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03 Apr 11

Nomination of members to stand for election to the church session closes today (3 April 2011). The final list of nominees will be posted on 17 April 2011. The election will be held in conjunction with our Annual Congregational Meeting, which will be held on 30 April 2011 (Saturday). Attendance at the ACM is compulsory for all members of Calvary B-P Church. Please be in much prayer for the nominees and the ACM.

Deacons

The first deacons were appointed by the church when the scope of the ministry became too big and the responsibilities became too heavy for the apostles to bear.

“And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:1-4).

The church was growing in number and need. There were certain quarters of the church whose pastoral needs were neglected. At the same time it was impossible for the apostles to leave the work of teaching to tend to these daily administrations. So the apostles called the church to look for men who would be labourers in the local church. The office of deacon was therefore one that came out of necessity.

Three criteria were given – *“men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.”* The Apostle Paul later expanded on this list. Men of “honest report” – one word in Greek [*marturoumenous*] – which is derived from the word “witness” (see Matt. 23:31; Luke 11:48). This is the first quality of a man who is called to be a deacon. He must be one who bears a good testimony within and without the church. He is to be a man of integrity and uprightness.

A deacon must also be “full of the Holy Ghost.” This does not mean spiritual gifts of speaking. Rather, a deacon must be “full of the Holy Ghost” in the sense that he is under the control of the Holy Ghost. The Bible teaches believers to *“be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit”* (Ephesians 5:18). Deacons must come under the control of and be in submission to the Holy Spirit. The control must extend to all aspects of his life – his mind and thinking, his will and doing, his passions and feelings. One writer says that men who are full of the Holy Ghost will be those with “distinguished piety.”

Third, a deacon must be full of wisdom; he must be a man who is prudent and skilful in the affairs of life. In the context of Acts 6, this is important because the deacons were in charge of meeting the needs of the church. Divisions had arisen in the church because the distribution of needs were seen by some in the church as unfair.

Different Offices, Same Criteria

The Apostle Paul further elaborated on these qualities in his epistle to Timothy. *“Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus”* (1 Timothy 3:8-13).

You find that the criteria for deacons and elders are similar. Both are to be grave (1 Timothy 3:4, 8), meaning serious minded. What we do not want in a deacon is one who is light-minded and frivolous. Deacons are

not to be double tongued or double-talk; it means to speak in such a way that the words carry more than one meaning. Elders and deacons are not to be drunkards; they are not to be covetous (1 Timothy 3: 3, 8). The offices may be different, but the criteria are the same.

In the Bible-Presbyterian church, we differentiate between elders and deacons. The former being responsible for the spiritual oversight of the church, while the latter plays more of an administrative role. However, the Constitution of Singapore Bible-Presbyterian church, upon which the Constitution of Calvary BPC is based, allows deacons and deaconesses to sit in the Church Session. The value of having deacons sitting in session is to prepare the deacons to assume the office of eldership.

Different Offices, Same Master

If there is a differentiation between elders and deacons, does it mean that elders have more authority than deacons? To see the different offices of elders and deacons and regard the former of having a higher rank than the latter is carnal thinking.

The sons of Zebedee, James and John, came to our Lord Jesus with a request, *“Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory”* (Mark 10:37). They were interested in having the top two ranks in the kingdom.

Our Lord said to them, *“Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them”* (Mark 10:42). That is carnal thinking. It is the way of the world. The world classifies people in terms of power structure. The man who stands *over* a hundred is more powerful than the one who stands over ten.

“But so shall it not be among you” (Mark 10:43). That is not the way of the church. Christians ought never to serve God because of a title. Paul says it is not wrong for man to *“desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work”* (1 Timothy 3:1). It is the desire for work – not title – that should move a man to seek the office of an elder or deacon.

Our Lord Jesus corrected the worldly thinking of James and John, *“Whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:42-45).

Our Lord Jesus sets the biblical structure for the church – not one based on power but one that is based on service. He said that the one who desires to be great among the people shall be a minister. In Greek, it is *diakonos*, which is the same word for deacon. The one who desires to be greatest shall be a servant. In Greek, it is *doulos*, which is another word for slave. A slave has no rights. A slave has no title. A slave vies for no glory except the glory of his Master.

The world classifies people in terms of power structure. God defines the church structure in terms of service. The man who stands *under* a hundred is more powerful than the one who stands under ten. But it is not the power of lordship; it is the power of servanthood.

Here is the point for any seeking to be an elder or a deacon. Do not make the mistake of thinking that a deacon after serving a number of terms automatically becomes an elder as matter of right. The one who would be a deacon must be ready to serve. The one who would be an elder must be ready to give himself for others.

The election of a church session is not a trivial matter. Members who have the privilege to propose persons for deacons and elders must do so prayerfully. Members who are privileged to be entrusted with the work of leading the church must examine themselves conscientiously. May the LORD help us!

10 Apr 11

It is as fast as a batting of an eye, and we are into the second quarter of 2011. The next quarter will be a busy time for all of us. There are several church activities that are lined up, and they need your prayer and participation. I list them below for your attention. Please take note of the times of the activities. The venue will be the church unless otherwise indicated.

16 April (Sat), 8:00pm	Mandarin Gospel Rally
22 April (Fri), 7:30pm	Good Friday Combined Service
24 April (Sun), 6:30am	Easter Sunrise Service (Jurong West Stadium)
24 April (Sun), 10:00am	English Easter Sunday Service
24 April (Sun), 4:00pm	Mandarin Easter Sunday Service
24 April (Sun)	Closing date for registration of Bible Conference 2011
30 April (Sat), 7:00pm	Annual Congregational Meeting and Election (Attendance is compulsory for all members)
2 May (Mon)	Family Day
28 May (Sat), 9:00am	BP Combined Youth Conference (Life BP Church)
10-11 June (Fri, Sat)	Missions Conference
13-17 June (Mon-Fri)	Bible Conference 2011
18 June (Sat)	Combined BP Seminar. Speaker: Dr John McKnight (Life BP Church)
25 June (Sat)	Bible Conference 2011 Echo

So please pray for these meetings, and plan to come. A word to those who are planning to attend the Bible Conference, please register early. It will help the Conference committee greatly in their planning.

Contemplating the cross

As we approach the Passion Week, I would like us to turn our attention to our blessed Saviour. The Passion Week begins with our Lord Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem when the people greeted Him with praises "*Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest*" (Matthew 21:9); "*Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest*" (Luke 19:38). And it culminates with Christ on the cross because the people demanded of Pontus Pilate, "*Let him be crucified...Let him be crucified...[Let] His blood be on us, and on our children*" (Matthew 27:25).

We begin to trace the steps of our Lord Jesus as He heads toward the Mount of Olives and into the Garden of Gethsemane, just a few hours before He was betrayed. "*And He came out, and went, as He was wont, to the mount of Olives; and His disciples also followed Him*" (Luke 22:39). We know that eventually, we will follow Him into the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Mount of Olives is about 200 feet higher than Jerusalem, and it gives a vantage point for our Lord Jesus as He looks toward the holy city.

A Place of Communion

The phrase "as He wont" tells us that the Mount of Olives was a familiar place to Him. It was here that our Lord Jesus told the disciples about God's impending judgment upon Jerusalem (Matthew 24). It was here that He taught them the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25).

It seems that during the Passion Week, The Mount of Olives was the place where our Lord retreated (Luke 19:19, 37; 21:37; 22:39). It was most probably the place where our Lord rested. It was also His place of prayer and communion with His Father.

I wonder what our Lord Jesus thought about. I wonder what went through His mind as He contemplated the sufferings that awaited Him. I wonder about the content of His prayers and meditations. I think we can intimate from our Lord's High Priestly prayer (John 17) that our Lord Jesus probably prayed to the Father about His love for the Father, His love for the disciples, His love for the Church.

I pray that in the days ahead, we will meditate about Christ and His love; that we will find the time to commune with Him in His Word and through prayer. If our Lord Jesus needed that physical and spiritual refreshment, how much more we who are made of far weaker constitution?

