

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

04 Oct 09

Today, the English congregation will launch our revamped Church website. This project was started several months ago, and after many hours of hard work, the new website is finally ready. It is fresh. It is more colourful, and its contents are better organised. Visit the website. All the Lord's Day sermons can be downloaded into your MP3 player. Check out the photographs of church events. The website will be updated weekly so that you are kept abreast of the upcoming events of the church. I appreciate the work put in by the team led by Dn Lam Chun See, which comprises John Ng, John Wong, Selva, Jasmina and Bernard Moey.

On 21st September, some 150 youths from several Bible-Presbyterian churches came together for the inaugural BP Combined Youth Conference. The theme of the Conference was Reformed, Resolved and Relevant; and it explores the doctrines of the Reformed faith to which the BP Church subscribes, the commitment of our youths to the BP stand, and the relevance of the Christian faith in the 21st century. The feedback from the youths in the Conference was very positive. God willing, the next BP Youth Conference will be held on 28 May 2010.

On a personal note, I thank God for the successful surgery for Rebecca, and I thank all of you who prayed for and visited with us in person, through e-mail or through phone calls. The concern and kindness shown to us is evidence of the importance of the local church. By local church, I refer not the church in Singapore, but the visible church at a particular geographical location. When the Apostle Paul wrote the churches at Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, etc, he was writing to congregations at those locations.

In recent years, there have been some Christians who are advocating that the local church has seen the best of its days, and they question the necessity and relevance of the local church. These anti-church proponents see the church as an institution that hinders more than helps the spiritual growth of the believers. Sadly, there are some believers who also have the same attitude toward the local church

In some ways, the local church scene today is far from perfect, and it will never be. Someone made a witty remark concerning the local church; comparing the local church to Noah's Ark, he said, "If not for the downpour and flood outside, the smell inside the Ark would have been intolerable."

Yes, the church is imperfect because the people who go to church are imperfect. However, that does not mean that the local church is not necessary or relevant. There is an unhealthy and mistaken view that the Christian faith is merely a personal relationship between the Christian and Christ Jesus. To be sure, there would be no Christianity without this personal relationship. But the Bible does not stop at this personal and private relationship between a person and Christ.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

So what is the church? According to the dictionary, the "church" means several things. First, a church is a place of worship. If asked where he is going, a man may say, "I am going to church." Second, a church is also an activity. A man may also say that he enjoyed last Sunday's church, and he meant is that he enjoyed the activity in church. Third, a church may also refer to a particular denomination, such as the Anglican Church or the Lutheran Church. Fourth, the church may be used to refer to the clergy, or officials representing the church. Fifth, the church refers to the body of worshippers.

The biblical definition for "church" is not a building, or an activity, or a denomination. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which means the "called out" ones. In that sense, biblically and technically speaking, the church is a body of believers. Theologians differentiate between the universal church and the local church. The universal church, also known as the invisible church, refers to all believers throughout the world and through all ages who have confessed our Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. "*And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*" (Matt. 16:18).

The local church, as stated above, refers to the body of believers who worship at a particular location. So strictly speaking, believers do not worship at a particular church, nor do we go to church, nor do we participate in church. Believers are the church. That means that quality of the church does not depend on architecture of the church, but on the people.

Just as there has been much misunderstanding of the meaning of church, there is also much confusion and misunderstanding concerning the roles and responsibilities of members of a local congregation. Why do we have Basic Bible Knowledge classes for worshippers who desire to join the church through baptism or transfer? What are your rights and responsibilities as members of the church? What kind of relationship should you have with the leaders of the church? What are the criteria for service in the church?

Over the next few months, we will use this space to consider these questions as well as elaborate on the roles and responsibilities of members of the local church in general, and members of Calvary Bible-Presbyterian Church in particular.

IS CHURCH OUT OF DATE?

There has been a trend in Christendom where the institution of the local church (body of believers) is being dismissed as irrelevant. People desire spiritual growth, but they also disdain organized religion. They say “yes” to Christ, but they say “no” to the church. These people look at the church as being trapped in the dark ages, and they in turn are being trapped within the church. They become disenchanted with the church because of its formal liturgy, old decrepit buildings, out-of touch clergy, or perhaps their spiritual needs were not met.

Whether the assessment is right or wrong, fair or unfair, the result is that worshippers begin to find their spiritual needs met outside the church in parachurch organizations. Some of these are organized according to their age groups, and there are such Christian organizations and clubs in schools, college campuses, offices, etc. Some are activity based, such as Bible study, choir, or even physical exercise. The result is that there are Christians who serve beside (or worse outside) the context of the local church.

This situation is worse in the local church with a small congregation. They have to compete with the specialised ministry provided by the parachurch organizations, and they also have to contend with the wealth of resources provided by the mega-churches. Because of their size and resources, the mega-churches can cater to the specific needs of different age groups and special interests. I personally see the mega-churches as nothing more than many parachurch organizations operating under one single umbrella. Mega-churches with their secular marketing techniques, non-confrontational messages, and high-tech entertainment-like worship services are able to draw the people in.

However, studies have shown that they have failed to produce believers with a serious commitment to Christ in the local church. The reason is that both the parachurch organizations and mega-churches present the Christian faith as the individual meeting his need, and not as the individual committing himself to Christ and His church.

These phenomena of parachurch organizations and mega-churches stand in contrast to the Reformed view of the church. Here is what John Calvin wrote about the church. “The name of Mother given to the Church shows how necessary it is to know her. No salvation out of the Church. The Church is our mother, inasmuch as God has committed to her the kind office of bringing us up in the faith until we attain full age.” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 4.1).

Calvin further adds that “there is no excuse for him who spontaneously abandons the external communion of a church in which the word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered” (*Institutes*, Book 4.1.19). Calvin’s point is that the church is indispensable to the spiritual growth of the Christian.

Today, we are far more accommodating to people who walk in and out of churches as though the church is a revolving door. John Calvin and other Reformers would have condemned such people as apostates because their commitment is not to Christ and the local church but their own perceived needs. The church that is able to meet their needs is where they would go.

The argument from these in-and-out church hoppers is that even though they are not associated with any church, they are closer to God. This begs the question: Can one be close to God apart from the local church? Is it possible for a person to move in and out of churches and still be close to God?

The answer to the above questions is no! The reason is that the church is the means ordained by God through which He accomplishes His purpose and will. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear the importance of the church. Our Lord Jesus Christ will build the church (Matt. 16:18). He gives the church the authority to act (Matt. 18:17-20). The Apostle Paul writes about the running of the local church (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus). Paul also equates the local congregation as the church of the living God. *“But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth”* (1 Tim. 3:15). If the local assembly is the church of the living God, how then ought we to behave, and what does it say about the person who displays little or no commitment to the body of believers of which he is a part? May the Lord help us to examine our commitment to our Saviour and His Church.

11 Oct 09

We are into the last quarter of 2009, and as the year draws to a close, it is time to reflect on what God has done thus far, and to plan for the new year ahead. On Saturday, the Session organised a leaders' retreat to see how we can serve God better and more effectively. I would urge all of you to pray for the church leaders. In the same light, I would also urge to assess your own spiritual walk with God. What are your spiritual goals for 2010? What steps are you taking to grow spiritually? Are you serving in any ministry of the church?

Last week we considered the unhealthy signs of the increasing irrelevance of the local church in the eyes of the believer. As a result of the offerings by para-church organisations and mega-churches, the smaller local churches seem to have lost its place.

The church is not just a place of worship or a religious activity. The church, biblically speaking, refers to the body of believers who worship and serve God in a particular place.

The Household of God

The Apostle Paul describes the church as the *"house of God...the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth"* (1 Timothy 3:15).

Like "church," the word "house" does not refer to the physical building, but to the people. There is no life in a building; it is only a shell. It is the people who give life to the meaning.

In Ephesians 2:19-20, Paul puts it another way, he writes, *"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone"* (Ephesians 2:19-20). The household of God comprises of believers.

The Apostle Peter also makes the same point. *"To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:4-5).

The lesson from these passages is simple: the church is a family of believers. As in any family, there are privileges and responsibilities. Paul told Timothy, *"if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God"* (1 Timothy 3:15).

The privilege of being in the household of God is that the believer can resort to the church for support – spiritual and otherwise. *"Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it"* (1 Corinthians 12:26). Paul told the Romans, *"Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep"* (Romans 12:15).

On the other hand, the responsibility of the church member is that he behaves himself. The word "behave" means to abide and live within the order of the church.

The word "behave" is translated as "had our conversation" in Ephesians 2:3, and in that instant, it is used negatively to describe unbelievers who *"had [their] conversation in times past in the lusts of [their] flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath"* (Ephesians 2:3). The idea is that because the unbelievers were in the world, they behave according to the order of the world. Christians whose minds have been renewed and are part of a local church ought to behave and live within the order of the church.

