and even bestiality.

In today's sexually charged environment, we see billboards, magazines, movies, television shows, music videos, and video games that glorify sexual immorality to such extremes that entire societies have become desensitized and debased from prolonged exposure. But we know that all these things are an abomination to God, regardless of how callously it is promoted by our culture. In any dating or courting relationship, inside of the church or not, we must honor God and refrain from such activities that the Bible permits only married people to do.

### 2) God's prescription of marriage is that we are to marry only in the Lord

*A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. (1 Cor 7:39, emphasis mine)*

*Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? (1 Cor 9:5, emphasis mine)*

These verses provide additional

emphasis to keeping marriage “in the family” of believers. The widow can take another husband, but she is restricted to marry in the Lord. The apostles are at liberty to take along a wife, but not just any woman—she must be a believer.

“Because God said so,” should be reason enough for our faithful obedience, but the Bible also provides the following compelling explanations for why God strictly prohibits mixed marriages and demands our separation from unbelievers.

**3) In God's eyes, unbelievers are mentally, physically, spiritually, and ritually unclean. Becoming “one” with an unclean person will not only defile our body but also God's church and temple of the Holy Spirit**

This is what I often hear from brothers and sisters who are considering relationships outside of the church:

“She’s a devout Christian, just in another church, and she has better moral virtues than many other people in our church...”

“I’m thirty years old now. I’ve tried but can’t find any brothers in church...”

“Well, he’s really nice to me and respects my parents...”

“Maybe after a while, she will come to believe too...”

The problem with each of these statements, and most discussion circles about dating and marriage, is that we are starting from the wrong place—that is, we are looking at a spiritual matter from a human point of view.

Whenever we start talking about feelings, emotions, and other complicated human dynamics, we are speaking from a human perspective. If we really want to know God's will, we do not need to look further than the Scriptures. It's all about cleanliness. Here are some crystal clear passages that command God's clean people to be separate from the unclean people of the world:

*“The land which you are entering to possess*

*is an unclean land, with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from one end to another with their impurity. Now therefore, do not give your daughters as wives for their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons; and never seek their peace or prosperity.” (Ezra 9:11, 12)*

*Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” Therefore “Come out from among them and be separate,” says the Lord. “Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.” (2 Cor 6:14-17)*

*[S]o we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. (Rom 12:5)*

*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For “The two,” He says, “shall become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. (1 Cor 6:15-17)*

So we see, with respect to the sacred rite of marriage, God's primary concern is not “chemistry” or “character” but “cleanliness.” It really does not matter if this person is a devout and chaste Christian. Until he or she receives the one true baptism, this person is still unclean in God's eyes.

**4) Having a spouse that serves other gods will cause us to fall away from serving the one true God**

*“Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly.” (Deut 7:3, 4)*

*But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites from the nations of whom the Lord had said to the children of Israel, “You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. For surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David. (1 Kgs 11:1-4)*

Are we wiser and mightier than Solomon? Marriage is the most intimate relationship on earth, and our spouse will no doubt have the most profound influence on our spiritual growth or downfall.

**5) Mixed marriages hinder our ability to raise godly children, which is an important function of marriage and the responsibility of parents**

*But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. (Mal 2:15)*

*In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people. So I contended with them and cursed them,*

*struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things?" Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin. Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women? (Neh 13:23-27)*

This marital decision is not just about us and what we want for our lives. When our spouse does not esteem the Lord, it impacts our ability to bring up the child whom God had entrusted us to raise in a God-fearing manner.

So we come to this understanding—that it is not a trivial matter, but a great evil and abomination in God's eyes, that the people He had sanctified and for whom He made such sacrifice should again defile themselves with the unclean peoples of the world in sexual immorality, mixed marriages, and rearing children that do not honor God.

The Bible teaches in unambiguous terms that, as children of God, having been sanctified by the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we should remain separate from the unclean and unsanctified. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, which dwells in us, and we are not to defile this holy temple by committing sexual immorality in uniting with an unbeliever, Gentile, pagan, or unclean person.

### IS DATING AN UNBELIEVER SIN?

Now that we have completed our review of the sanctity of marriage, let us return to the original question—is it morally acceptable to date an unbeliever? If we have completely followed through the logic—that dating results in deeper mutual feelings, which is the typical precursor to marriage, and that marriage to a Gentile is unacceptable in God's eyes—then we

must all agree that it would not be wise to start weaving this complicated web.

We often think about sexual immorality as the physical act of adultery or fornication, but our Lord Jesus explains that the sinful deed begins in our heart, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Mt 15:19).

Consider the commandment prohibiting adultery. Jesus said that "whoever looks at a woman *to lust for her* has already committed adultery with her *in his heart*" (Mt 5:28, emphasis added). The Greek word for lust is *epithumeo*, meaning to have a strong longing for or desire for something. It is sin to lust for that which God has already forbidden, even within



the private confines of our heart.