The Ministry of Prayer

“As He was wont...” also implies that this prayer was not an isolated event. Prayer was never an incidental part of our Lord’s life and ministry. Prayer was integral to His life. It remains so. Paul writes, *“It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us”* (Romans 8:34), and that is why we can be confident that we are more than conquerors through him that loved us; that nothing – *“neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:35-39).

The Tendency for Complacency

“As He was wont...” further implies that this place was familiar to the disciples, including Judas Iscariot. Of the twelve, our Lord Jesus chose three – Peter, James and John – to travel into that inner sanctum where they were supposed to watch with Him. But they fell asleep.

The Mount of Olives was also familiar to Judas Iscariot, who would shortly lead a band of soldiers to Gethsemane, and planted the kiss that would send the Christ to the cross. There is nothing more treacherous than to betray a friend, and to do so under the pretence of intimacy. Truly this is the work and mark of the devil.

Judas’ betrayal is the epitome of hypocrisy. While we will never think ourselves of surpassing Judas’ treachery, yet every believer should be mindful that we are easy preys to spiritual complacency. Christians should never regard the sufferings of Christ indifferently as a matter of fact. Isaac Watts, the hymn-writer, gets it right with these words...

Alas! and did my Saviour bleed
And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?

Thus might I hide my blushing face
While His dear cross appears,
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
And melt my eyes to tears.

O Christian, I pray that we would never be so casual and callous in our view of the crucified Christ.

“As **He** was wont...” also leads to contemplate the Person who went to the Mount of Olives. This was no ordinary person. He was not just another man. The accounts in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) together describe for us not just what our Lord did and prayed but also how he felt. He was *“sorrowful and very heavy”* (Matthew 26:37). He *“sore amazed...very heavy...[His] soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death”* (Mark 14:33-34). He was in *“agony...and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground”* (Luke 22:44).

The prophet Isaiah gives us a picture of the suffering Messiah. *“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed”* (Isaiah 53:3-5).

Our Lord Jesus has never been described in this way before. These are unusual descriptions of the Son of God. But they serve a purpose. It seems to me that the writers deliberately put the whole episode in slow motion so that we may think about each word and have a true sense of what our Lord Jesus went through.

Have you considered what is it like to grieve to the point of death? Have you considered what our blessed Saviour must have felt that while He grieved, the closest of His disciples slept? Did the idea of abandoning His divine mission cross His mind?

The answer is an absolute NO! *“The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45). Our great Shepherd said, *“I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father”* (John 10:17-18). Our Saviour prayed, **“I have finished the work** which thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4).

Indeed, anything less than that would leave us enslaved to our sin and without any shred of hope.

“And He came out, and went, as He was wont, to the mount of Olives; and His disciples also followed Him” (Luke 22:39). That will be the final time before His betrayal that our Lord went to the place where he was wont to go. That day, His soul was exceeding sorrowful unto death. That day He prayed and wept alone. He prepared for His death so that we may partake of life everlasting.

17 Apr 11

Who is this who is the Christ?

Today is Palm Sunday. It commemorates the day in which our Lord Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem for the last time before His betrayal. His entry was met by the rapturous cries of the Jews. *“And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest”* (Mt. 21:8-10a).

However, our Lord Jesus’ moment of triumph was brief. The people’s transient and hollow praises were betrayed by their identity of Christ. As our Lord Jesus rode by, the question was asked “Who is this?” (Mt. 21:10b).

The identity of the questioner was not known, but it was the multitude who answered, *“This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee”* (Mt 21:11). After three years of ministry, teaching and performing miracles; after our Lord Jesus Himself had made it clear that He was the Christ; after the multitude themselves had shouted *“Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest”* (Mt. 21:9), which means “Save now, O thou that dwellest in the highest heaven,” the best that the multitude could say about our Lord Jesus Christ was that he was a prophet from Nazareth.” These words spoke volumes about what they thought of Christ.

The same question can be asked of us, “Who is this?” And I am sure most of us who have been to church long enough will be able to give the theologically correct answer. We may echo the words of Peter, *“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Mt. 16:16). Or we may borrow the words of the Samaritans when they declared *“We have heard Him [Jesus] ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world”* (John 4:42). However, we have to be more than just theologically correct.

Our Lord Jesus brought along Peter, James and John – the closest of His disciples – to the Garden of Gethsemane. He said to them, *“My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me”* (Mt. 26:38).

Our Lord Jesus wanted the three disciples to “watch” with him (Mt. 26:38). To “watch” means “to guard against danger.” Part of that watching was to pray with and for Him (Luke 22:40). This was such a simple request. Our Lord Jesus rarely asked for anything from the disciples. From the time our Lord Jesus called them, He never depended on them. On the contrary, they depended on Him. He fed them when they were hungry. He comforted them when they were distressed. He healed their sick. He raised their dead. He calmed the storm. He washed their feet.

“Could ye not watch with me one hour?”

Now at His hour of greatest need, He sought their company; yet there was a curious irony in His request, *“Remain where you are. Watch with me.”* He wanted them to be near, and yet He left them and *“went a little further”* (Mt. 26:39). Luke’s Gospel tells us that *“he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast”* (Luke 22:41).

While our Lord Jesus agonised in prayer, the disciples were succumbing to the fatigues of the flesh. When our Lord Jesus came to the disciples, *“He found them sleeping for sorrow”* (Luke 22:45). Our Lord Jesus returned to His place of vigil, lonelier than ever. He came a second time to the disciples. There was no stirring from the disciples. Matthew’s Gospel records our Lord’s response when He saw the heavy-eyed disciples, *“What, could ye not watch with me one hour?”* (Mt. 26:40).

I often wondered about the tone in which these words were spoken. Our Lord Jesus asked for so little, and yet the disciples could not give. *“What, could ye not watch with me one hour?”* (Mt. 26:40). Did the tone of our Lord Jesus betray His anger? Or disappointment? Or frustration?

When He came to the disciples a third time, He said to them, *“Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me”* (Mt. 26:45-46).

These were the times of our Lord’s aloneness. He came to the prayer place alone. He was on His knees alone. He was taken by the Roman soldiers alone. Our Lord Jesus even asked the soldiers that the disciples be allowed to leave, *“I have told you that I am he: if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way”* (John 18:8). Matthew’s Gospel tells us that *“all the disciples forsook him, and fled”* (Mt. 26:56).

In the end, whatever support that our Lord Jesus sought from the disciples, He found none. Our Lord Jesus was alone with the Father. The Gospels reveal to us the amazing dialogue between the Son and the Father, which gives us a glimpse into the pain of severance in the holy triune Godhead.

Our Lord Jesus came to Gethsemane with three disciples. He told them, “*“Remain where you are. Watch with me.”* In the end, none did. Our Lord Jesus asked for so little. Why did the disciples fail Him? Why were they oblivious of the sufferings of our Lord Jesus? Have they no inkling of the gravity of the moment? Our Lord Jesus said, “The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak” (Mt. 26:41). Why was their flesh so weak?

Their flesh is weak for the same reason our flesh is weak. We dare not judge the disciples who slept while our Lord Jesus prayed. The reality is that there are many times when even under less stressful circumstances, the weakness of our flesh got the better of us.

I pray that over the next few days, we will never let the Passion of Christ pass us by without pausing to think about Him. The prophet Isaiah writes, “Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows...He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed...and the LORD hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:4-6). Spend time in prayer over this Christ. Be still! Watch with Him.

May I also remind you that there is a Combined Good Friday Service (22 April 2011) at 7:30pm. Come and worship our LORD and Saviour. Come and watch with Him! Then on 24 April at 6:30am, there is a Sunrise Service at Jurong West Stadium. Wake up early. Come and worship our risen Saviour!

24 Apr 11

Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne.
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own!
Awake, my soul, and sing of Him who died for thee,
And hail Him as thy matchless King through all eternity.