Church of the living God

Paul also describes the church as belonging to the living God. This description tells us that the church does not belong to any man. God is the builder and the protector of the church. Our Lord Jesus says, *“That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”* (Matthew 16:18).

The description also speaks of the commitment of God to the church. God paid a high price for the church. The Bible tells us that the Lord had *“purchased [the church] with His own blood”* (Acts 20:28). Ephesians 5:25 says *“Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it”* (Ephesians 5:25). It would be a terrible mistake for the believers to relegate the importance and value of the church.

Pillar and ground of the truth

“But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). The church is the pillar and ground of truth. This does not mean that the church is the source of truth. Our Lord Jesus is the truth. But the church is the means by which His truth is held high. In other words, if there is no church, there would be no proclamation of that truth.

Are there other means by which the Gospel can be preached? Sure! In the United States, there is the so-called “pyjamas church.” It is a television broadcast of a church worship service, and a person can attend a worship service in the comfort of his sofa, with a cup of coffee in hand, and in his pyjamas. Such TV broadcasts may be useful and necessary for those who are infirmed and indisposed. However, the able-bodied person who resorts to such means instead of being committed to a local church is depriving himself of the means of grace that God has ordained through the church.

God ordained the church first for the proclamation of the truth. Second, He ordained it also for the administration of the sacraments (water baptism and the Lord’s Supper). Third, God ordained the church for the protection of believers from doctrinal errors, false teachers, and disobedient brethren. Our Lord Jesus assigns the church the responsibility of discipline. *“And if he [an offender in the church] shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”* (Matthew 18:17-18). Only the church is given this responsibility.

The church is also described as the ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). The “ground” refers to something that is settled and permanent. Here Paul is saying that the truth will be preached when the church is stable and settled, and the church is stable and settled if it is founded upon our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the compelling reason that we, as a church, should devote our energies and resources to the building and the strengthening of the local church.

As Christians, we must be committed to the life of the church. Is the church perfect? Far from it! And as someone said, if you ever find a perfect church, please do not go there. Why? Because the moment you enter its doors, it ceases to be perfect. But as imperfect as the church (and our church is no exception), if the church is “the pillar and ground of the truth,” then she will endure, and all who are within will be blessed of God.

18 Oct 09

Several years ago, I received a survey in our letter box. The survey came from a church that wanted to start a new congregation in our neighbourhood. Here are some of the questions that were asked: What are your reasons for not attending church? What kind of church are you looking for? What kind of music do you like to hear in Church? What activities and programmes do you want in a church?

The purpose of the survey is to identify the demographics of the neighbourhood, and to design a church with a worship service that will attract the most people. The idea is that if the people in the community are mostly retired people, then the church will design programmes and activities that will meet the needs of people in that age group. If the residents are mostly young families, then the church will set up a day-care centre or preschool, and the style of worship and music will be more contemporary.

What do we look for in a church? For those of you who are attending Calvary Bible-Presbyterian Church, the question will keep us alert to the progress and growth of our congregation, and remind us of the focus of our ministry here.

A Good Church Must be a Bible-Preaching Church

There are a few essentials in a good Church, and first of which is that it must be a Bible-preaching church. Acts 2:42 tells us that the believers in the early church “*continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine*” (Acts 2:42). The church was founded upon the preaching of the Word of God. Paul writes, that believers are to be “*rooted and built up in [Christ], and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught*” (Colossians 2:7). Earlier, he had told the Colossians, that they were to “*continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven*” (Colossians 1:23). And the early church thrived in very trying circumstances because they “*continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.*”

The apostles’ doctrine is the Word of God. Paul, who wrote 13 of the 27 books in the Bible, told the Ephesian leaders that he had not shunned to declare “*all the counsel of God*” (Acts 20:27). The apostles’ doctrine is about God, His Person, His work, His saving grace, His sovereignty, His Son – our Lord Jesus Christ, and His sacrificial death, His resurrection, His substitutionary atonement, His coming again.

The apostles’ doctrine is also about principles for Christian living, our separation from the world and sin, and our commitment to God and His work. The apostles’ doctrine is about God’s instructions on the various aspects of our lives, our relationships in our families, in our places of work, in our community and in the church.

The apostles’ doctrine is what Martin Luther had in mind when he said, “*My conscience is captive to the Word of God.*” The apostles’ doctrine is the Word of God being taught and applied in our lives. Thus a test of a good church would be whether or not there is the systematic teaching and preaching of the Word of God.

Our Lord Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for laying aside the commandment of God, and holding on to the tradition of men. Our Lord said that they had rejected the commandment of God so that they might keep their own tradition (Mark 7:8-9). The apostles’ doctrine therefore excludes opinions offered by theologians and traditions of the church which do not have strong scriptural support.

A Good Church Must be a Bible-Practising Church

The Roman orator, Cicero said, “*A good speech is a good man speaking.*” I paraphrase Cicero to say, “*A good sermon/Bible study is a good Christian living.*” Paul told Titus, “*Speak thou the things which become sound doctrine*” (Titus 2:1), and then the apostle went on to describe the behaviour of those who had the privilege of sitting under sound doctrine.

Teaching the truth is important. Living out the truth is just as important. The latter affirms the former. Paul says that Christians are to “*adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things*” (Titus 2:10). How can sinners possibly adorn the pure doctrine of the Word? The answer is that we live out the truth.

The preacher in the pulpit and the Sunday School teacher at the front of the class must teach well. To do that he must prepare well. He must make his sermon/lesson relevant to his congregation/class. He must apply the truths to their hearts. Above all, he must practise what he preaches.

I'd rather see a sermon
than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me
than merely tell the way.

The eye's a better pupil
and more willing than the ear,
Fine counsel is confusing,
but example's always clear;

And the best of all the preachers
are the men who live their creeds,
For to see good put in action
is what everybody needs.

A Good Church Must be a God-Centred Church

The congregation of a good church has its eyes focused on God. The answer to that first question in Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us that the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. That is true in every aspect of our lives, and especially so in our worship. A good church is one that shows deep reverence for God in public worship. The Psalmist says that we are to “*serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling*” (Ps. 2:11). Paul says “*that in all things [Christ] might have the preeminence*” (Col. 1:18).

A man-centred church does not teach the whole counsel of God because either the preacher is afraid that the congregation might find God’s truth offensive or that the congregation has an unhealthy regard for the minister. The worship in a man-centred church is geared toward the desires and preferences of the worshippers; whereas the worship in a God-centred church aims at glorifying and exalting God. A man-centred church focuses on the social activities and programmes; a God-centred church concentrates on activities that will edify the believers.

A Good Church is a People-Loving Church

The church is in the people business. Our Lord Jesus told the disciples, “*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*” (John 13:35). However, this love is not blind. Truth cannot be compromised at the expense of love, and love cannot be disregarded in the name of truth. Total commitment must be given to both in the church. Where truth is preached, love must be practised. And where there is love, it must be founded upon truth. Paul says, “*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing*” (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

One of the most remarkable descriptions of the early church is their unity and the mutual concern they had for one another. “*All that believed were together, and had all things common*” (Acts 2:44). “*The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common*” (Acts 4:32).

The sacrifices that the early Christians were willing to make were proof that God was working in their lives. The irony is that in our day, most Christians have things we do not need, and yet we find it difficult to give up anything for others. The true church of Christ today must therefore exhibit a similar kind of love and concern within its membership.

Is there is a person looking for a Bible-believing church, will they visit and remain with us? Before anyone sends me a list of complaints of areas that we have fallen short (and I am sure there are many areas that we can do better), are you committed to the ministry here? Remember a church is not a building but the people, and a church is only as good as the people who go there.

25 Oct 09

On the last Lord's Day, we observe the Reformation Sunday. What is the Protestant Reformation? What did an event that happened some 500 years ago have to do with us today? A lot if you know the history behind the Reformation. Here is a short review of that momentous event.

What is the 16th Century Reformation?

Up to the 16th century, the power and influence of the Roman Papacy extended and strengthened its hold on Europe. From cradle to grave, the Roman Church controlled every facet of a person's life. The Church determined how a man lived and what he believed. The people were chained to the fetters of the papacy, enslaved to its traditions, and entangled in its yoke of bondage.

The Roman church at its prime was a law unto its own. Popes and cardinals were more powerful than kings and princes. This unrestrained power gave rise to immorality in the church. Priests were unrestrained in their greed and intemperate in their lusts. Although there were several attempts to reform the Roman church, the early reformers such as John Wycliffe, John Hus, Girolamo Savonarola were ruthlessly put down.