For example, God has forbidden adultery; therefore it is sin to lust after your neighbor's spouse. God has forbidden incest, so it is sin to have sexual thoughts about one's own sibling. God has forbidden homosexual activity, so it is sin to have romantic feelings for someone of the same sex. These are all examples of sins that have not been physically acted out but still defile our heart.

And let us remember Apostle James' warning that if these lustful thoughts are left to fester, they will lead to more regrettable actions and unfortunate consequences. Recall the tragic stories of David and Bathsheba, and of Amnon and Tamar. Consider how the narratives would have changed if David had turned away after seeing Bathsheba bathing or if Amnon had immediately repented of his impure thoughts for his sister.

We finally arrive at this central point—it is sin to desire and date an unbeliever, as it is sin to desire someone of the same sex, another person's spouse, or your close relative. It is sin on the simple basis that God has forbidden it, and if we have learned any lesson from Adam and Eve, we ought not to long for what God has already explicitly forbidden. Let us instead keep our faith simple and minds pure and no longer entertain the idea of having a romantic relationship outside of the body of Christ.

### DEALING WITH TEMPTATION

Why did God put a luscious fruit tree in the Garden of Eden and then tell Adam and Eve not to eat of it? And why was God so cruel, bringing this attractive person to me and then restricting our interaction?

James writes plainly that God does not tempt anyone (Jas 1:13). Apostle John reiterates, "For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 Jn 2:16, emphasis added).

All temptations come from the tempter

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*Carefully guard the heart—do not let any impure thoughts linger, but cast them out without delay, like one would a demon from his body.*

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himself, Satan. He uses these choice weapons of lust because they are effective in enticing humans to sin, which, if left unchecked, will accomplish Satan's goal of our spiritual death.

*But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (Jas 1:14, 15)*

Carefully guard the heart—do not let any impure thoughts linger, but cast them out without delay like one would a demon from his body. If the feelings do not immediately subside, do not be like Amnon and seek council from an ungodly friend, but pray for God's help to purge this impurity from our heart.

Seek a brother or sister you trust to share this burden and strengthen you in prayer. Do not try to be strong, keep this matter concealed, and fend off Satan alone.

My husband was formerly a social worker and once had a female client who made a pass at him. As a counselor, it was not out of the ordinary for clients to develop feelings of affection toward him, always to his indifference. But this particular case was different, and he felt uncomfortable in her presence.

He sought a pastor for counsel, and the first thing the pastor told him to do was, "Go home and tell your wife." So that evening, he confided in me, and we prayed together for God's wisdom and guidance. Satan no longer had a heel to grab on, and for no explainable reason, the alluring woman never visited my husband again.

Now what the devil wants a person to do in this situation is to keep the embarrassing matter a secret from his spouse so that the devil can grab him at an opportune time when he is isolated and spiritually weak.

The Bible admonishes, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12), and Mark Twain wrote, "There are several good protections against temptation, but the surest is cowardice." In short, when it comes to temptation, we are to flee from it, not fight it.

That is not to say that we should run away from anyone we meet who happens to be of the opposite sex, for they may very well be a chosen child of God for whom we were sent to lead to the path of salvation. It so happens that my husband came to the True Jesus Church because a sister casually invited him to a Bible study.

### WHAT ABOUT "MISSIONARY DATING"?

Let us revisit the survey results.

One has to wonder, how is it that the same people who believe it is not acceptable to marry an unbeliever feel that it may be acceptable to date one? Why would a Christian risk being romantically involved with a person that they know they cannot marry?

The primary reason is that they have already become emotionally attracted to this person and are unwilling to turn back from following after him or her. It is always painful after opening up your heart, and that is why the wisest council offered is prevention—to repent immediately from a lustful thought and not let it get to the point where one has to choose between honoring God or this significant other. But if one must choose, then let us choose the One who gave His life for us and is worthy of our adoration.

*For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is His name; And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth. (Isa 54:5)*

God is our first husband, and our faithfulness should be first and foremost towards Him. If we truly love our Lord and believe that He is worthy to be worshipped, then we will be faithful to Him, even if it means sacrificing some things that are important to us. However blissful, it is still only temporary.

Even the best marriages on earth will one day dissolve, because God designed marriage to be a temporary relationship, as it is with all our relationships on earth. Whether it be with family or friends—they all end as soon as we die. The only everlasting relationship is our marriage with God and the fellowship we share with those joined in the kingdom of heaven.

A second reason members date unbelievers may reside in the hope that the unbeliever will convert in the process. The optimistic point of view is that, sooner or later, their boyfriend or girlfriend will embrace God, become baptized, and then they could lawfully be married.

We can probably point out a number of faithful brothers and sisters who happily came to the Lord after dating and marrying our church members, but it is absolutely critical in this matter that we separate and do not confuse God's grace and mercy from His sovereign and explicit will, as expressed in His written word.

A great biblical analogy is in the story of Jacob. Was it God's will for Jacob to receive God's blessings? Yes. Was it God's will for Jacob to cheat, lie, and steal in order to receive it? Of course not.