Mary Magdalene came from the tomb, and told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18). This is one statement that changed the world. Now, sin has been paid, forgiveness procured, eternal life promised. This day of resurrection is the day of victory and celebration. We echo the glad words of Paul: "*O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

But the first resurrection morning began with sorrow that lingered from three days earlier. The long Sabbath had ended. The women came to the tomb to tend to the dead. The hurried burial needed more attention to afford the dignity of the One who had died; the One Whom they loved, and the One who loved them.

So, they must rise up early and prepare the burial spices. As they made their way to the tomb, they had a discussion amongst themselves, "What about the stone sealing the door of the sepulchre? Who will roll away the stone for us?" (Mark 16:3). "We do not have the strength to move the stone, should we get one of the disciples?" Strangely, they never went to the disciples, and none of the women turned back. What were they thinking? Would it not be a wasted trip if they could not move the stone?

It was not faith in the resurrection that moved the women toward the tomb. They were preparing to tend to the dead. Perhaps it was grief that robbed them of their ability to think. Perhaps it was a sense of resignation. Perhaps it was fatigue that none was willing to turn around. Perhaps they were thinking, "We would just go ahead to the tomb; if the stone was rolled away, good, if not..."

As it turned out, God was more prepared to meet them than they were prepared to meet God. In the early hours of the first resurrection morning, "*there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it*" (Matthew 28:2). This must have scared off the soldiers guarding the tomb.

When the women reached the tomb, there was no stone sealing the tomb. That must have been a relief. Then an angel spoke to them, "*I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay*" (Matthew 28:5-6).

The women "*departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word*" (Matthew 28:8). But their message was dismissed by the disciples as "*idle tales, and they believed them not*" (Luke 24:11). It seems that it was at this time, Mary Magdalene said, "*They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him*" (John 20:1-2).

Immediately, Peter and John ran to the sepulchre. John, younger and faster, outran Peter. But John stopped at the door of the sepulchre. Peter, impulsive and brash, ran straight in to the tomb, and there was no dead body, only a set of neatly folded linen. John went in after Peter. "*Then the disciples went away again unto their own home*" (John 20:10). Not a word from them.

Perhaps the words of our Lord Jesus came flooding back into their minds. "*Behold...the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again*" (Mark 10:33-34).

Could these words be true? Dare they hope?

Mary Magdalene, overcome by grief, began to weep. And the risen Christ came to her, "*Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou?*" (John 20:15). Thinking that it was the gardener who was speaking to her, she begged for the body of Jesus. Then Jesus called her by name, "Mary" (John 20:16). This was the turning point for Mary. She knew the man behind that voice.

But again we see that the LORD was more prepared to meet Mary than she was prepared to meet the LORD.

Crown Him the Lord of life, who triumphed o'er the grave,

And rose victorious in the strife for those He came to save.
His glories now we sing, who died, and rose on high,
Who died eternal life to bring, and lives that death may die.

It was after this face-to-face encounter with the risen Saviour that Mary Magdalene came to the disciples, and said "I have seen the Lord."

The hope of every Christian is crystallized into this one statement. We too shall see the Lord. Mary Magdalene saw Him in the glory of His resurrection. We shall see Him in the glory of His coming.

Can we imagine what thoughts must be racing through the mind of Mary as the risen Christ appeared to her? Place yourself in her shoes. Hear Jesus speaking your name. Stop all the busyness of the day. Be still. Listen.

Then bow down and worship. Rejoice! Shout the glad song: He is risen. Hallelujah. The LORD lives! And because He lives, we shall live.

Crown Him the Lord of Heaven, enthroned in worlds above,
Crown Him the King to Whom is given the wondrous name of Love.
Crown Him with many crowns, as thrones before Him fall;
Crown Him, ye kings, with many crowns, for He is King of all.

But how shall we live in light of the blessed hope? Be ready (Matthew 24:44). Be faithful (Luke 19:13). Be watchful (1 Corinthians 1:7). Be sanctified (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Be obedient (1 Timothy 6:14). Be expectant – *"Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ"* (Titus 2:13). When our risen Saviour returns as the King, we must be prepared to meet Him.

01 May 11

Just a follow up on what was brought to your attention from the pulpit concerning the Church in Beijing who defied the authorities to hold an outdoor Easter service. *The Straits Times* reported on Monday (25 April 2011) that several members of the church in Beijing have been arrested. What caught my attention was NOT this act of civil disobedience on Easter Sunday, but rather the commitment of the believers of that church that eventually led to this act of civil disobedience. The pastor of the church which had been under house arrest had circulated a prayer letter to the worshippers in November 2009. I mentioned some of the prayer items. Here is the complete list (the comments in parenthesis are mine):

1. That the congregants will be able to withstand the cold outdoor temperatures. (If they could not withstand the elements of weather, they would not withstand the conditions of the prison cell.)
2. That God will keep each member walking with Him and the church. (If they were not faithful to God in their daily walk, it would be hard to conceive they would be faithful when it was time for them to take a stand for Christ.)
3. That they would not grumble and complain. (If they grumble and complain about the normal circumstances, they would not be able to hold up in adversity.)
4. That they will not be caught up by Satan's craftiness.
5. That this situation will not become political.
6. That they will continue to patiently wait on God with thankful hearts. (If they could not rejoice in normal trials of life, they would never be able to rejoice in times extraordinary difficulties.)

As Peter told the priests when he was arrested, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Consecration and commitment precede courage. The prayer of the people is essential to the witness.

Also, I will make a final appeal to those who are praying about going for our annual Bible Conference. Let me encourage you to sign up. Borrowing a lesson from Malachi 3:10 – "*Prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.*" The LORD has installed something wonderful for us.

The articles for the next four weeks will touch on the effects of modern technology on Christians. How is this technology affecting us and our spiritual walk? Is it for good or for ill? The articles are written by Bro. Bendick Ong.

The Advent of Modern Technology and the Response of Christians (Part 1)

We are all living in a digital world. This is an age of e-mails and i-phones, and of blogs and Facebook. Perhaps some of us cannot imagine living a day without our handphones; some of us may feel totally lost without our blackberries; some of us may start our days checking e-mails, even before we brush our teeth!

With the advent of these electronic gadgets, it would be self-deceiving if we are to disregard the impact of them in our lives and in those of our loved ones. We do not want to deny, and can in no way dismiss, the benefits brought about by technological advancement; and indeed, it has in more than one way, brought much convenience to our lives. However, we need to be also aware of the negative repercussions of this advent and consider contemplatively how a Christian should respond and make use of technology in a God-honouring way. God willing, I will be covering the ethical response of Christians to the advent of modern technology in the next couple of weeks.

“Geography is dead”

With the speed of the information superhighway and the ease one can get in touch with another electronically, human beings have successfully overcome distance. Gone were the days where children wrote to their pen-pals and marvelled at the culture in which another child lived in; gone were the days where couples, separated by the oceans, penned their love through writings and waited earnestly for the replies of their loved ones; gone were the days where parents yearned to write and talk more to their children studying or working overseas, but were constrained by either words or time, be it through telegrams or long-distance calls.

Thanks to technological advancement, most things are now a mouse-click away. Children do not need to rely on their pen-pals to broaden their horizons — these are all readily available on the net, furnished with colourful pictures and detailed write-ups; couples do not have to write each other letters, wait for a week for them to reach, and perhaps another for the replies to come — they can chat online for free and even see each other in the process using a webcam; parents need not write down everything they want to say beforehand just in case they forget to remind their children overseas to put on extra clothes and realize it only after they have hung up the phone — they can write everything down in an e-mail and edit with ease, and if they forget anything, they can always write another.

Indeed, like what “futurists” of our times have proclaimed, “geography is dead,” “space is conquered,” “place has ended.” The digital world is continuing to expand, and reaching out to more lands which were formerly inaccessible. Indeed, in the digital world, “there is no centre and therefore no periphery.”

But we know it is not that simple.

The internet is akin to a big forum-board with millions of “netizens” writing on, and reading it. Every hour of every day, uncountable articles are uploaded, comments are made, videos are viewed and pictures are downloaded. People seem to be communicating — opinions are voiced and challenged; facts are broadcasted and received; photos are shared and commented on; rumours are given either an extra weave of falsehood or a realistic jab of correction.