By the 1500's, the papacy began to loosen its grip because of social and political pressures. The Renaissance also brought about the resurgence of learning. A man was able to learn and read on his own. He was no longer bound by what the priest told him. The Renaissance emphasis on the individual set the ground of the mindset for Protestant teaching that salvation was a personal matter between God and a man without the intermediary of a priest. The authority of the papacy was replaced by the authority of the Bible, which the individual was now allowed and able to read. Faith now resided in the heart of the individual, and not externally imposed upon him by a priest. The expression of that faith was founded upon the Bible, and not upon the traditions of the church. The 16th century Reformation returned Christianity and the Bible to the individual.

Different people looked at the Reformation in different ways. The Roman church regards it as religious rebellion. Secular historians see it as a social revolution. Some church historians see it as an ecclesiastical reformation. Certainly, the Reformation had a revolutionary character, but it was more than just a revolt against the Roman church, it was a spiritual revival.

The Man God Used

Martin Luther was ordained as an Augustinian monk. And he was a good one. He kept his vows and pursued the monastic life with an intensity that went far beyond his fellow priests. In one of his confessions, Luther said, "I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkey it was I."

In his reflections in his latter years, he wrote, "I was a frantic saint. I ran through all the churches and crypts and believed everything, their suffocating lies and falsehoods. I celebrated several masses in Rome, and almost regretted that my father and mother were still living, for I would have liked to redeem them from purgatory with my masses and other good works and prayers."

But the peace that Luther sought was elusive until he read Romans 1:17 – "*For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith.*" Luther wrote about this experience, "After I had pondered the problem for days and nights, God took pity on me and I saw the inner connection between the two phrases. . . . I began to understand that this justice of God is the justice by which the just man lives through the free gift of God, that is to say 'by faith.' Thereupon I felt as if I had been born again and had entered

Paradise through wide-open gates. Immediately the whole

Luther's discovery of the doctrine of justification by faith changed the world because this truth brought him into direct confrontation with the papacy. John Tetzel, a monk and travelling salesman for the pope was selling

indulgences to raise money to finance the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Indulgences were letters of pardon which guaranteed forgiveness of sins. Luther saw this as a perversion of the Gospel. On 31 October 1517, Luther wrote up 95 statements challenging the scriptural validity of the indulgences, and nailed them to the door of the Wittenberg Castle.

Luther was condemned as a heretic, excommunicated, and forced to go into hiding. By then, Luther and his teachings had spread across Europe like a wild fire. The Protestant Reformation Movement could not be stopped. In Luther's days, "Protestant" was a derogatory term to describe those who opposed the Roman Church. Today we call ourselves Protestants. But sadly, the flame of Protestant Reformation is fading. If the Christian Church is to be an effective witness for God, Christians must return to the Word of God and the God of the Word, and we must be, as Luther declared before those who sat in judgement of him, "bound by the Scriptures and our conscience held captive to the Word of God." May the Almighty God find us faithful till the very end!

01 Nov 09

MISSION TRIP TO VIETNAM

There will be a team going to Vietnam over the next few weeks. The purpose of the trip is to train local pastors under the auspices of the Vietnam Bible Institute. This will be the second training session under VBI. Next week, Bros. Kenneth Tan and Ricky Seah will be visiting some churches that had been affected by the recent floods. Calvary Missions Fellowship is sending some \$8,000 for the flood relief on top of the nearly \$10,000 that has been given by church members and friends. I praise the Lord for your love and compassion for the believers in Vietnam. The funds will be handed over to the pastors whose members have been affected by the floods. Later in the month, Dns Patricia Lin will also be travelling to Vietnam to help the kindergarten. Please remember us in your prayers as well as the missionaries and local pastors who labour on the ground.

The Commitment of Church Membership

“Why should I join a church if I am already saved?”

“Church membership is not necessary for salvation.”

“I just want to worship God; I like the variety that comes with church-hopping. I do not want to be tied down to a church.”

These are some of the statements made by Christians who see no need for committing themselves to a local church. On the surface, their reasons for not joining a local church seem valid, but held against the Holy Scripture, they are unbiblical.

First, there is a biblical command for church membership. *“And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching”* (Hebrews 10:24-25). God tells us that we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. There are some people who take this to mean that we must be faithful in attending worship in church but not in one particular church. In other words, as long as a person attends church every Lord’s Day, he is not forsaking the assembly.

Such an interpretation, however, omits the requirement of the person to provoke and be provoked to love and good works. A person who is never settled in a church will find it hard to fulfill this responsibility. Every believer must be engaged in encouraging others to love and good works.

Hebrews 10:24-25 calls for commitment of the Christian to others. The passage also identifies the place where such a commitment is to be made – it is in the assembly of believers. The word “assembling” (Hebrews 10:25) comes from the same root as the word “synagogue.” The place where Christians are to exercise commitment and to stir one another to love and good works is the local church.

Thus, it is not enough for a person to say that he is saved, and he is a member of the universal invisible church. God commands His people to gather in and be committed to a local church.

By faith, we are united in Christ. Every born-again believer is a part of the universal church regardless of denominational identity. However, in the Apostles’ ministry, they dealt with the local visible church, i.e. the churches at Rome, Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi and so on. In the New Testament, there is no evidence of a saved person who was not part of a local church.

The reason is that the local church is a visible representation of the universal church. To our own regret, local churches often do not accurately reflect the universal church. Nevertheless, the local church is what the world sees. In Acts 2:47, Luke writes that “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). On what basis did Luke say that the Lord had added to the church? Was he referring to the local or universal church? I believe that Luke came to this conclusion because he saw that there was an increase in the number of people in the local churches. Every believer (who is a member of the universal church) also became a member in a local church.

This does not mean that a person who does not join a local church is not saved. There are some cases where it is not possible for a believer to be part of a local church. Example: a person may be posted to a place where there is no Bible believing church; or a person may have believed in Christ but he died before he could join a local church. These are the exceptions, but the general principle is that while membership in a local church is not necessary for salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation.

The Westminster Confession of Faith states, “the visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF, Chapter 25, Section 2). The Confession is saying that membership in a local church is the natural response of a believer.

The Obligations of a Believer

In Calvary BP Church, we require all worshippers who wish to join the church to go through a Basic Bible Knowledge Class, an interview with the Board of Elders, and a public confession of faith in Christ by transfer or water baptism. One of the questions asked of new members is – “Do you promise to pray for, support, labour with, and be subject to the discipline of the leaders whom God has set over this church?”

The first obligation of a believer is submission to the church leadership. Paul says to the Thessalonians, “*And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves*” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

The Bible says, “*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you*” (Hebrews 13:17).

Church Membership is Submission to Church Leadership

Our first obligation is to submit to the leaders whom God has appointed over the church. But there is more. The writer of Hebrews says we should ensure that our leaders find it a delight as they watch over us; that “*they may do it with joy.*” Practically, it means that we are to do whatever it takes to make sure that the oversight responsibility of church leaders over us is not burdensome. To be sure, there are some shepherds who are hirelings. But it is equally true that there are many sheep who are more like goats.

Submission to the local church is therefore a mark of a believer. This is not to say that all church members are saved, and non-church members are lost. Membership in a church does not tell us who is and who is not a true believer. There will be members who are not saved, and non-members who are saved. Our Lord Jesus talks about the goats among the sheep and the tares among the wheat. But church membership is a sign of a believer’s commitment to Christ and obedience to His Word.

There are also specific issues in a person’s life that will require the church’s involvement – infant baptism, marriage, divorce, remarriage and death. And the extent of the church’s involvement in these matters will depend on whether or not the person is a member of the church. There are also other matters such as service in the church, taking on church leadership that will depend on whether or not the person is a member of the church.

One issue in which church membership will play a determining factor is church discipline. Church discipline is reserved for church members. A person who is not a member of the local church cannot be subjected to church discipline. A man cannot be put out of the church if he is not in it in the first place. He cannot be excommunicated if he does not have communion in the body of believers. Church members who sinned are biblically disciplined. But in the case of a non-member who has sinned, the church leaders would have to treat him as unbeliever and the response is evangelism.

Church Membership is a Testimony to the World

Paul writes, *“the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth”* (1 Timothy 3:15). The Church of God stands on the ground of truth, which is the Holy Scriptures. Paul told the Ephesians that the household of God *“are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone”* (Ephesians 2:19-20). The Bible is the foundation of the local church.

The local church is the pillar of truth in the sense that it ought to reflect the truth. The pillar is the superstructure. The pillar is that which is seen by the world, and that which is seen by the world must be an accurate reflection of what it really is.

Thus, members of a local church must reflect the beauty of Christ. Paul says that we are to be *“blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world”* (Philippians 2:15).

There are social clubs in the world that demand a high standard of conduct from its paying members lest by their misconduct, they sullied the name of the club. The Church of Christ should exact no lesser demand because if church members are unethical and immoral, they sullied the name of our Saviour and give occasion for the enemies of Christ to blaspheme His Name.