Like many of us, Jacob lacked patience. Yes, it is God's will that all men come to believe and be saved, including the unbeliever you may be dating, but it is also positively against God's will that we should enter into a sinful relationship in the name of accomplishing His will.

How can we expect to shine as a light to this Gentile if we are an accomplice to their darkness? We often forget that God is God and has other means and methods to draw those He has chosen to Himself that would require no assistance on our

part. So let us forget about converting someone through "missionary dating."

We are instructed, instead, to be wary and guarded when preaching to others, "but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh" (Jude 23).

*But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Cor 9:27)*

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*Yes, it is God's will that all men come to believe and be saved, including the unbeliever you may be dating, but it is also positively against God's will that we should enter into a sinful relationship in the name of accomplishing His will.*

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### SEPARATING THE "IDEAL" FROM THE "FOR REAL"

This may all sound very pithy and idealistic, but it is a frustrating exercise trying to reconcile the "ideal" from the "for real," particularly when what we read in Scripture and hear from the pulpit is at odds with what is actually practiced and generally accepted at large.

The reality is that we are all sinners, and as sinners, what we know and believe is often incongruent to how we actually behave. But unlike fallen man, we can trust that the Bible will never contradict itself. So as Paul wisely admonished young Timothy,

*Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. (1 Tim 4:16)*

God is truth, and as true worshippers, we must worship Him in undiluted truth. Faith without truth is like salt that has

lost its flavor. We must hold fast to the truth that we have received as if we were holding on for dear life, for if we let go of what is true, we no longer have a foundation on which our faith and church can stand.

A final note on love—the highest kind of love is not the attraction felt between a man and a woman but the most selfless manifestation as described in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. We should thoughtfully consider the impact of our romantic interludes on the many other stakeholders besides us and the person we are in love with.

Mixed marriages anger God, negatively impact the faith of our future children, and weaken the family and church. If we have always been faithful, let us continue to be faithful to the end. If we are at the onset of developing romantic feelings for a Gentile, let us repent and ask God to help us purge this sin from our heart. If we are currently involved in a relationship with an unbeliever, let us seek godly counsel. ★



## Office Relationships Series: King Darius, the Secular Boss

Ruth Huang—Elizabeth, New Jersey, USA

Working in the world often involves working under a secular boss, which entails making decisions and handling problems in secular ways. These “secular ways” may not go against the teachings of the Bible, but when they do, they become challenges to us in our workplace.

It is tough when we are faced with decisions that test our faith on a day-to-day basis. Most of the time, these trials may be subtle and harmless at first glance. What we tend to forget is that Satan often masks himself to be very appealing and innocuous and slowly leads us astray from the truth.

### THE DILEMMA

If you are blessed enough to have an understanding supervisor, it's usually not a problem to not participate in anything against your beliefs. On the other hand, if your boss has little to no respect for your beliefs, it creates many opportunities to

compromise and make decisions that go against your morals or beliefs. It seems that spiritual growth often involves sacrificing career success.

### Living up to Your Ethics

Most career websites will advise you to steer clear of unethical practices because it will come back to bite you in the end. A common logical solution to immoral conduct is to back up every incident with documented evidence and maintain an ethical and professional attitude at work.

If all else fails, [careerbuilder.com](http://careerbuilder.com) recommends the following: “After analyzing the political landscape in your company, if you decide the game is one you can't play, prepare to move on. It's not typical, but some organizations actually condone—even promote—dishonest, ruthless or unethical behavior. The game of office politics in this situation is not one worth winning.”

### Living up to Your Religion

This is sound advice coming from a secular and moral point of view. Most people who aren't consumed with the desire for power and money want to work for a company that makes ethical decisions. As Christians, there is no question that our career should be ethically based.

But in addition, we who seek to abide by the truth face a dilemma that covers a much wider spectrum of circumstances, ranging from something that is straightforward, such as working on the Sabbath, to something that falls in the gray zone, such as participating in office politics or gossip.

To put in the extra effort that will earn recognition in front of our managers, do we forgo Sabbath once in a while without inquiring if Sunday was a possibility? To maintain a pleasant working atmosphere and camaraderie among fellow coworkers, do we indulge in office gossip or take sides

in trivial office politics? Do our colleagues know not to tell dirty jokes in front of us because we are Christian?

Although it is easy to put the dos and don'ts of being ethical in writing, it is not always easy to put them into action when we encounter a difficult situation. Therefore, it is important to equip ourselves with God's teachings to prepare for common and uncommon circumstances.

One Bible character whom we often turn to as an example of maintaining a strong faith while working successfully

what his colleagues would think or what the consequences would be.

When faced with such a situation, whom do we choose? God or mammon? Sometimes, we waver and choose God only when it is easy and convenient—only when it requires no sacrifice. But the Bible states it is impossible to serve both God and mammon (Mt 6:24).