Most of us find ourselves in this intricate web of information-sharing and data-receiving. As Christians, how are we going to stay afloat amidst this onslaught of information? How can we use the benefits brought about by technological advancement to our favour? To seek an answer to these two questions, we need to understand the nature of the information found in the internet and the possible pitfalls that are involved.

Relative “truths”

As much as we enjoy the benefit accessibility of information offers us, we know we should not believe everything that is uploaded on the internet whole-heartedly. The truth is, some information provided on the net are from questionable and even malicious sources, including seemingly reliable encyclopedic entries.

Few people use encyclopedia now. In the past, parents were willing to spend thousands of dollars on a set of encyclopedia for their children; and to a child, a set of encyclopedia with their colourful photos and captions certainly captured their young imagination. But now, everything comes easily on the web. Children do not have to lift a heavy book of the shelf, flip to the right page and read an entry that may be obsolete — they just have to go to the internet, do a keyword search and get hundreds and thousands of hits and links.

However, most of these websites are not edited by professionals; and even worse, most are not monitored. The internet offers convenience by providing us facts and information, but it may also contain misleading propositions and even false claims. Many parents think that with internet filtering software, they are effectively protecting their children from dangerous websites, but this is not necessarily the case. The danger of web-surfing does not only lie in the websites that are obviously harmful — we can easily identify the websites which contain pornography or promote violence and block them from our children. The more subtle harm comes from websites which propagate dangerous ideas under the guise of truth.

In this world where ideas like postmodernism and cosmopolitanism are celebrated, people are often told to be more open-minded. That, by itself, is not altogether undesirable, for it promotes mutual understanding and charity, but again, it can be exploited to lead us wayward. For one, exposure to ideas without appropriate guidance and supervision may be dangerous to easily-impressed minds. One possible pitfall that comes in this modern age is moral relativism. A moral relativist believes that there is no absolute Truth, and along the same line, moral codes in the absolute sense — what they believe we have in this world are only many small truths in their individual relative senses, dependent on contexts. In other words, they believe what is true in a situation may not be true in another. For example, a moral relativist may not think that committing adultery is absolutely wrong, because he sees that such cases are common in some cultures; or he may agree with you that stealing in most occasions is wrong, but for some exceptional cases, stealing is forgivable.

People who embrace moral relativism face the dangers of making their moral judgment according to the situation they are in. But do not get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with being flexible and practising discretion — religious dogmatism can lead to many undesirable consequences too. But what we need to consider are the implications involved if we allow exceptions in our moral code of conduct, that is, if we think there is no absolute right or wrong, and especially when we leave these standards to the discretion of young impressionable minds. For if we allow this to happen without close monitor and guidance, the question is no longer where the line between right or wrong is, but rather, where the line between our morals and the exceptions is. And herein lies the danger — this is precisely where sin gains its foothold. If we allow one exception, we permit room for more. “Thousands of people are doing the same thing — surely this is not absolutely wrong?” “This person did this and got away with it — perhaps this is not that bad. After all, my minor indulgence is nothing compared to his major transgression!” Our sinful human nature is such that we are often happier than not to find excuses for our sins.

God willing, we shall consider, next week two more types of “truths” which seek to ensnare us, namely “virtual” and “excessive” ones.

08 May 11

Praise the LORD for a blessed Annual Congregational Meeting and the election of a new Session. All the nominees have been returned with a strong mandate from the people. As I have said on ACM, the church election is not a competition between personalities. We are not into personality cults lest we end up like the church in Corinth where one group says, "We are of Paul." Another group says, "We are of Apollos." Church election is for members of the church to confirm their support for the nominees. Now that a new session has been elected; they are worthy of all your support.

I would also like to thank God for the ministry of several Session Members who have decided to step down from their posts. They are Elder Su and Deacon Ben Tsai (Mandarin Congregation); and Deacons Thomas Goh, Peter Goh and Stephen Lai (English Congregation).

In their places, there are now three deacons in the English Congregation – Deacons Vincent Lee, Dr Bendick Ong, and Yeo Eng Hee; and Elder James How from the Mandarin Congregation. I pray that the new session will continue to build upon the foundation that the previous session has laid.

Please pray for the new session that we "*stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*" (Philippians 1:27). The session is a team of different persons, each endowed with different gifts from God. Some are in the forefront, some labour behind the scene, but all are important to the work. But it is my prayer that we will be fitly joined together.

Praise God also for the blessings that He had showered upon us on Family Day nature walk. Thank God for those who organized the family day event.

The next thing we look forward to is the Annual Missions Conference (10-11 June). This will be followed by the Annual Bible Conference (13-17 June). And the day after, in commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Authorised Version, we will be organizing a Combined B-P Seminar on "Christian Fundamentalism in the 21st Century." Dr John McKnight will be our speaker. The seminar will be held at Beulah Centre at Life BP Church.

The Advent of Modern Technology and the Response of Christians (Part 2)

Dn (Dr) Bendick Ong

Virtual "truths"

We considered relative "truths" last week. They are often associated to moral decisions we need to make in our lives. We face a moral choice and decide whether there should be an exception to what we have always believed. If one does not base one's belief on absolute divine commandments, one faces a dilemma and often makes exceptions, which often results in sins. Herein lies the danger of taking morals and truths relatively. This week we consider two more "truths," which are less associated to making moral decisions.

Virtual "truths" are "make-beliefs." A person who lives virtually loses reality of life and often sinks into self-deception and disconnects himself from real life.

A common example of one who lives in delusion is often seen in the life of one who frequents websites which propagate violence and pornography. A person who surfs such websites is often desensitized by them — he easily loses sense of the disparity between what he sees on the web and what he encounters in real life. He thinks that if he can beat people up and burn cars virtually in online games, he can also do so in real life; he seeks to imitate what he sees on the net that provoke his lust and imagination. Many crimes in real life are actually caused by misinformation from the web and the inability of the offender to draw a line between real life and the virtual world.

Another typical example is language. On the web, we are often protected by our own anonymity. People often hurl unkind remarks to one another in the comforts of their couch, knowing that the most they get in return is a rude rebuke or a verbal threat that would not actualize if they keep their anonymity well. However, this has serious implications on their character development. This mentality is almost akin to people thinking that stealing is permissible as long as they do not get caught. In addition, one loses sense of the difference between reality and virtuality — if one uses vulgarity and makes ill-intentioned remarks regularly on the web, it usually spills over to his daily ethical life with others — and this may lead to undesirable social consequences.

The examples above serve to illustrate the consequences of an inability to discern between what is real and what is virtual. There is another equally dangerous case where one is aware of the difference, but either manipulates it or is manipulated by it.

Again, this has to do with the anonymity the web provides. A person can intentionally build up a virtual self that seems perfect, deceiving others, and even deluding himself. Behind a brave-sounding call-sign, we may find a timid man; under a safe-looking banner, we may overlook lurking dangers.

In fact, this is the main reason for the rise in cyber-crimes, impressionable minds believe in the false personhood built by one on the net. And the imagination of these minds is such that the more they idealise another, the greater their propensity to believe even if these idealisations go disproportionately out-of-hand. And soon, they arrange to meet their online “friends,” and get into trouble.

But not all of these building up of false personalities are ill-intentioned. One may be an introvert who is not at all gifted in sports but describes and builds himself up as a sports champion; one may be an extrovert who does not have the patience to read a page but claims she has read much. The virtual self that these people built up may not be who they really are, but who they hope they will become.

Harmless as it may sound, this mentality is essentially self-delusionary. And like telling lies, the more one builds up this false impression which he hopes to leave to others, the more he sinks into it. In the end, his virtual self turns out to be totally different from his real self. If he is happy doing so, he is actually living in false joy because once he logs off the internet, he has to face who he really is — that is, unless he desires to live in this virtual state perpetually. But in most cases, he will sink into depression. This is, in fact, a common emotional distress faced by some celebrities — an inability to draw a line between their role as a public figure and their life as a private individual often draws them into the abyss of confusion. On the one hand, they desire to be who they really are; yet on the other, they desire to meet the standards which they have set and others have raised due to idolisation.