Church Membership is for Stewardship of God’s Gifts

Peter says, *“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God”* (1 Peter 4:10). The church is a gathering of people which is a myriad of spiritual gifts, and the church, as a whole, is to be faithful stewards of these gifts. Business enterprises plan and organise so they could optimise their resources and maximise profits. They do it for earthly treasures. The church is concerned about heavenly treasures, and we should be just as diligent and careful in our administration of God’s manifold grace.

This principle applies to the use of our talents, time and treasures. Church membership requires a commitment to the ministry of the church, and members are called on to support the work by their prayers, attendance, service and resources. In prayers, we are to *“pray one for another”* (James 5:16). In attendance, we are not to forsake *“the assembling of ourselves together”* (Hebrews 10:25). In service, we are to *“do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith”* (Galatians 6:10). In giving, we are to *“bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in Mine house”* (Malachi 3:10).

And as members of the church, we do all these for the glory of God and for the good of the church. May our Lord be praised.

07 Nov 09

Membership in a local church comes with commitment. These commitments include the member's being identified with a local church and being a part of the collective testimony for our Lord Jesus Christ to the world. Second, a member's commitment includes the exercise of faithful stewardship of his spiritual gifts. Third, a member's commitment includes his submission to church leadership. *"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you"* (Hebrews 13:17).

However, church membership is not only a member's commitment to the church, but it is also the church's commitment to the member. Church leaders are to have oversight of the congregation. Three times, our Lord Jesus told Peter – "Feed my sheep." This exhortation was so engrained into Peter's mind that in his epistle, he wrote to church elders, *"Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock"* (1 Peter 5:2-3).

To Minister and To be Ministered

To Minister: The church's commitment to the member is that he would have the opportunity to minister. The Bible compares believers in a local assembly to the different parts of the body. *"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body... For the body is not one member, but many... God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him... That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it"* (1 Corinthians 12:12-26).

Members in a local assembly have the responsibility and the privilege to minister to one another. This is only possible because of the mutual accountability. In Calvary BP Church we insist that only members of the church can serve in a teaching ministry. This would include being leaders in the AWANA clubs, or teachers in the Junior Worship, or leaders in a Bible Study group. The reason for the qualification is for the sake of accountability.

This membership requirement for ministry means that those who refuse to be members fall into one of these two categories: either they are unwilling to serve or if they are willing to serve, they do not want to be held accountable for their ministry. It would also mean that those who are members of the church have the liberty to obey God and serve Him.

To be Ministered: One of the powers that the pre-reformation Roman church had over kings and princes was the use of the interdict. An interdict is a church sanction that bars a person from receiving the sacraments of the church. When a person or a city or nation was placed under interdict, the Church would not conduct any burials, marriages, baptisms, and so on.

Members of Calvary BP Church have the right to ask to be ministered to. Although we do not have a formal biblical counselling ministry, the pastor's door is always open to all who need help. You can call the church office to arrange for an appointment. You can drop him an email.

This commitment to the members on the part of the church would include every event from cradle to grave. When a mother of the church has given birth, please inform the church, and arrange for the baptism of your children.

Members should inform the church when there are wedding plans ahead. These are times of rejoicing. If you are planning to get married, inform the elders and pastors to arrange for pre-marital counselling. I believe that marriage is one area that ought not to be done outside the church without prior consent from the elders. God exhorts believers to *"Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow,*

considering the end of their conversation” (Hebrews 13:7). This is not just a matter of respect for the office of the elder; more importantly, it is a matter of accountability for the spiritual welfare of the members.

Inform the church when you or one of your loved ones are sick. *“Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord”* (James 5:14). And finally, there is the ministry of comfort that the church gives to bereaved families.

Mutual Responsibility of Accountability

One of the privileges of being a member of a local church is that there is mutual accountability. The church leaders are accountable to the members of the church, and in return, church members are accountable to the leaders.

This principle of mutual accountability ensures that the church is not run by one person or an elite group. Members have the right to raise questions, and this is usually done at the Annual Congregational Meeting. Members also have the right to elect leaders into office.

On the other hand, members are accountable to the church leaders especially in matters concerning church discipline. Church discipline is not a pleasant thing, and there are few, if any at all, believers and members in a church who see this aspect of accountability as being beneficial to them. But church discipline, biblically administered, is intended to mould us into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. The most severe form of church discipline – excommunication – is done in and out of love for the believer. Paul told the Corinthians *“to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus”* (1 Corinthians 5:5).

David says, *“Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head”* (Psalm 141:5). Even King David recognizes the importance of accountability.

Listen to what Solomon says about discipline. *“Whoso loveth instruction loveth knowledge: but he that hateth reproof is brutish”* (Proverbs 12:1). *“He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding”* (Proverbs 15:32). The word “instruction” really means correction or discipline. The Bible also says, *“Open rebuke is better than secret love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful”* (Proverbs 27:5-6).

Church discipline is the means to spiritual growth, and it is possible only if believers are committed to a local church. A person who refuses to become part of a local church is saying that he refuses to use his gifts to minister to others, and he is also saying that he is not interested in the divine accountability in his life.

There is a trend in some countries where a man and a woman just moved in together, and they do all the things that husbands and wives do except marry. A believer who refuses to become a member in a local assembly is treating his relationship with the local assembly as a matter of convenience.

A husband and a wife must minister to one another. They must be mutually accountable. Their relationship is manifested in two ways: their mutual love and inward commitment to one another, and their outward expression of care and concern. So likewise, a believer’s relationship is in Christ – that unseen inward commitment to our Saviour, and the visible outward commitment to His church. May the Lord help us to be faithful to Him, and His church.

15 Nov 09

I thank you for your prayers for the recent visit to Vietnam. This trip was an eventful one chiefly because of Typhoon Mirinae which hit central Vietnam on 2 November. A few days earlier, Brothers Lawrence Tan and Kenneth Tan left for Vietnam as advanced parties to prepare for the second training session of the Vietnam Bible Institute. Brother Bernard and I left on Monday for Ho Chi Minh City with a connecting flight to Dalat. But our flights were cancelled because of the typhoon. This is the second typhoon to hit central Vietnam in less than a month. The people were barely getting over the devastation left by Typhoon Ketsana when they were hit again by Mirinae. The typhoons affected the churches and homes of several of the pastors who were attending the training. Your financial help in the flood relief came at the most opportune time.

As a result of the typhoon, the training session was delayed by one day. We began a few hours after arriving on an early morning flight to Dalat. The training sessions went on for two hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoon, and another two hours in the evening. There were 14 pastors who were present. We were huddled in a room on the fifth floor of a hotel, with some of the pastors sitting on beds and stools. As much as the pastors were concerned for my stamina, I thanked God for their perseverance. The last session ended about 9pm on Wednesday evening. Bernard and I returned on Saturday. Kenneth remained behind, and he was joined by Brother Ricky Seah on Monday (9 November), and they flew up to Danang with Phan to distribute the flood relief to the Christians who were affected by the floods.

Like I said over the pulpit last Lord's Day, I praise God every time Calvinians who, on their own time and resources, go out to minister and serve on short-term mission trips. There is no better learning experience on missions than to visit a mission station. I praise God for those who cannot go but give. And I too praise God for those who cannot go, who cannot give, but who pray for missions work.

On the matter of late coming, I urge all worshippers to be early. I understand the occasional late-coming due to difficulty in finding parking space and unforeseen circumstances. However the habitual late-coming is certainly not honouring to God and an inconvenience to other worshippers. No one should regard the reserved seats at the back as our accommodating late-comers. Rather the reserved seats are there to ensure minimum distraction to other worshippers when the worship service is under way.

I also understand the need for some who have to leave during the worship service (especially during the sermon) because of call of duty but try to do so with minimum distraction. Leaving by the side aisles instead of going down the centre aisle in this case would be appropriate. The point is that we want to maintain the sanctuary a place of minimal distraction for all during the worship service.

Relationship between Members and Leaders

Throughout history, God has always provided for Israel in sending them leaders. When the children of Israel were languishing in Egypt, God sent Moses. When they were about to enter Canaan, God sent Joshua. During the period of the Judges, despite the unfaithfulness of the Israelites, God sent the judges to save the people every time they cried out to Him for deliverance. Even when the people themselves turned against God and His appointed leaders, He continued to send His prophets. God told the children of Judah, "*Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day I have even sent unto you all My servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them*" (Jeremiah 7:25).

That God sent His prophets did not mean that the people accepted them. "*But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward... Yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck: they did worse than their fathers*" (Jeremiah 7:24, 26).

Our Lord Jesus Himself said that the prophets were persecuted (Matthew 5:12). The Jews themselves despised our Lord Jesus. "*He came unto his own, and his own received him not*" (John 1:11). And our Lord said, "*A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house*" (Matthew 13:57).