We need to be unconditionally certain about the one we serve, not only when the timing is right. When faced with a dilemma like Daniel's, we must acknowledge in our hearts that any raise or promotion

see my heart. I'll just follow the decree to keep the others quiet. In doing so, I can save my life to continue working for God."

On the surface, this train of thought may seem wise, but on a deeper, more fundamental level, it is distorting two basic truths: there is only one true God, and we should not worship any other god. If a Christian cannot exhibit through actions what is in his heart, then his faith is truly dead (Jas 2:17).

In addition, because Daniel held such a high position and was favored by the king, his colleagues were envious and plotted against him. Without letting pride over his status drive a need to be vindicated, he willingly submitted to authorities and let God have full control of his future. We should not dwell on how unfairly we've been treated, but let God handle those who wrong us.

Having the faith and courage to stand up for what we believe in, instead of cowardly compromising to save face, can only come from the power and mercy of God.

God is faithful and He will not give us anything that we cannot bear, but we cannot just wait and do nothing and expect God to take care of our problems. We need to seek God's guidance through tribulations and failure and remember to praise and give glory to Him when we garner recognition and success.

For Daniel, there was no dilemma. He was in the king's high graces because he had an "excellent spirit" within him. He didn't step on anyone to get there nor did he ever compromise his beliefs to appear more desirable to the king.

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*Having the faith and courage to stand up for what we believe in, instead of cowardly compromising to save face, can only come from the power and mercy of God.*

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in the world is Daniel. Let's look into how he dealt with his secular boss and colleagues.

## LESSONS FROM DANIEL

Daniel was a successful governor and one of King Darius' elite. King Darius was a great boss who respected and favored Daniel above his colleagues. But spiritually, King Darius did not know the one true God and consequently signed a decree that was at odds with Daniel's belief.

The decree stated that for thirty days anyone who petitioned to any god or man except for King Darius would be cast into the den of lions. Even though the king did not mean any harm, he did not understand Daniel's beliefs and endangered both Daniel's career and physical life.

### Put God Above the Boss

Daniel could have made it easy for himself and bowed down to the king during those thirty days. However, he chose to go against the decree and continue to offer prayers and thanks to his God. Daniel put full faith in God and did not worry about

in a career is temporary, but the treasure we store in heaven by honoring and worshipping God is eternal.

Daniel was willing to suffer the consequences of disobeying the king's command. As a result, he was thrown into the den of lions.

However, Daniel's faith in God had a solid foundation that made his decision both effortless and immovable. He was completely confident that God would take care of him in life or death and was content with the fact that it could go either way.

When we are asked to choose God or mammon, let us choose God. Put God above the boss.

### Don't Compromise Your Beliefs

To refrain from compromise during a trying time is a very difficult thing to do. Daniel's attitude is exemplary because it reminds us how important it is to do what is biblically correct and stand by it.

He did not say, "I know God is the only God in my life. The important thing is that I believe it in my heart, because God can

### Stay on Top of Spiritual Cultivation

The king's decree did not stop Daniel's custom of praying to God three times a day. He chose to accept the consequences rather than bow down to man. We must follow Daniel's example and cultivate our spirituality so that the decision to sacrifice secular gain for things that are eternal is

an easy one to make.

Daniel's life of prayer is evident in the decisions he made in his career. He was very successful, and he knew God gave him his success. He did not once doubt or get frustrated when his colleagues plotted to have him terminated. He remained peaceful and gave thanks and supplication to God.

Daily cultivation reaps greater benefits than prayer and scripture reading on random days or only when we are feeling down. We must spend the time and energy to build an intimate relationship with God. Without daily cultivation, the line between what is biblically correct and secularly reasonable can become indistinguishable, causing us to risk compromising our entire faith.

Daniel's daily spiritual cultivation helped him maintain a peaceful heart during a very stressful time. His job and status could have been taken away from him and his life instantly over. In the end, he was not eaten by the lions; instead, his enemies were devoured. Daniel continued to prosper and God's name was honored and praised throughout all the land.

## FOCUS ON THINGS ABOVE

It would have been hard to make the right decision if Daniel did not maintain an intimate relationship with God. It is hard to accept being laid off, demoted, or patronized. Many secular concepts focus on individualism and empowering oneself. It is easy to get caught up in these concepts and lose focus.

But as Paul reminds us, our focus should be on "Set[ting] your minds on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col 3:2), for "the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor 4:18).

After the incident, a new decree was issued and it was clear to King Darius, a Gentile, that the God Daniel worshipped was the God that the entire kingdom must fear, because He was the living God that remained steadfast forever. Daniel's

boss, who did not previously know God, now knew that God's kingdom was indestructible and enduring. Daniel was able to glorify God and edify others by focusing through spiritual cultivation on things that were eternal.

Doing well in our career to support our family and ourselves is one of our duties. But sometimes we are so engulfed by getting that promotion or raise that we forget that God is our ultimate Provider. Our vision of things that are eternal becomes blurred because our hearts have leaned more towards mammon than to God due to lack of spiritual cultivation.