This is the root mechanism and mentality commonly found in blogs and social networking websites. Many started out truthfully but ended up lost in the virtual world mainly due to vanity. Our sinful human nature is such that we like to compare, and we are often envious and covetous of others. Social-networking website allows an opportunity for one to exalt oneself — even to a disproportionate extent.

But again, do not get me wrong. Social-networking websites are not altogether bad. It can serve as a platform where a busy one can stay connected to her family and friends through regular updates; it can be an avenue from which one finds friends which one has lost touch with; it can even be a channel of blessings for others if we use it to encourage or edify others; in fact, if used appropriately, these technological devices can function as useful Christian ministerial tools.

We shall discuss this next week. For now, I shall cover one more aspect of “truths” brought about by technological advancement, which affects most of us.

Excessive “truths”

Suppose all of us are matured enough to discern between right and wrong. And suppose we are all able to, in the unfortunate case of a disparity between our real selves and our virtual ones, differentiate one from another. We still face one inconvenience brought about by the convenience of technology — namely, information overload.

Like what a Christian writer has written, in our modern age, we often mistake knowledge as wisdom. In a knowledge-enterprise society, a person who has the most knowledge is always deemed respectable and socially well-connected. Everyone wants to be seen as knowledgeable and versatile. A person who does not know the latest news and gossips, the most recent brand of car, the best food in town or last night's soccer-match scores is seen as ignorant and often loses out to one who knows them and is able to share with everyone.

Similarly, a person who is esteemed as one who knows everything seeks to keep himself updated lest people catch him ignorant of the latest trends and development. As a result, everyone finds it an obligation to know everything that is made available to them. And the truth is, with easy access to the internet, it is not impossible to do so. Consequently, a person gets lost in this non-ending quest for information. A piece of update that is sent to one becomes compulsory reading if one wants to "stay in the league;" a lucky draw opportunity which requires one to spend ten minutes completing a survey becomes a duty because one does not want to lose this opportunity; a daily reading of Facebook-updates becomes mandatory for some because it satisfies their curiosity and keeps them well-informed; a day without handphones, e-mails and the internet makes one question the meaning of life. In an era where technology is supposed to bring convenience and help us save time, we find ourselves engaged in more time-consuming activities; in this modern time where electronic devices seem to have improved our lives, we become enslaved by them.

God willing, we shall see next week, how, as Christians, we can stay afloat in this irrational disarray, and use these technological tools to His glory.

15 May 11

Praise God for the good response to the Bible Conference 2011. Now let us pray for God's safekeeping for our Conference speaker, Dr John McKnight. He is the Pastor of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Darlington, in Maryland. Dr McKnight also serves as President of the American Council of Christian Churches. He will be here with his wife, Diane. Pray also for our Mandarin speaker, Rev Du Guang Yao. He is the principal of Bethel Bible Seminary in Maesai, North Thailand. Pray also for our invited missionaries: Rev Vijayenthiran and his wife Thanuja (Sri Lanka), and Preacher Yang Degang and his wife Xiu-rong.

Pray for the conference organizers – Deacons Dehan and Kenny and their committee. Then do not forget to pray for ourselves that our hearts will be prepared to receive the Word of God.

Continue to pray for the government of Singapore. This is our duty as Christian citizens, as Paul teaches, "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour" (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

I also covet your prayers. I am preaching in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, this morning, and God willing, should be returning to Singapore Tuesday night.

The Advent of Modern Technology and the Response of Christians (Part 3)

For the past couple of weeks, we have considered the possible pitfalls that come with the advent of technology. We have considered the implications of relative "truths," which are possible breeding grounds for condoning of sins; and we have also discussed the repercussions of being disoriented in our lives by virtual "truths" as well as excessive ones.

Today we shall see how we can make full use of the benefits technological advancement brought to us, without getting ourselves caught in the possible traps that may lie along the way.

Be God-centred

God gives us the Bible for a reason. It is the solid rock on which we stand if we want to anchor ourselves in the ebbs and flows of the technological tides and the calls of postmodernism and cosmopolitanism. It keeps us rooted in divine wisdom.

However, there is always an inclination within us to lose ourselves in virtuality. Human is imaginative by nature — it is no wonder why novels, movies and computer games are popular in these times — they bring a person out of the real world and engage them in a virtual world where their wildest imagination may come "true." But sadly, imagination is often misused. Covetousness is the sin behind many sinful acts; and coupled with idleness, the human mind becomes a workshop of the devil.

We need to draw a clear line between our imagination and real life. And we must impress this need upon our children as well. Train our children to discrete between truth and falsehood; be watchful of the websites our younger children surf and the television programmes they watch.

If we find ourselves spending time building up an online personality who is not ours, it is time to slow down and examine ourselves. Why do we want to give people false impressions of ourselves? Consider the time and efforts wasted to maintain that kind of falsity. Are we building for ourselves, an idealized idol? More importantly, are we actually desiring people to idolize us? Are we provoking envy in others? Are we building pride in ourselves? Are we, in our excuse of bringing glory to God, exalting ourselves rather than Him?

Instead, walk out of the virtual world and live a godly life that centres around God.

Embracing charity

This is, however, not to say, the virtual world cannot be used to glorify God — make use of it as an interface to provide encouragement and support for fellow Christians; upload photos that are God-honouring; show Christian love when you are making your comments; stop comparing your profile on the web with those of others.

We should be careful not to over-rely on the convenience brought about by digital gadgets. This is prevalent in the lives of people in fast-paced modern society. When a friend is sick, a sms saying “we are praying for you” is, of course, much easier than taking a personal trip down to his home to offer a comforting hand; when you want to express your love to your wife, sending an email with an animated figure offering a rose, is definitely more economical, both in terms of time and money, than meeting her for lunch and offering her a real rose personally.

And in a way, it is true. Before meeting our business partners personally, it is perhaps more efficient if we have some email exchanges to set things in motion; before we visit someone, calling him or sending him a sms to arrange for a convenient time is perhaps a polite gesture.

But there is perhaps no need for me to tell you that nothing beats the human touch. Make an effort to get out of the virtual world if you think you are sinking too deep into it. Are we spending too much time answering emails and surfing the web? Are we neglecting the real needs of our loved ones?

Showing humility

Most of the vices brought about by technology have to do with pride. People hurl offensive comments at one another because they think they know better or because they think someone has slighted them. Some may not be brave enough to rebuke the school bully but under the shield of anonymity in the virtual world, they can take nasty revenge or even bully those that are weaker than them, without getting into trouble. Some prefer to stay in the virtual world because it is in there that they can regain their esteem — they may be a miserable employee always reprimanded by their boss in real life; but in the virtual world, they become a warrior who slays dragons and a popular person with many virtual friends; whereas some are obligated to surf the net to keep themselves updated because they do not want to be seen as ignorant and lacking in knowledge.

Most of these have to do with pride, and pride is, indeed, one of the greatest sins. If the combination of covetousness and idleness is the breeding ground for sins, then pride provides the nutrients for sins to grow. For one may yearn to become like someone which one envies, and one may have a lot of free time to imagine what it is like to be that person; it is eventually pride that makes one think one can actually be, or even become better than him.

As such, humility is the cure to the ills technology brings. If we humbly confess ourselves as sinners and turn the other cheek whenever someone offends us, then we are less likely to hurt another online with an unkind remark; if we place our attention on God, and not ourselves, we would not spend so much time and effort in online activities that bring glory to ourselves; and if we humbly accept the fact that we do not know everything and that it is fine to be ill-informed on worldly matters, then pride would not be able to make us read every piece of news that comes our way.