God has instituted positions of leadership for the sake of order within the body of believers. Of the myriad of spiritual gifts, leadership and governance is one (Romans 12:8). Thus, the Bible tells us about how members of a local assembly should relate to the leaders.

Extremes in Leadership

As often is the case, there are extremes of leadership. The first is best described as “whatever goes.” This is the view that denies the need for structured leadership in the local assembly. We live in an age which the rights of the individual are celebrated. The 21st century man does not like rules. In light of such individualistic tendencies, some church leaders abdicate their responsibilities. Why insist on order when every one seems intent on doing what is right in their own eyes?

At the other extreme is the attitude that some leaders have which would be best described as “nothing goes until I say so.” This is the view of the tyrannical leader who controls every aspect of the members’ lives from the clothes they wear, to the place that they should vacation, to knowing the amount of monthly income of their members.

There is a fine line between providing biblical counsel to and controlling the lives of members of a local assembly. One writer observes that even “godly overseers can blur in their minds of their followers the distinction between God’s Word and man’s word and unwittingly shift the standard of God’s will from the Bible to human pronouncements. Counsel becomes control, control becomes coercion, and coercion becomes tyranny over the conscience. Christian freedom is eroded as lay people become more and more enamoured with the decrees of elders and the commandments of men. It has all the appearance of wisdom, but it represents a slippery path into slavery.”

Relationship to Leaders

It is obvious that both extremes are wrong. One leads to anarchy within the church. The other leads to authoritarianism which is just as destructive. The Bible warns leaders and members of going to either extreme. The Word of God exhorts, “*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you*” (Hebrews 13:17). There are several lessons for us in this verse.

Obey the Leaders. The first command is obedience – “*Obey them that have the rule over you*” (Hebrews 13:17a). The word “obey” means “to be convinced.” It is translated as “persuaded” in other passages of Scripture (Matthew 27:20; Luke 16:31; Acts 13:43; Romans 8:38; 14:14, and others). The idea here is that members of local assembly must be persuaded by the instruction, counsel and leadership of those whom God has appointed as overseers of the church. One commentator says that “there ought to be a disposition to yield all proper obedience to those who are set over us in the Lord.”

God said, “*Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation*” (Hebrews 13:7). Here, God said that believers should remember the instruction and counsel of the former leaders. In verse 17, believers should have the same regard for the instruction and counsel of the present leaders.

To obey implies to follow. It means more than just a passive reception of the instruction from the leaders, but it is also an active doing of what the leaders said. The same word is used in James 3:3 – “*Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body*” (James 3:3). The instructions of the leaders are portrayed as bits in the horses’ mouths to control the direction.

Does this command to obey mean that members are to give unquestioning obedience to the leaders? Are we, as members, to behave like the soldiers of old who lived by the slogan, “Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die”? The answer is no! Obviously, when leaders of the church are irresponsible and abusive in the use of their leadership, members ought not to obey them. “*I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and*

forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church. Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God” (3 John 9-11).

Diotrephes was a leader in the church, but the Word of God says, “follow not that which is evil.” God willing, next Lord’s Day, we will consider the members’ discernment in this area of being persuaded by the counsel of God’s appointed servants.

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Relationship between Members and Leaders

There are two extremes that Christian leaders must avoid. The first is minimal control which would lead to anarchy. The other extreme is absolute control which would end up in authoritarianism. Leaders and members in the local church are exhorted to ensure that neither extreme happens. The Bible's instruction is that members are to "*obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you*" (Hebrews 13:17).

However, this does not mean that members are to give unquestioning obedience to the leaders. The Bible says that there are legitimate reasons for members to "*follow not that which is evil [leadership], but that which is good*" (3 John 11). This decision, however, must be made with great discernment.

Alexander Hodge gives this advice on members' right to dissent, "synods and councils, consisting of uninspired men, have no power to bind the conscience, and their authority cannot exclude the right, nor excuse the obligation, of private judgment. If their judgments are unwise, but not directly opposed to the will of God, the private member should submit for peace's sake."

Conscience Versus Preference. For members to dissent the counsel of church leaders, they have first to determine whether the matter at hand is one of conscience or one of preference. If it is a matter of conscience which they are fully persuaded that the counsel of church leaders is unbiblical and against Scripture, they should follow their own conscience. This was what Martin Luther told the Pope's representatives at the Council of Worms, "Unless I am convinced by the testimonies of the Holy Scriptures or evident reason, I am bound by the Scriptures adduced by me, and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God, and I am neither able nor willing to recant, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen."

Bear in mind that such a decision must be made in the light of Holy Scripture and not under the uncertain dimness of personal feelings and preferences. All of us have our own preferences. We are affected by different things. We are affected by the same things differently. Our personal choice may be wrong even if we think it feels right, and other people's choice may be right even if we feel that it is wrong. "*The way of a fool is right in his own eyes*" (Proverbs 12:15a). As believers, we have to consider our own sinfulness and be mindful that there is a tendency that our selfishness may hinder us in our obeying the counsel of God's appointed leaders. For that reason, before we disobey the counsel of church leaders, we have to pause and ask, "Is this a matter for dissent? Will my action hinder the unity of the church?"

Objective Truth Versus Personal Offence. If the leaders of the church are teaching the wrong doctrines or imposing certain unbiblical demands upon the congregation or urging members to do things that are contrary to the Word of God, dissent is necessary.

Yet, believers also have to take into consideration that there may be times when we oppose the leaders of the church because we object the counsel of church leaders because they confront our sins. We do not like to be told that we are wrong. When sin is exposed, whether directly by personal counsel or indirectly through the public ministry of God's Word, there are believers who are offended. In such situations, believers should be humble to recognise that God is using the church leaders to bring to our attention some shortcomings in our spiritual life that we may have to deal with. Resisting the counsel then would be unrepentance.

Biblical Commands or Personal Counsel. When God commands, the only response from believers is to obey. God's commandments are non-negotiable. There are duties that clearly spelled out in Scripture where believers must do. There are also policies which are established by church leadership where believers must abide with. These policies are formulated for the orderly administration of and proper stewardship in the local church.

In dissenting the counsel of leaders, believers have to discern between biblical commandments and personal opinions. Church leaders are not perfect, but for every decision that is made, it is always preceded by much prayer

and discussion. Solomon tells us, “*Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counsellors they are established*” (Proverbs 15:22). “*Every purpose is established by counsel: and with good advice make war*” (Proverbs 20:18). Members in a church should therefore give due deference to the counsel of church leaders.

Submit to the Leaders

“*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you*” (Hebrews 13:17). Members of the church are first to obey. Then they are to submit; the word literally means “to yield/place under.”

There is not much of a difference between “to obey” and “to submit.” The difference in this case is that the word “submit” is an active verb. The implication is that believers are to actively place ourselves under the leadership of the church. The difference is between one who submits proactively, and one who submits reluctantly. The Chinese differentiates between “被动” and “主动.” The former refers to being moved by some external force; the latter is to move on one’s accord, which is the kind of submission described in Hebrews 13:17. Believers in Christ are to proactively submit to the leaders of the church.

Here is what the Word of God says that believers must do. “*And we beseech you, brethren, to **know** them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to **esteem** them very highly in love for their work's sake. And **be at peace** among yourselves*” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

Know the leaders. One commentator writes, “The word ‘know’ seems to mean that [members] were not to make themselves strangers to [the leaders] – to be cold and distant towards them – to be ignorant of their wants, or to be indifferent to them...there are things in regard to him [the leader] with which they should be acquainted. They should seek to be personally acquainted with him, and make him their confidant and counsellor in their spiritual troubles. They should seek his friendship, and endeavour to maintain all proper intercourse with him. They should not regard him as a distant man, or as a stranger among them. They should so far understand his circumstances as to know what is requisite to make him comfortable, and should be on such terms that they may readily and cheerfully furnish what he needs. And they are to ‘know’ or regard him as their spiritual teacher and ruler; not to be strangers to the place where he preaches the word of life, and not to listen to his admonitions and reproofs as those of a stranger, but as those of a pastor and friend.”

Esteem the leaders. Believers are to cherish their leaders. The Bible qualifies further by saying that we are to “*esteem them very highly*.” Scripture puts it in superlative terms which I – as a pastor – would find it embarrassing to use this phrase if it were not God’s divine inspiration. The word “esteem” is also translated as “governor” or “chief” (Matthew 2:6; Luke 22:26; Acts 7:10; 15:22). The phrase “every highly” is translated as “more abundantly” (John 10:10), and as “superfluous” (2 Corinthians 9:1). The idea here is that church leaders are to be given great regard. They are literally to be treated like governors.