To ask God for the strength and courage that Daniel displayed in his most difficult hours is not an impossible thing to do. We do not need to be a prophet or have deep spiritual wisdom to overcome the trials we face in society. Entrusting our careers and lives into God's hands takes only a mustard seed of faith that can move mountains. May God give us attributes like those of Daniel so that we can embrace our status as God's elite.

*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (1 Pet 2:9) ★*



## Spend the Love

Joannie Yeh—Chicago, Illinois, USA

*Owe no one anything except to love one another. (Rom 13:8)*

### OWE NO ONE ANYTHING

Once in a while, when it comes time to pay the check after a delectable dinner, I realize that my wallet is empty, so I borrow from a friend to spot my meal. Aware of my own forgetfulness, I try and write it down. *Owe Melissa \$10. Go to ATM.* I am usually prompt with this sort of thing, so within a week the note can be tossed out, debt repaid.

Pay where you owe, and avoid owing for things you don't need or can't afford.

"To owe" means that we are bound or under obligation to fulfill a certain responsibility. The government, loan

companies, and our banks are keeping track of our progress in paying back education, housing, and business loans. God and the conscience He blessed us with are keeping track, so we should pay our debts off without delay to the best of our ability.

Have a library fine? Pay it.

Have a loan from a friend? No matter how menial the amount, don't forget to pay it.

Have a speeding ticket? Argue it if you have a case, but if the judgment is still against you then pay it.

Have an income? Tally up your wages, render to the government what belongs to the government, and pay it.

But there's another debt that binds us.

### EXCEPT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER

We dwell deep in the debt of the love of God.

*For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:7, 8)*

We are nothing, unworthy of a second glance, and yet God chose us. God freely gave us His love, His Son to die on the cross for us so that we would not be found lacking. Through Jesus Christ, our debt to God has already been forgiven and the road to salvation opened.



By what coincidence did I survive my bouts of bronchitis as a child and receive enough time as a young adult to know the peace and almightiness of God? By what chance did I not get hit by a bus while I was absentmindedly running too close to the street? By what deeds did I deserve the prayers of so many brothers and sisters during a difficult time? Not by luck, not by my goodness, but by the amazing love of God.

We owe God so much. While most lenders demand that we pay back the loan, God does not demand the same. God is almighty and all knowing, so He doesn't need the things He has given us. He obligates us to pay it back, but not to Him. Rather, He says,

*"Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." (Mt 25:40)*

We pay God back by spending His blessings to benefit those around us who may be in need of shelter, a warm cup of soup, a warm hug, kind words of encouragement, or piercing words of gospel truth.

## LET'S SPEND THE LOVE

*"[F]or I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me." (Mt 25:35, 36)*

By what coincidence do we come to know someone who is hungering for a sandwich? Thirsting for the secret to contentment? Shivering for a blanket? Despairing for healing of an empty heart? Imprisoned by jealousy, greed, or pursuit of money? By what coincidence do we have one, two, or five talents of resources, time, or strength to offer? All by the amazing love of God. Do we clench our fists tight over what we've been given, or do we willingly spend the love?

Opportunities to spend the love permeate our lives. Sometimes the love is spent on scheduled visits to a nursing home, while other times the love is allotted for unexpected giving and helping at natural disasters. Sometimes love is given to a close friend, while other times love is collected by a stranger. Either way, we should spend the love as if God is the one who ultimately receives the payment.

### In Our Family

As people physically or emotionally move away from their families, we have to remind ourselves of the standards in the Bible. Jesus said to "'honor your father and your mother'" before He said to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 19:19). It may not be the world's way, but it is God's way. Whether your family members are believers or not, spend love on them within obedience to the Lord.

When I was two, I told my grandfather that I would buy a house for my parents and a house for my grandparents. I am not quite financially able to accomplish this goal that my grandfather often teases me about, but I spend what I can on them.

In college, I called my parents at least once every evening so that they would know I was okay and we could quickly catch up. When I started working and living at home, I wrote checks to my parents as reassurance that I would take care of them throughout my life. It was my gesture, not the slight increase in their bank account, that made them happy.

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*Sometimes love is given to a close friend, while other times love is collected by a stranger. Either way, we should spend the love as if God is the one who ultimately receives the payment.*

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Now I am back in school and living at home. I don't have much money to spend on my parents anymore, but I try

and spend time with them. We share at our meals, discussing how work is going, what my latest career plans are, or the news. We often pray together at night.

Still, I am a work in progress. Sometimes I snap at my parents or neglect to do house chores, but I thank God that I am aware of my weaknesses, sometimes through the help of my parents spending a reminder on me, telling me to spend a gentler voice and more attention on my family.

### In Our Church

I see love spent every Sabbath. Religious education teachers prepare fun activities and probing questions to help their students learn about God. Church members chip in to sweep the floor, scrub the toilets, and wash the dishes, taking care of the church as they would their own home.