In fact, it is not necessarily true that a person who is able to scan ten books within a month is wiser, or for that matter, is more well-informed than another who reads one book thoroughly and carefully over a month. In this light, I inquire the use of reading hundreds of Christian literature if we have only scanned through the Bible. The Bible, in fact, contains all the information and wisdom that we need for doctrine, for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). Turn your eyes upon Jesus and His Word, for therein contains more than enough wisdom to last through our whole life. Perhaps like what the apostle Paul has said, “for if I have boasted any thing to him of you, I am not ashamed; but as we spake all things to you in truth, even so our boasting, which I made before Titus, is found a truth. And his inward affection is more abundant toward you, whilst he remembereth the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling ye received him” (2 Corinthians 7:14-15).

Combined with charity, humility can bring us very far in our God-centred Christian walk. By loving others and always esteeming others better than ourselves, forgiving others and admitting that we do not know anything, we can avoid most of the pitfalls brought about by pride in the light of technological advancement. By wanting nothing but the approval and love of God, not only can we direct our footsteps in the right way, we can also help others do the same, be it through using the digital gadgets, which God gives us stewardship over, to minister unto others, or through our own testimonies as effective users of these tools. It is only then, that we can confidently say we have successfully used technology to improve our lives and those of others.

week two more types of “truths” which seek to ensnare us, namely “virtual” and “excessive” ones.

22 May 11

I thank the LORD for your prayers for my visit to Sri Lanka. This time, God has opened the door for me to visit Jaffna, in northern Sri Lanka. The place has been at war for many years between the Liberation Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government. The war finally ended in May 2009, and now Jaffna is slowly opening up to outside visitors. We have a mission work in Jaffna which is served by two former Geneva Institute students, Sivapalan and Sujeendran. We thank the LORD for their faithfulness. Please pray for them as well as the CCF mission team that will be going to Jaffna in August.

Christian modesty

Some years ago, I read a little book entitled, *Christian Modesty and the Public Undressing of America* by Jeff Pollard. I admire his courage for writing a book on such a topic. It is a sure way of making enemies and losing friends. There will be believers who will say that he is being legalistic. At the other end of the spectrum, there will be those who say that he is too liberal. But Pollard touched on a very important subject — Christian modesty and the testimony of the believer as reflected in his/her dressing.

Does it matter what we wear? To be sure, there will be Christians who appeal to Christian liberty, meaning to say that they are free to wear what they want; that the style of dressing is a personal choice. That is a rather self-centred approach to and understanding of Christian liberty.

Someone once said that “culture is religion externalized.” By that he means that the culture of a people is a reflection of the true faith of that people. The way people live, dress; their values, mores and priorities; their sense of beauty and morals are dictated by what they believe.

Parallel to that thought is that dressing is also religion externalized. People who are into nature-worship tend to dress immodestly. People who have embraced biblical Christianity tend to factor in personal holiness their dressing. So dressing, as in all life-style choices, is not neutral.

What is modesty?

The British playwright George Bernard Shaw once quipped that in the good old days, the wool from two sheep was needed to spin a dress for a lady. Societal mores has deteriorated to the point where today the silk from silkworm is more than enough. Modesty, it seems, has fallen out of fashion.

What is modesty? It is not prudishness. It is not shame. The Cambridge dictionary defines modesty as “of dressing or behaving in a way which is intended to avoid attracting sexual interest.” Webster defines it as “that lowly temper which accompanies a moderate estimate of one’s own worth and importance...the word is used also as synonymous with chastity, or purity of manners. In this sense, modesty is result from purity of mind, or from fear of disgrace and ignominy fortified by education and principle. Unaffected modesty is the sweetest charm of female excellence; the richest gem is the diadem of their honour.”

Modesty: Propriety, Respect, Moderation

With respect to Christian conduct, modesty means dressing, speaking, and behaving with propriety, respect and moderation. Propriety implies that there is an external standard (biblical injunctions and societal norms). Respect means to consider one’s own conscience and that of others. Moderation refers to the control of one’s dispositions and preferences.

Immodesty is the opposite. An immodest person is one who speaks, dresses and behaves in a manner that shows no regard for societal norms, gives no consideration to another’s conscience, and exercises no control of one’s desires.

“In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works” (1 Tim. 2:9-10). Paul makes the link between what one wears (modest apparel) with godliness and good works. That means that modesty deals with more than just one’s clothes. A man may dress modestly, but he may speak in an immodest way. In Proverbs, the strange woman is one who *“flattereth with her words”* (Prov. 2:16), whose *“lips...drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil”* (Prov. 5:3). The strange woman would have dressed strangely (out of the societal norm of decency and modesty), but her words also reflect the immodesty of her heart.

In Proverbs 7:4-27, we find that the immodest woman is characterized not only by her provocative and sensual dressing, but her words, actions, behaviour also betray her immodest character.

Modesty: A Matter of the Heart

You are what you truly are on the inside. Modesty, ultimately, is a matter of the heart. We go back to the question at the beginning: Does a person's dressing reflect his/her faith? The answer is unequivocally yes!

What a person is on the inside is what a person appears on the outside. And how a person appears on the outside is what he is on the inside. The internal and the external are inextricably linked. *“Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit...Wherefore by their fruits [what you see on the outside] ye shall know them [what is in the inside]”* (Matt. 7:17-18, 20).

So it is disconcerting and alarming that Christians today try to divorce the internal from the external. If one were to judge by the dressing of Christians today (both men and women), we would have to admit that there are many who profess godliness are in fact worldly at heart.

I have no intention to be judgemental of any person or style of dressing. There will be situations where a person is ignorant, especially among the younger ones who have never been instructed in this area and who are mimics of what they see in the older people around them. My purpose is to raise a consciousness amongst Christian men and women so that they will think about their fashion choices and the message that their dressing will send to others, and most importantly how they can glorify God even in this matter.

29 May 11

Last Saturday (21 May 2011), according to Harold Camping, was supposed to be the day of rapture. On billboards, posters and other publicity materials, Camping claimed that the date was guaranteed by the Bible. His stunt had become a laughing stock not just for Camping himself (which he deserves), but also for every Christian who believes in the imminent second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since Camping's shenanigans, the doctrine of our Lord's second coming has become the subject of much ridicule by comedians, commentators and even some preachers. Camping is more than just a joker, and his idea is more than just a prank.

Christians will do well to denounce the man as a false prophet, and his teachings as heresy. The Bible warns: *"Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing"* (Matthew 24:44-46).

ACHIEVING Christian modesty

We began last week by considering Christian modesty in the area of our dressing. What we choose to wear reflects our mindset. The way we live, dress; our values, mores and priorities; even our sense of beauty and morals are dictated by what we believe. Christian modesty may be defined as dressing, speaking, and behaving with propriety, respect and moderation – propriety with regard to one's observance of an external standard (biblical injunctions and societal norms); respect with regard to one's own conscience and that of others; and moderation with regard to the control of one's dispositions and preferences.

Not Legalism!

The question is: How do we achieve propriety, respect and moderation in our fashion choices? One way is to have a person/persons of authority impose a set of rules. This may be applicable in a household, but in a community of believers with diverse backgrounds, it is impossible to have a set of rules without having another list of exceptions. And in the global community of believers, where dressing is part of culture, it is all but impossible to have a one-size-fits-all standard for believers. Besides, life is far more complex.

There are some Christian communities that insist on a dress code. Let me say something positive about dress codes. Christians today regard dress codes as archaic and reminiscent of old-style Puritanism. There is nothing wrong with dress codes *per se*. In the past, I had received invitations to black-tie only events, where a certain dress code is expected. There are some restaurants that will deny you entry if you are not properly attired.

There is nothing wrong with having dress codes. However, when dress codes are equated with righteousness, then it becomes legalism. Laws are not opposed to liberty. The architect who designs a building has to abide by building codes and laws. As long as the architect operates within those codes, he is free to design what he wants. If he refuses to follow those codes, his design will not be safe. A musician, likewise, has to abide by some conventions; even a solo musician when doing his cadenzas has to abide by some rules of harmony and tempo. As long as he plays within those conventions, he is free to make music. Outside those conventions, he is making noise and not music.