Of course, if a person enters the Gospel ministry just so that he would be honoured, he should not be in the ministry to begin with. The Bible warns that those who aspire to be church leaders are not to be “lords over God’s heritage, but...ensamples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). The honour that Paul talks about in 1 Thessalonians 5:13 is that which is given to the leaders not for who they are but for what they have done. Leaders should be honoured not on account of their status or the office which they hold but on account of the work they are doing.

One writer puts it this way, “the church cannot be expected to do its work effectively if the leaders are not being loyally supported by their fellows. It is a matter of fact that we are often slow to realize to this day that effective leadership in the church of Christ demands effective following...if we bear in mind ‘the work’s sake’ we may be more inclined to esteem them very highly in love.”

“*To esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake*” also means that members are to esteem church leaders not because of personal feelings or friendships but because of their ministry. The reason is this: the Gospel ministry, if done well, is for the glory of God and the good of man. And a man who sincerely devotes himself to such a work deserves the kind regards of his fellow-men.

Be at peace with the leaders. Members are to “*with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*” (Philippians 1:27); we are not to strive against one another. To be at peace does not mean to be in total agreement all the time. Dr. Bob Jones Sr. has a good advice for believers, “Good men are always reasonable.” Christians can disagree without creating conflicts if we are humble and gracious. One commentator writes that “a member must be careful about the manner in which he differs [with the church leadership]. He may not do so in a rebellious or independent spirit.”

Sadly, there are times when Christians feel not only the need to be right but also the need to be superior, and the only way to be superior is to destroy those who differ with them. James writes, “*Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom...This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace*” (James 3:13-18). Dearly beloved, we have to be careful not to allow these attitudes to creep in our lives and into our church. Pray for the leaders of the church. And let members and leaders “*stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*” (Philippians 1:27).

SERVING GOD WITH JOY

“Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Again, When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul” (Ezek. 3:17-21).

These are the words of God to the prophet Ezekiel. He was to be a watchman unto Israel. Paul also gave a similar exhortation to the elders in Ephesus, *“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God” (Acts 20:28).* Peter also said, *“Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof” (1 Peter 5:2).* These are heavy responsibilities and thankless tasks.

So God exhorts believers in the local assembly to *“obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17).*

We have considered the first three of four points – that church members ought to obey, submit, and be at peace with the leaders whom God has appointed over the congregation. The final point is that members are to relate to the leaders in a manner that they may carry out their ministry with joy and not with grief.

Be a Partner in a Joyful Ministry

An elderly member of the Vancouver BP Church encouraged me with these words, “The most difficult part of the Gospel ministry is the people, but do not let the people get you down.” I find these words to be absolutely true. It is a fair observation to say that there are Christians who are keen to kill their own – not by an actual act of murder – but by words. God tells us that *“a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver” (Proverbs 25:11);* that *“if any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect [spiritually mature] man, and able also to bridle the whole body” (James 3:2).*

Yet in my few short years of ministry, I find it true, sadly, that even amongst those who have been Christians for many years and Christian workers who feel an urge to get in an unkind word. We have to learn to purposely seek the evidence of God in the lives of other people. The Word of God says to us that we must help one another so that our ministry would be joyful. How do we do that? Here are some suggestions.

Believe in Christ. There is no greater joy than to have sinners come to faith in Christ Jesus. The Bible tells us that *“there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:10).* Likewise, there will be joy amongst God’s people over every sinner who comes to salvation.

Walk in Christ. The Apostle John wrote to Gaius, *“For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (3 John 1:3-4).* Faith in Christ must be accompanied and evidenced by a walk in Christ. John was delighted that believers were walking in Christ.

Live in Peace and Keep the Unity. There is nothing as precious as peace and unity in the church. David writes, *“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Psalm 133:1).* Where

there is peace and unity, the labour is sweetened, failures are soothed, and successes are savoured. On the other hand, where there is no peace, successes will be uncommon; normal work becomes a burden, and disappointments of failures are exacerbated.

Where there is peace and unity, time, effort and resources are rightfully used to advance the cause of the Gospel. But where there is neither peace nor unity, time, effort and resources are diverted to fight fires within the church.

Paul exhorts the Philippians to “*stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel...that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others*” (Philippians 1:27; 2:2-4).

Pray for the Leaders. Paul writes to the believers in Corinth, “*We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us; ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf*” (2 Corinthians 1:9-11).

Prayer, not gossip. It is impossible to be praying for another person and also gossiping against him at the same time. The tongue can only perform one function at any one time. So believers have to decide – prayer or gossip. And the challenge is to pray more and more and gossip less and less.

Show Appreciation. Our Lord Jesus ministered in His home town of Nazareth, and the people despised Him. And He said to His neighbours, “*A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house*” (Matthew 13:57). Paul’s ministry was sustained by people whom God sent to encourage him. He said that there were times when he was persecuted, and God comforted him by sending people to minister to him (read 2 Corinthians 7:5-7).

Seek and Receive Biblical Counsel from Them. The Bible tells us, “*Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful*” (Proverbs 27:6). Most of us do not like to be told that we are wrong. But the wise man will seek and receive biblical counsel with joy because he knows that it is for his own good. The Apostle Paul writes to the Galatians, “*Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?*” (Galatians 4:16).

When you are reprovved, before you retaliate, consider this: Has anything been said to you that the Bible does not teach? If there is, then it is right to disregard the advice. If there is not, then do not blame the messenger for the message that you do not like to hear. To disregard the messenger for the message is to dishonour the original Source of the message.

See the Evidence of Grace in Them. Cynicism about church leadership promotes a critical and adversarial relationship between members and leaders. Members like to “roast the leaders,” and leaders “pull their ranks.” The Bible warns us – “*If ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another*” (Galatians 5:15). Instead, we are to “serve one another” in love (Galatians 5:13). Believers – members and leaders alike – ought to think well of one another. We ought to assume the best in one another. Give the benefit of doubt instead of giving doubt. Do not presume, much less judge, another person’s motives.

Co-labour with Them. What you get out of church depends on what you put into it. In Calvary, we try to create a sense of belonging by appealing to members to serve. I am sure things that can be done more effectively and better by hired professionals. However, that defeats the purpose of the church, which is “*for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:12). Co-labouring in the church means every member using the talents that God has given you in some ministry of the church.

Be a Partner in a Joyful Ministry for Your Own Good

Hebrews 13:17 is clear. If it is not a partnership between members and leaders it is not one of joy, it will be one of grief. If ministry is not joyful, it will be sorrowful. The Bible has many examples of grieving leaders. Moses was tested to his limits by the stubbornness of the children of Israel. The prophet Jeremiah laments, *“For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold on me”* (Jeremiah 8:21).

Paul ministry was marked by some who preached the Gospel out *“of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds”* (Philippians 1:16). Of course, Paul rejoiced because the Gospel was preached, but how much better it would be for him if those who oppose Paul had co-laboured with him in joy.

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17). Joy and grief are equally infectious. They permeate the environment of the church and the sphere of our ministry.

The member who despises the leader, and the leader who despises the member are in the end both losers in the ministry. They will find their ministry burdensome, and their service sorrowful. Let not it be said of you that you bring grief rather than joy to another person’s ministry. Instead, we can be winners by being a joyful partner in the Gospel ministry. May the Lord help us.

06 Dec 09

I thank our Lord for a most blessed trip to Fang to see the work of the China Evangelistic Mission (CEM). The trip coincided with the retirement of Rev. Jenny Kwok. She had been there for some 24 years. She came to Thailand after the passing of her husband, and she said that she intended to stay only for a few years, but her few years ended a quarter of a century. Rev Kwok will now focus her work on Muslim evangelism in Thailand.

Succeeding her is Rev. David Li. He and his wife, both from Hong Kong, have been serving in Thailand for some 20 years. My main purpose of the trip was to visit CEM's latest work – the New Sky Orphanage – and see how we may help with this ministry.

Membership and Worship

It was not too long ago that we had a series of articles on the different aspects of Reformed worship. The church is at its best or worst in terms of its testimony to the world when it is at worship. The Lord's Day worship service is the church's collective witness to the world. It is the showcase of the church to the world. More importantly, our worship service reflects our understanding of who God is and what He has done.

Reasons for Worship

God's people must understand and practise biblical worship. Here are some reasons for Christians to take the worship of God seriously. First, it is God's command. *"Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name"* (Deuteronomy 6:13). The word "serve" is "worship."

Second, the sincere worship of God is proof of your salvation. Our Lord Jesus says, *"The true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth"* (John 4:23-24). The Apostle Paul, making a difference, between the true and false believer, says, *"For we are the circumcision [true believer], which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh"* (Philippians 3:3).

Third, worship is the distinguishing mark of God's people. In the opening chapters of Genesis, we read that Abel and Cain worshipped, although the Bible tells us that *"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain"* (Hebrews 11:4). The first thing that Noah did as he stepped off the ark was to build an altar of worship (Genesis 8:20). Wherever Abraham went, he built an altar (Genesis 12:7-8; 13:4, 18; 22:9). God's people are characterized by the worship of God.