Instead of scurrying out the church door as soon as service ends to spend our time at a basketball court, a coffee shop, a mall, or a golf course, we must scurry to find out how else and where else in God's temple we can spend a helping hand.

We also have many members in remote areas. If you are blessed to live near a church, spend a trip, spend a call, or spend an email. If we find ourselves wondering why no one has called us or cares about us, perhaps it is time we spend a call and care on someone who might be wondering the same thing.

Our youth and campus fellowships are communities to spend some nourishment

on so that we can help each other glow brightly for our own faith and for all those who see us. There are countless

ways we can encourage each other, and 1 Corinthians chapter 13 captures all the proper attitudes we should have when we spend our love.

Patience might be needed to usher a stray sheep back to the fold. Our own interests might need to be sacrificed to warn a member who is about to make an unwise financial, marital, or spiritual decision. And whatever we need to say, we must not lash out at anyone in church with rudeness. Spend some gentleness. These qualities may take some spent time to cultivate, but remember that practice and prayer make perfect.

There is another community we need to remember. While the middle-aged adults are busy with their careers and children, and the children are busy with their games in their own little worlds, many elderly people might feel left out or useless, especially if they do not speak English or are new believers.

Anyone who has a few seconds to spare should spend some attention on them. Just spend a hello on each of them each week and watch their lips widen and open. Whether that smile reveals dentures, gaps, or lack of teeth, you will want to show your pearly whites, too.

### **In Our Community**

The community includes neighbors, workplace colleagues, classmates, coffee shop servers, restaurant waiters and waitresses, clients, customers, or anybody around us. Spend some kindness on everyone, even if the grocery store clerk rolls her eyes because you asked for a price check, or even if you are the grocery store clerk whose customer just decided to return half the items after you already scanned them into the cash register.

Spend some patience on the first-time waitress who brought you a blueberry scone instead of the walnut biscotti. We encounter different people with varying moods and attitudes every day so that God can see how we spend our reactions. Spend wisely. Spend joyfully.

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*If we spend time preaching to our friends and family and teaching them how to rely on God, then we can help people help themselves in daily life and in faith.*

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God has even opened up a way for us to love those we do not know. Our taxes pay for social services that help the less privileged in our communities. If we dutifully fill out our tax forms, then we can help those who do not have food, clothes, or shelter. God opened a way for us to earn wages, and God opened a way for us to extend our wages to help others.

We can even seek out those in need. Campuses and urban centers, as well as the suburbs, are volunteer-filled organizations. Join them by yourself, or join them with fellowship members.

I joined alternate spring break after learning about it from another church sister who had participated in college. The organization sends students on community service trips during spring break. I went to Maine one spring to help build homes, among other tasks. One of them was to shovel horse manure so that the farm boy could take a break to see his family in another city.

I also became involved with Reach-A-Peer helpline, a night phone service that offered students anonymous and confidential conversations and referrals. Now, I volunteer at a free clinic run by students in my medical school.

### **Into Heaven**

While we can spend endless hours tutoring kids, serving meals in soup kitchens, or encouraging friends in a difficult time, we must also remember the greatest love we can spend. If we spend time preaching to our friends and family and teaching them how to rely on God, then we can help people help themselves in daily life and in faith.

Spend the gospel on them. Spend your testimonies on them, telling of how

putting God first and worshipping Him the way you do has given you peace and joy. We were nothing, and yet God gave us His only Son. Spend that story and spend your life experiences to attract people to God so that He can directly spend His promise of eternal life and blessings on them. Spend your hope of salvation on another soul.

Have a blessing? Pay it to someone in need of encouragement.

Have an hour? Pay it to someone who is lonely.

Have the Holy Spirit? Pay it to someone in need of prayer.

Have the truth? Pay it to someone whom Jesus has led to you. ★



## Learning from My Son

Jennifer Lu—San Jose, California, USA

When Josh was diagnosed with high functioning autism (HFA), my husband and I could not be happier. Of course, we were not happy that our then five-year-old son had a disability, but we were glad that there was a name to our son's inexplicable behavior.

### NOT QUITE NORMAL

Josh was born in May 2000. There was nothing abnormal about his birth, and for the first two years of his life everything seemed to be great. He met his milestones for sitting and walking. He babbled words and played with toys, just as any other toddler.

When he was two, we decided to enroll him in preschool. This was only for two mornings a week and more for fun since I worked at home and did not really need to have the babysitting. It was a parent participation preschool, which

meant I needed to volunteer once every two weeks in the classroom. For the first time, I really noticed some differences in my son's development versus the children around his age.

I saw that Josh did not care to play with other children. He was always on his own. I joked that anyone could spot him on the playground because he would be the one circling the periphery of the playground, walking around and around, daydreaming about something.

He also did not talk a lot. He used many singular words like "Mom" or "juice" but was not able to string together a real sentence. Many times, he would use gestures to get his point across. However, he seemed to understand all that was asked of him, so I hadn't been extremely concerned prior to preschool.