To deny and ignore established codes and conventions is not liberation; it is blindness that will lead to disaster. The statement that says Christians are *"not under the law, but under grace"* (Rom. 6:14) is true or false depending on the context. If "not under law" means that a person is free to do as he pleases, then it is wrong. However, if "not under law" means that we are free to please and glorify God in our daily living, then it is true and right.

“Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour....For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness” (1 Thess. 4:1-7).

Those who say that to impose some standard of dressing is being legalistic have no idea what it is. Legalism does not oppose order. Every aspect of life has some rules and standards of sorts. People stand in line. Drivers obey traffic signals. So it is in the church. To deny order and structure is not liberation, it is unbiblical license. It is wilful disobedience and a refusal to acknowledge limitations that come with an ordered and structured society.

What then is legalism? Legalism focuses on the ceremonial and not the ethical; it majors on the external and not the internal. It spotlights the deeds of the hands but not the motivations of the heart. Being legalistic also implies a judgmental, holier-than-thou attitude. It is the attitude of the Pharisee who said to God, *“I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican”* (Luke 18:11). The end result of legalism is a man who is self-righteous and arrogant.

To be sure, legalistic tendencies abound the church today where the focus is on external compliance and internal conformity. Legalism sets in when we control the deeds without nurturing the heart. Ultimately, legalism will fail because the heart is not transformed.

Christians today have the idea that the Bible has no say in their life-style decisions. They are willing to submit to the Bible on spiritual matters, but they have no regard for God’s Word when it deals with the issues of day-to-day living. This means that the Church today – Christians – are infected with the disease of moral relativism. *“Every man [doing] that which was right in his own eyes”* (Judges 21:25).

The preceptive will of God concerning our moral behaviour is obligatory for Christians. God has said it, we must do it. In this regard, there are things that are clearly forbidden. *“Thou shalt not commit adultery”* (Exodus 20:14). Our Lord Jesus added, *“Thou shalt not commit adultery....whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart”* (Matthew 5:27-28).

Our response to God’s preceptive will is to obey. *“Those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law”* (Deuteronomy 29:29). As God’s commands are concerned, we have no right to choose what to obey. Christianity is not a choose-what-you-like kind of faith. God’s laws are non-negotiables. To obey God’s law and apply the Scripture to have some decent standard for our dressing is not legalistic.

Not Subjectivism!

Twenty-first century Pharisees are a rare breed. The modern man is more inclined to insist on his rights as an individual than he is to obey a set of strict rules. So while legalism is an error, even more pervasive than that is the error of subjectivism, in which the morality falls within the purview of the person’s own ideas rather than divine absolutes.

There are Christians who say, “As long as I feel right, I can....” The Bible warns us about our own feelings and emotions. *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9).

There are also Christians who demand that unless a practice is backed by a chapter and verse, it is illegitimate. On the surface, such an attitude seems to be biblical, but it is really an excuse for doing what is right in one’s own eyes. These people are in fact saying, “The Bible does not have a chapter and verse on dress codes, so there should be no dress codes at all.” A more specific example, the Bible does not say how high a hemline should be, so we should never impose such a standard.

Yes, it is true that the Bible is silent on many things. The Bible has nothing to say about surfing the internet and playing computer games, but God gives us principles which we apply in our cultural context.

Where the Bible gives explicit commands, we obey. Where the Bible is silent, we apply principles that are derived from the Word of God. One of the reasons that the Bible does not give a specific dress code is that is not the purpose of modesty. The purpose of modesty is to beautify the body and protect it from lustful attention and not for Christians to dress all alike. The purpose of modesty is to divert attention and time away from the physical to focus on the spiritual. Peter says that the adorning of women should be *“that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price”* (1 Peter 3:3-4).

conclusion

It is not legalism to have Christians set a standard of modesty in the area of one’s dressing. By the way, the best way to deal with this issue is also not for a pastor/preacher to set a list of rules. Pastors are not fashion policemen.

Subjectivism is wrong because it ignores all moral absolutes. Legalism is ineffective because it deals with externals only and does not go to the root of the problem. It must also be pointed out that modesty is not achieved by covering oneself from head to toe, with not an inch of flesh exposed to light. There are some Christians who think that if they dress in the fashion of bygone eras (when wool from two sheep is needed to make a dress), they have achieved Christian modesty. The fact is that a person can be wrapped like a mummy, but it does not mean he/she is holy or even modest.

Christian modesty is not achieved by adopting a particular style. Real biblical modesty is not just about the external appearance; it is about one’s heart reflected in one’s dressing, as Proverbs tell us *“beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised”* (Proverbs 31:30).

05 Jun 11

This week, we begin a busy month of church activities. Today, we have the installation of the new session. Next weekend, we have our third Annual Missions Conference, with the theme: Go Ye! The Rev. Du Guang Yao will be our speaker for the two evenings. The various fellowship groups will also present their missions project for 2011-12. On Saturday (11 June 2011), we will also be commissioning Bro. Jimmy Yip as our missionary to Maepoon, North Thailand. I urge all Calvinians to come and attend the missions conference. If you cannot go to the missions field, you can support the work of missions by coming to the conference and praying for the people and the work of missions stations.

The week of 13-17 is our Annual Bible Conference, and that will be followed by the Combined BP Seminar on 18 June 2011. The speaker will be Dr John McKnight, and he will be addressing the issues concerning Christian Fundamentalism in the 21st century. The seminar will be held at Beulah Centre at Life BPC.

Over the last two weeks, we have been considering the issue of Christian modesty. When I wrote that the external is a reflection of the internal, it also means the problem of Christian modesty in the church and amongst Christians is really a symptom of a deeper problem; one which cannot be resolved by a simple imposition of rules.

We have to realize that human culture, as a whole, is on the decline. The Western world, certainly, has turned its back on Christian values. Europe – the birth places of the 16th Century Reformers – are now considered post-Christian. The United States of America, whose history is rich with references to God of the Bible, is ashamed of and apologetic for her Christian roots. For those in the Far East where values are supposedly more conservative, we only have to look at what comes through the popular media. And we cannot even blame Hollywood for that because the movies produced in Asia (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore) are not any less sensual.

The question is: Why is this happening? How did we come to this stage where we tolerate music, art, books, movies, dressing that are perverse? To be sure, this is not something that has taken place over a short period of time; rather it is the result of centuries of neglect. Christians and the Church – at large – have gone to sleep, and we have allowed the ideas of the world to infiltrate and contaminate our minds.

Ideas are not neutral. Ideas have consequences. When our society adopts the ideas of secularism, humanism, and moral relativism, these ideas will be manifested in the life-style of the people. This is what is known as the worldview.

John MacArthur defines worldview as comprising of “one’s collection of presuppositions, convictions, and values from which a person tries to understand and make sense out of the world and life....A worldview is, first of all, an explanation and interpretation of the world and second, an application of this view to life.” (John MacArthur, *Think Biblically, Recovering a Christian Worldview*, p. 13). He adds that worldviews begin with a person accepting certain presuppositions, which are beliefs which he holds “to be true without supporting independent evidence.”

Secularism, Humanism, Moral Relativism

Secularism, as the word suggests, opposes the Christian worldview. Secularism rejects the spiritual and the eternal. It teaches the physical and the temporal. What is important to man is the here and now, and not the thereafter. It does not take much therefore to apply this idea with our life-style choices. Example: Why save to buy something when you can get it on credit and pay at your leisure? Why wait till you are married to have sex when it seems that everybody else is doing it now?

Humanism is the idea that man is central. There is no God to whom man will be held accountable. The *Second Humanist Manifesto* declares “We believe...that traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species....We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfillment of the human race. As non-theists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity.” If a person accepts the humanistic presupposition, then it is not difficult to see why he would also reject Christian values and morals. The American Humanist Association today is elated that the judge in California overturned the decision of seven million people who voted to ban same sex marriages.