At the time of Exodus and beyond, God gave specific instructions to the people as to how, when, and what to do when they worshipped Him. And the nation of Israel would be judged on the basis of their worship. True worship called forth God's blessings. False worship would call forth His judgment. This truth does not change in the New Testament. Christians are still to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Corporate Worship

Every person who joins Calvary B-P Church as a member is asked: Do you promise to be regular in attending worship services? A believer can worship God anywhere and anytime. There is a sense that a believer's worship is an expression of his relationship with God. David writes, *"I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy: and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple"* (Psalm 5:7). In Philippi, Paul *"went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither"* (Acts 16:13). The ladies gathered to worship.

However, individual worship does not and cannot replace corporate worship. The Psalms has many references to corporate worship. Note the plural pronouns. *"O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together"* (Psalm 34:3). *"O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms...O come, let us*

worship and bow down: let **us** kneel before the LORD our maker” (Psalm 95:1-2, 6). David also specified the place of worship, “I was glad when they said unto me, Let **us** go into the house of the LORD” (Psalm 122:1).

In the New Testament, corporate worship is seen in the gathering of the believers. Luke tells us that “**they** continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). The writer of Hebrews says that we have “an high priest over the house of God; Let **us** draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...Let **us** hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering...And let **us** consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking **the assembling of ourselves together**, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:21-25). Christians need both individual and corporate worship. Each one of us needs to worship God as His own blood bought child. And together, we need to worship as a body of believers. One cannot do without the other.

True Worship is God-Centred

“Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods” (Psalm 95:2-3). “Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come into his courts. O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth” (Psalm 96:8-9). The Psalmist tells us that the object of true worship is the LORD.

Yet many Christians have turned worship on its head and make it a time about themselves. “I enjoyed/did not enjoy the service.” “I liked/did not like the choir.” “I liked/did not like the sermon.” This is not to say that the worship leader, choir and the preacher need not offer their best. There is no excuse for poor preparation on the part of those who have the privilege of leading in the worship service. Ill-preparation on the part of the worshipper is insincerity. Ill-preparation on the part of the worship leader is desecration. In the Old Testament, the high priest who was unprepared for worship was struck dead.

However, when Christians speak of worship in terms of how they have benefitted, we are thinking of worship primarily from our own point of reference. We, instead of God, become the centre of worship.

One writer puts it this way, “Since worship is focusing on and responding to God, regardless of what else we are doing we are not worshipping if we are not thinking of God. You may be listening to a sermon, but without thinking of how God’s truth applies to your life and affects your relationship with Him, you aren’t worshipping. You may be singing ‘Holy, holy, holy,’ but if you aren’t thinking about God, while singing it, you are not worshipping. You may be listening to someone pray, but if you aren’t thinking of God and praying with them, you aren’t worshipping.” God willing, the next time, we will consider the difference between the church-goer and the true worshipper.

13 Dec 09

Praise God for a blessed ministry at the Evangel B-P Church over the weekend. The choir and ensemble presented the Christmas Cantata "Winter Rose" to the members and friends of Evangel. The Gospel was clearly presented in music and preaching, and we pray that our Lord would bless the ministry that souls might be won to His kingdom. We praise God also for the successful Junior Worship camps from both the English and Mandarin congregations. Please continue to pray for the Youth Fellowship groups as they have their own camps over the next two weeks.

We are two weeks short of a new year. I trust that you have made some plans for the New Year. And I hope you have made some spiritual plans as well. There will be some changes in the coming year, which I have published separately. Most of these plans are the result of the feedback that I have received from our Leaders' Retreat in October. So please be in prayer for the church, her leaders and members and worshippers of this church that we will begin the New Year by turning to God with all our heart.

Membership and Worship

Biblical worship is God-centred. Biblical worship is also active, meaning to say that the believer actively participates in worship. The Psalmist says, "*O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms...O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker*" (Psalm 95:1-2, 6). Biblical worship requires the believer to come before the presence of God, to sing, to make a joyful noise, to give thanks, to bow down, to kneel before the LORD. These verbs suggest that worship is active. Worship is something that Christians do; it is not something being done to Christians.

Church-Goer versus True Worshipper

Biblical worship demands physical presence and actual participation from the believer. Yet, how true the remark that is made of Christians in worship that we worship our work; work at our play; and we play during worship. Sadly, there are still Christians who think that Lord's Day worship is merely showing up in church. To be present in the church on the Lord's Day does not constitute worship anymore than being in the kitchen makes you a cook.

Our Lord Jesus told the disciples, "*the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth*" (John 4:23-24). Worship is a spiritual exercise, meaning to say that it is not mere performance without meaning. Both the body and the heart must be involved.

Our Lord Jesus says that there are people who "*draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me*" (Matthew 15:8). So worship is more than just showing up in church on Sunday morning, and it is more than just going through the motions of worship.

There is a difference between a church-goer and a worshipper. Let me be direct as the Word of God is direct. I find no difference between the person who stays at home on the Lord's Day and the one who comes to church but remains passive and inattentive during the worship service. By passive, I mean the one who does not sing the hymns, follow in the corporate prayers, and sleeps during the worship service. The inattentive is one who is preoccupied with his own thoughts, engaged in his own business – messaging; sadly, there are people who use the time of the worship service to catch up with each other in idle chit-chat.

Here is what Charles Spurgeon said, "We shall not hurry into God's presence as men run to a fire...How should we prepare ourselves when we come to Him?...There should be no stumbling into the place of worship half-asleep, not roaming here and there as if it were more than going to a playhouse. We cannot expect to profit much if we bring with us a swarm of idle thoughts and a heart crammed with vanity. If we are full of folly, we may shut out the truth of God from our minds."

Matthew 22:1-14 records our Lord Jesus' parable of the wedding feast. *"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy."*

Instructions were then given to the servants to go to the highways to invite as many as would, both bad and good, to come for the wedding feast. However, there was a man, who *"had not on a wedding garment"* (Matthew 22:11). By way of application, I liken those who come to church and do their own thing while in church to this man who came to the wedding feast of the king's son on his own terms. There is a real difference between the church-goer and the true worshipper – a difference as big as that between a true and false believer. We must be careful that we are, as our Lord Jesus said, not those who *"honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me"* (Mark 7:6).

Preparing for Worship

True worship is not found in the external performance, but in the inward delight of our hearts. The Psalmist says, *"Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart"* (Psalm 37:4). To worship is to delight in God; it is to find our greatest joy in Him. And it starts with heart preparation. Spurgeon says, *"Rest assured, Christ will not live in the parlour of our hearts if we entertain the devil in the cellar of our thoughts."*

David asked, *"LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?"* (Psalm 15:1). *"Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place?"* (Psalm 24:3). The answer to both questions is the same. *"He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart"* (Psalm 15:2). *"He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully"* (Psalm 24:4).

The true worshipper is one whose heart is fully prepared for what his eyes will see, ears will hear, and his lips will speak. There is an oneness of heart, mind and body. The writer of Hebrews says that we are to *"draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water"* (Hebrews 10:22).

How should we prepare for worship? Here are some suggestions.

- Keep an early Saturday night.
- Wake up early. Leave for church early.
- Pray for the worship service. Pray for the musicians. Pray for the worship leader. Pray for the preacher. Pray for yourself.
- Prepare an offering.
- Pray for the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the preaching of God's Word.

We will consider this further. In the meanwhile, may the Lord help us to be the true worshipper!

20 Dec 09

the gift of peace (Luke 2:8-14)

The first carol was sung by the multitude of angels. The heavenly choir broke the quiet night as they praised, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men*” (Luke 2:14). This is a carol that praises God for who He is – He is God in the highest. It is also a carol that praises God for what He has done – He has given us a Saviour, and with the Saviour, men might have peace with God.

Peace is precious commodity in our day. 2009 has been a year of uncertainty in the financial and political stage. On the international scene, there are the continual threats of war and violence. Closer home, there are people who are fearful of what the future will hold for them in light of the economic uncertainties. So we ask – will there be peace?

The irony is this – we live in an age of great technological and scientific advancements. We are more educated. We are more technologically advanced. However, as we become more sophisticated and cultured, it seems that peace becomes more and more elusive. Peace, then, would be man’s greatest need.

peace not by having education

Is man’s greatest need education? The angels declared God’s Word that there will be “*on earth peace, good will toward men*” (Luke 2:14), not wisdom, intelligence, and education but peace. One would assume that if men were smart and wise and educated, they would not kill one another. If men got more education, they would have put to good use what they have learned, and solve some of the world’s pressing problems.