But it became more apparent in the school's social setting that something

wasn't quite normal about his social and language development. I learned later that these are the two biggest commonalities among children with autism. All individuals diagnosed on the autism spectrum have delays or disabilities when it comes to social skills such as ordinary conversation, eye contact, and emotional understanding of others.

We take these things for granted because they come naturally to us. For people on the spectrum, they are the hardest things to do because they just don't possess these skills. As a result, these issues are likely to lead to impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, and unusual, repetitive, or severely limited activities and interests.

As I compared Josh to the other children in his class, I shared my growing concerns with my family and friends. I remember

them comforting me by saying that Josh was a boy, and boys always develop a bit slower. Even the pediatrician assured me that his son did not really talk until he was four.

Eager to have an explanation, I happily accepted everyone's words of encouragement and left things alone for the next few months. The only thing I could do in the meantime was continue to engage him and try to get him to interact more with his peers.

### **A Difficult Child**

It was also during this first preschool year that another big symptom of HFA came out, although we didn't know it at the time. We chalked it up to the fact that we just didn't understand Josh and that he was being a difficult child.

One time, on the way home, I decided to take a different route. As I made a turn onto a street we didn't regularly travel, Josh began screaming in the backseat. Although he wasn't a talker, he let me know in no uncertain terms that it was

him and thought to myself, "What is wrong with him? Why is he being so difficult?" By the time we got home, the only thing I could do was put him in a timeout. I wanted him to understand that what he had done in the car was not acceptable.

But even during the entire timeout, he kicked and screamed. I had to physically hold him down. It seemed like he had hit a road block and could not get past it. It was the most exhausting timeout we had had, and it was the first in a series of them.

This rigidity and the deep need for sameness is another huge common characteristic among autistic children. They dislike changes in their routines and have a hard time transitioning from one activity to the next.

### **TOO MUCH TO HANDLE**

By the time Josh was three, we took him to a speech therapist for an evaluation because it was obvious that he was lagging in language development. We could not take the chance to see if he would really talk by four.

to the light switch, turn the lights back on, and then turn them off himself. He had to be the one to do it—always. And it didn't just happen casually, as if he would walk over to the switch and repeat the motion. It was almost always accompanied by a big tantrum.

Eventually, he had a one-on-one aide to help him transition throughout the day. There were times when he got so frustrated that he kicked his friends and ran out of class because he could not handle all the stimuli.

By then, we had already made an appointment to have him evaluated by doctors at the Autism Spectrum Disorder Clinic at Kaiser Permanente. Although not much was known about autism then, my husband and I did read up enough to see that Josh could very well be on the spectrum. His language delays, lack of social skills, and inability to accept changes were just too obvious.

### **GOD'S PLAN**

Once Josh was diagnosed, we began our journey into the world of autism. We read every book on the market and tried all sorts of diets and therapies. He has been to speech therapy and occupational therapy, as well as group therapy to help him learn social skills.

There have been some really bad and intense moments in our lives, like the time he got so frustrated with himself that he took the computer chair (the closest thing to him that he could grab) and tried to ram his younger sister and grandmother down. They took cover in another room.

Those were the moments when I went into my room and cried to God for a long time. I reasoned that I was an educated person and knew a lot about this disability, yet I was unable to really help my son when it mattered most.

When the day to day realities of HFA hit, they consumed my entire being, and I just wanted to crawl into a hole and give up. But those were also the times when I realized that this was something

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not acceptable to go home this way. He kept insisting that I had to go back to the same spot where I made the turn and go home the way we normally did.

Since he was a child barely over two years old, I didn't understand why it mattered to him that I didn't go home the same way. So I replied that we were not going back, and I continued to drive home. That did not go over well with Josh. His screaming turned into a full-blown tantrum within seconds. He was thrashing in his seat, and his face became red from his forceful yelling.

At this point, I was very irritated with

The therapist diagnosed him with some speech delays, so Josh qualified to go to the public school-sponsored preschool, which would work with him for two years on his speech and motor skills.

But by the time he entered kindergarten, things went from bad to worse. Although his speech had improved, he could not function well in the class with twenty children and one teacher. There were just so many rules for him to follow and too many transitions in a day. Many times, he decided that his way was the best way.

For example, he did not like it when the teacher turned off the lights. He would go

I could not fight on my own. No matter how educated my husband and I were on the subject, no matter how in tune we were with the latest therapies, we needed God.

And God has been there for us.

By praying to Him each day, it has brought sanity back into our world. Although there have been many moments that have overwhelmed us, God has given us the strength to get through the day. Even though the speech, occupational, and social group therapies have helped Josh come a long way, nothing has helped us more throughout these years than the peace we have received through our daily prayers.

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*We have learned to be patient and tolerant. We have also learned to trust in God for all we need. He will truly give us the strength to overcome all obstacles.*

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We have no idea, though we are trying to understand, why Josh has this disability. Some scientists think it has to do with genetics, while others think it is caused by the environment or a combination of both. I often think back to the days I was pregnant and try to remember what I had done that might have even remotely contributed to his condition.