But the truth is that man has never been more informed. The science of education has improved by leaps and bounds. Our children know more than we do when we were their age, but education has not made the world better; it has not made society kinder (Proof: just read the newspaper reports on educated people who abused their domestic helpers). Education has not made man a better person.

peace not by improving quality of life

If man’s greatest need was a high standard of living, God would have sent a team consisting of a doctor, an environmentalist, a scientist. The angels’ song was “*on earth peace, good will toward men,*” not health, not strength, not longevity, not a better quality of life or a higher standard of living but peace.

One would assume that if there is a better quality of life for all, if men were healthy and strong, people would be at peace. The truth is that the quality of life has also improved by leaps and bounds. Life expectancy has increased. In the 1960, the average life span of man is about 50 years. In 2007, that number has increased to about 70. In Singapore, life expectancy in 1960 was below 65. In 2007, it has increased to eighty.

We live longer, and we also live better. Much of what we have and what we enjoy today did not exist some 50-60 years ago. Life’s daily chores are made easier by washing machines, dishwashers, microwave ovens, and other modern day amenities. The quality of life has improved. What about the quality of men? Has man become more peaceful? Has man become kinder and compassionate as a result of a better quality of life?

peace not by acquiring more Wealth

Is man’s greatest need money? It seems that money is the panacea to all life’s problems. One would assume that if there were enough money for everyone, there would be no robberies. If there were enough money to go around, everybody would be contented. If there were enough money, people would live happily. But if money were the answer to the world’s problems, God would have sent a banker and an economist. But the angels sang, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, not wealth, not money, but peace.*”

The truth is that money does not make a peaceful man; more money just makes for a richer man. More money does not necessarily make a better man. More money does not make a more peaceful man. The Bible tells us that “*a man’s life does not consist of the abundance of the things which he has*” (Luke 12:14).

Peace through the prince of peace

The world is good at making money. The world has advanced in the area of education and science. But the world has not been very good at achieving peace. So if education, a better quality of life and more money are not answers to man’s problems, then what is? What is man’s greatest need? In Matthew 1:21, we read, “*And [Mary] shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21).

This is man’s greatest need – salvation and forgiveness of sin. Because man’s greatest need is to have forgiveness of sins, therefore God sent a Saviour. And because man’s greatest need is to have peace with God, therefore God sends the Prince of Peace. And this is what the angels sang about, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*”

Peace (*shalom*) means more than just not having war. *Shalom* carries the meaning of wholeness, of completeness. It is used to describe a person who is not just living in peace with himself and with his neighbour, but more importantly he is living in peace with God.

The world is at enmity with God. Sinners are at war against their Creator and against each other. But Jesus Christ – the Prince of Peace – came to make peace. He told His disciples, “*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid...These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world*” (John 14:27; 16:33).

Jesus Christ is our **peace maker** with God. He is our peace. By His sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus Christ became the bridge that links the great divide between the Holy God and sinful men. Without Christ, sinners are alienated from the promise of God, “*having no hope, and without God in the world*” (Ephesians 2:12). But in Christ, we can draw to God because He is our peace; He has broken the wall that separated God and sinful men. On the cross, Jesus restored the broken fellowship between God and men.

The Lord Jesus Christ is our peace. When we put our trust in Jesus, “*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Romans 5:1). And when we have peace with God, we will also have the peace of God, a peace that transcends her circumstances. This is the peace we need. This the peace that is not the absence of trouble, but the quiet confidence that God is with us at all times, in all situations and at all places. This is the peace that “*passeth all understanding*” (Philippians 4:7). In light of the uncertainties of our times, God’s peace is all the more important.

At Christmas, the best gift awaits you is the gift of peace with God and the gift of the peace of God. Come and rest confidently on our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

27 Dec 09

MOVING AHEAD

This is the last Lord's Day of 2009. As I look back at my planner for the last twelve months, there are many things for which we can be thankful. The LORD has been good. "*Many, O LORD my God, are Thy wonderful works which Thou hast done, and Thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered*" (Psalm 40:5). This is the song of praise that we can sing over and over again, and we would still not exhaust its truth and relevance. The LORD is very good indeed.

In the coming year, we must "*not [be] slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord*" (Romans 12:11). We must forge ahead for God with greater zeal and fervour. We must be moving ahead for God.

When Moses began writing *Deuteronomy* the children of Israel had been wandering in the desert for nearly 40 years. The journey from the land of Goshen in Egypt to the Promised Land in Canaan was one that could have been completed in 40 days. But it took the children of Israel 40 years because of their lack of faith and disobedience. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years – one year for each day that they spent searching the land of Canaan.

Because they refused to believe and obey God and move forward, they were reduced to just moving around. There were movement and activity, but these served no purpose other than to come to the day of one's death. They wasted 40 years of their lives.

Similarly, when Christians do not want to live our lives in faith and obedience to God, we would also wander aimlessly. To be sure, there would also be movement and activity, but there is no spiritual direction in our lives. We see no difference in our own lives; and certainly, we make little difference in the lives of those around us.

At the start of *Deuteronomy*, the children of Israel had settled at Mount Horeb, and they must have been there for a quite a while. So Moses came to the people with these words, "*The LORD our God spake unto us in Horeb, saying, Ye have dwelt long enough in this mount: Turn you, and take your journey, and go to the mount of the Amorites, and unto all the places nigh thereunto, in the plain, in the hills, and in the vale, and in the south, and by the sea side, to the land of the Canaanites, and unto Lebanon, unto the great river, the river Euphrates. Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give unto them and to their seed after them*" (Deuteronomy 1:6-8).

Dwelt long enough

Horeb was a very significant place for the children of Israel. It was on Mount Horeb that God spoke to Moses out of a burning bush. It was on Mount Horeb that Moses brought fresh spring water out of a rock. And the people must have thought – "We could just stay here, and we would be fine. There is no real need for us to move forward."

They had no desire to move forward and take what God had promised their fathers. They were contented with living around the fringes of God's blessings but not in the centre of His will. But our Lord came to them, and said – "You have stayed here long enough, it is time to move on."

As God's people, we too must continue to press on for our Lord. The Apostle Paul writes, "*Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:13-14).

Paul says – forget about those things which are behind; forget about the failures and the mistakes and the disappointments; forget also about past successes and accomplishments. Our past failures and successes are mere signposts for our present. Our failures in the past are lessons for us. Our successes serve as reminders that it is God's grace that gives us the victory. So whether it is failure or success, we must press on.

Turn, take your journey, Go

There is a danger of doing nothing. There is also the danger of doing something aimlessly. But God was very specific in the direction that the children of Israel should take, *“Turn you, and take your journey, and go to the mount of the Amorites, and unto all the places nigh thereunto, in the plain, in the hills, and in the vale, and in the south, and by the sea side, to the land of the Canaanites, and unto Lebanon, unto the great river, the river Euphrates”* (Deuteronomy 1:7).

This is moving in God’s direction. For some Christians, this may be a new journey that you are taking. For some of you, in all your years as a Christian, you were just travelling around in circles, living on the fringes of God’s blessings. You think you are growing, but really you are just getting on in years. You have been a two-year old Christian for the last 20, 30, 40 years.

God says, you have dwelt here long enough, get up, turn, take your journey and move. Do not live on the fringes; make God the centre of your life. Make His glory the goal of your life.

For some, it means to change the priorities in our lives. For others, it means to reassess our value system. Turn, take your journey and go. And to be sure, the path would not be an easy one. To be sure, it would be more difficult, more demanding than staying put. There would be vast plains where the people would have nowhere to hide but be exposed to dangers. There would be valleys of disappointment. There would be hills and mountains of seemingly insurmountable challenges. There would be great rivers of sorrows. But no matter how vast the plains, how low the valleys, how high the mountains; no matter how wide the rivers of sorrow, we have to turn, take our journey, and go.

The whole nation of Israel moved because each and every person and each and every family made the decision to move as well. So it is with the growth of the church and the growth of every Christian. It is you who decide whether or not you want to turn, take your journey and go.

behold and possess

The Chinese has a saying, the journey of a thousand miles begin with the first step. And every journey begins with the first step, and it continues with the next one. That is all our Lord requires of us. One step at a time, each day at a time. Our Lord does not demand of us to do in one year what needs to be done in a life-time, but He does require of us to move one step by one step. God said, *“Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give unto them and to their seed after them”* (Deuteronomy 1:8).

To “behold” is to “look upon with joy.” Walking in God’s path and making one’s life joyful are not diametrically opposed. These two goals are one and the same. If you walk in God’s path, you will be joyful. If you want to be joyful, you have to walk in God’s path.

Conclusion

Dearly beloved, as we come to the time of the year, when we turn the page on 2009, and begin a new chapter of our lives in 2010, it is time to turn, take your journey, go and possess the blessings that God has reserved for you. May the Lord help us to move ahead according to His will, and may we live each day for His glory

Loving in Christ
Pastor Isaac

---The End---