But at the end of the day, we know that God has His plans for us. We may not like them or understand them. However, God will never give us more than we can bear.

## **SHOWERED WITH ABUNDANT LOVE**

Although it has been difficult, God has shown us His love in many ways as a result of Josh's disability. Josh practically grew up in San Jose Church. We moved to California when he was just four months old, and this has been a great blessing for us.

The members here have seen him grow and mature over the years. Almost all of them know he has this condition and have been eager to help him. Next to God and our immediate family, this has been the biggest support system for him and for us.

Every week he goes to church and does something unexpected. Instead of giving him a funny look (as many strangers do), the brothers and sisters show him understanding and love. They demonstrate patience, kindness, and generosity. In fact, many go out of their way to engage him in conversation.

This is what Jesus was talking about when He shared the importance of the church as a family. We feel it every week as we have fellowship with the members in San Jose. Even though Josh may not realize it now, he has been showered with abundant love from God.

Josh is eight now, and he is steadily improving. He is currently mainstreamed, which means he goes to a regular class without an aide. He still has his moments, and some things continue to be very frustrating for him. But with the guidance of the Spirit, we have learned so much from him.

We have learned to allow him to be who he needs to be instead of forcing him to conform to our norms. We have learned to be patient and tolerant. We have also learned to trust in God for all we need. He will truly give us the strength to overcome all obstacles. Perhaps this is the biggest lesson God wants our family to learn.★



# We want to hear from you!

**Have a suggestion for an article?**

**What do you enjoy reading the most?**

**Have an idea for a theme?**

Tell us what you think about the magazine and share your great ideas with us!

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\*You must provide a valid email address to be entered in the drawing for a Manna t-shirt.



# CALL FOR ARTICLES

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## Author Guidelines and Editorial Calendar

### Issue #60:

#### Theme: Money

Articles due: March 1, 2009

We must be careful in how we view money and wealth. It says in 1 Timothy 6:10, “[T]he love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” We should not place too much emphasis on obtaining money, but we cannot survive without it. In a world obsessed with the accumulation of wealth and possessions, how do we maintain the correct perspective? What can we do to manage what we have? What constitutes as contentment, and can we truly have the best of the spiritual and material worlds?

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

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### GENERAL WRITING GUIDELINES

#### CONTENT

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

#### GRAMMAR/STYLE

- Use active instead of passive voice.
- Write concisely.
- Use concrete words and ideas instead of abstract concepts.
- Use “plain old English” instead of obscure, academic language.
- Use the NKJV version when quoting Bible verses.
- Use American spelling, if possible.
- Adhere to the IA Style Guide, except for He/Him when referring to God/Jesus.

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

#### Christian Living

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

#### Bible Study

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

#### Doctrinal Study

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

#### Exhortation

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

#### Testimony

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

#### Creative Writing

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

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### SUBMISSION INFORMATION

Please email electronic files of articles (Microsoft Word) to [manna@tjc.org](mailto:manna@tjc.org), or send hardcopy and disk to:

**Manna**  
General Assembly of True Jesus Church  
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Anaheim, CA 92804 USA

Please direct any questions to [manna@tjc.org](mailto:manna@tjc.org) or  
Phone: +1-714-533-8808  
Fax: +1-714-533-8878

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

# True Jesus Church

## Articles of Faith

### Jesus the True God

The One True God was manifested in the flesh. He is the Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the redemption of sinners, was resurrected on the third day, and ascended to heaven. He is the only Savior of mankind, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and the only True God.

### Holy Bible

The Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible are inspired by God and are therefore the only authentic scriptures which testify to the Truth.

### Church

The True Jesus Church was established by our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit (the Latter Rain) and is the revival of the True Church of the Apostolic Days.

### Salvation

Salvation is given by grace through faith. However, it is necessary to rely on the Holy Spirit to pursue holiness and to keep the biblical teachings of honoring God and loving humanity.

### Baptism

The Baptism of Water is the sacrament for the remission of sins and for regeneration. The baptist must already have received baptisms of water and the Holy Spirit. The baptism must be immersion in natural, living water and must be administered in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, with the candidate's head facing downward.

### Foot Washing

The Washing of Feet is a sacrament which enables one to have a part in the Lord and teaches mutual love, holiness, humility, service, and forgiveness. The sacrament of the washing of feet must be performed in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ to all newly baptized members. Mutual washing of feet may be practiced when necessary.

### Holy Spirit

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is a prerequisite for entering heaven; speaking in tongues is the evidence of having received the Holy Spirit.

### Holy Communion

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

### Sabbath Day

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

### Judgment Day

The Lord Jesus Christ will descend from heaven on the Last Day to judge all people; the righteous will receive eternal life, while the wicked will be eternally condemned.

## TRUE JESUS CHURCH CONTACT INFORMATION

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

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