Moral relativism is an off-shoot of secularism and humanism. When a person believes that there is no God, he will also not believe in absolute moral values, and he will reject any absolute moral authority. Man becomes the authority, and his values become the norm. Man is his own god. He is his own authority and standard.

Rejection of God is Self-Deification

The irony is that man thinks that by rejecting God, he is also elevating himself. However, the opposite is true, by rejecting God, man is denigrating himself. The reason is this: one who rejects God also rejects that he is the jewel in the crown of God's creation. To the secular humanist, he is just another link in the chain of evolution. If he is just a link, then he is no more important than another link.

When man rejects God, he loses his uniqueness in God's creation, and he is no different than a beast, and he actually counts for nothing. And when he is reduced to the status of a beast, naturally he behaves like one. Nebuchadnezzar is an example of this moral condition. He defied God. He deified himself. Consequently, he was denigrated to a beast.

For the Babylonian king, the experience was real in the sense that Nebuchadnezzar was "driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws" (Daniel 4:33). For the modern man who defied God and deified himself, the experience of denigration is real in the sense that his morals reflect that of animals.

Rejection of God Leads to Anarchy

When man defies the authority of God, he invites anarchy into his life. When there is no absolute right or wrong, then everything is right. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so morality is according to the mind of the godless man.

The anarchy in our society is not seen in man taking the law into their own hands; rather it is seen in the lawlessness that is characteristic of our morality. British poet, William B. Yeats lamented, "the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

We do not have to look beyond the magazines at the supermarket checkout to know that "innocence is drowned." And as traditional moral values are silenced, moral perversion gets louder.

Rejection of God Leads to Moral Perversion

The secular, humanistic, moral relativistic worldview has reduced man to mere beasts, and their behaviour proves it. David Wells, in his book *No Place for Truth*, commented that the pagan (the one who rejects God) mind "had no moral categories superseding the relativities of daily life. Pagans made no appeal to moral absolutes. They determined what was right experimentally....Pagan religion sought to bring society into harmony not with moral absolutes but with the rhythms of life." Wells is simply making the point that the pagan lives according to the dictates of the flesh. His life is dictated with the "rhythms of life" and not by God's laws.

Another Bible scholar, William Shedd, wrote that the man who rejects God and His laws "will in every instance be guided in his choice by his epicurean inclination rather than by his moral conscience....His unbelief will retain those truths that present little opposition to a life of pleasure in this world, and will cast out those that stand directly in the way of it." (Shedd, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, p. 99).

Shedd's words affirmed with what the Apostle Paul wrote in the first chapter in his epistle to the Romans. When man rejects God, he does not become morally neutral; he becomes morally perverted. "When they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened...even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them" (Romans 1:21, 28-32).

The first chapter of Romans aptly describes our modern age. When a man and a society reject God and His Word, it will lead to a degradation of culture and morals. The iniquity of our society, in my opinion, is full. The world is running headlong to destruction. It has gone off the cliff and is now desperately pedalling the air before the eventual crash. Let Christians be aware of these ideas of destruction and damnation. Christian modesty is achieved by having a list of rules. It is achieved when Christians, by the grace of God, learn to think biblically. May the Lord help us!

12 Jun 11

We extend a warm welcome to Dr John McKnight and Diane, and the Rev Du Guang Yao. Dr McKnight and the Rev Du will be ministering the Word of God at our Annual Bible Conference. We also want to extend our welcome to the missionaries who have come and join us for a week of spiritual feeding: Rev Vijayenthiran and Thanuja from Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Preacher Yang Degang and Xiurong from Tientsin, China. We pray that the LORD will indeed make His face to shine upon us and give us a spiritual refreshing through the ministry of His Word.

Ideas have consequences. The worldviews that we embrace determines our outlook on life. Secularism, humanism, and moral relativism had warped the thinking and values of the Western world. We think like the world, therefore, we are like the world. That is the reason for believers' affinity to the world's values and mores. Just as Judah of old came under Babylonian captivity, the church is under the captivity of the world – the new Babylon.

Many observers within evangelical circles have been lamenting that the modern Christian has succumbed to secularization. A person calls himself a Christian. He does Christian things. He may even subscribe to biblical truths and fundamental doctrines. He may be conservative in many of the social issues in contemporary society, but he seems to be a lacking influence on the world. Such a person may not have embraced the secular humanistic worldview, but there seems to be divorce between the Christian worldview that he holds and real life practice.

A Reformed pastor writes: "I doubt if there has been a period in all of Christian history when so many Christians are so ineffectual in shaping the culture in which they live" (RC Sproul, *Life Views*). He was commenting specifically on the American society, but his observations hold true for all societies who are affected by western culture. The society and the church have been secularized. The Church has lost its savour, and its brightness.

Christians too Lazy to Think

There are several proofs: First, the church, as a whole, has become too lazy to think. Bertrand Russell once wrote derisively about Christians that they would rather die than think. Os Guinness, a Christian writer, wrote that anti-intellectualism is the scandal of evangelicalism. That is the thesis of his book, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think*.

The evidence can be seen in the local church on a Sunday morning. Whereas in the past, the church-goer could be expected to hear an exposition of a doctrine or a passage of Scripture, now the Sunday worship is like a performance. Christians used to go to Church to worship and listen to God's Word, now they go to be entertained. In the past, God was the focus. The glory is due to Him. Now, it is about the worshipper.

After studying sermons published in evangelical periodicals, David Wells noted that "less than half are explicitly biblical, and a significant number are not discernibly Christian at all. They could have been given by a secular psychologist in a setting like the Rotary Club" (Wells, *No Place for Truth*).

Christians no Different from Others

The second proof is that there is no discernible difference between the Christian and the unbeliever in many lifestyle issues. When it comes to behaviour, there is very little difference between people who go to church and those who do not.

In a Barna Research Group study conducted in 2002, the report said that large majorities of Americans claimed that their "religious faith is very important," and described themselves as "deeply spiritual." Yet, the same study also shows that less than half of those who described themselves as Christians said that they were "absolutely committed to the Christian faith." Barna suggested that many Americans may have fallen in love with faith rather than the object of their faith, adding that "It's much less demanding to be devoted to the idea of faith than to invest yourself in a true relationship with the living God. The data raised the question of just what people have become infatuated with: the idea of being a person of faith or the reality of having an intimate, growing relationship with Jesus Christ."

Another study also shows that there is very little moral distinction between the Christian and the unbeliever. In other words, people do not mind the identity of being Christians, but they do not like the commitment.

Another Barna study in 2003 shows that out of ten moral behaviours, the top three considered by the majority of Americans to be "morally acceptable" are gambling (61%), co-habitation (60%), and sexual fantasies (59%). These are followed by having an abortion (45%), committing adultery (42%), watching pornography (38%), using profanity (36%), drunkenness (35%), engaging in homosexual relationships (30%), and using drugs (17%).

What is more troubling is that 84% of all adults consider themselves to be Christians. That means that the majority of Christians think that it is morally acceptable for a man and a woman to cohabit. That is the modern parlance for fornication. Here is what God says about fornication:

“The body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body...Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:13, 18).

“For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication” (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

In fact, the Bible’s teaching on this matter deals not just with the act, but also the mind and the intent of the heart. “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28).

There is no sinless perfection on earth. It is not alarming to learn that Christians sin, and that Christians commit sexual sin. What is alarming is Christians are rationalizing these sins by embracing a secular humanistic worldview. Christians have acculturated to “Babylon” to the extent that they are morally ambivalent to, if not accepting of, behaviour that are plainly condemned by Holy Scripture.

The gravity of the problem is compounded by what our Lord Jesus said, “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:22-23).

Christians are to be the lights of the world. The function of light is to dispel darkness, meaning to say that Christians ought to have a redemptive impact. Christians, individually and corporately, must be different from the world. We are not to be conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). We are to be “conformed to the image” of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29).

This conformity to the image of our Lord Jesus means that we have to be discerning in our life-style choices: what we watch, what we listen to, and even what we wear. It does not mean that we dress like mummies (all wrapped up), or in ancient garb, but it does mean that Christians have to renew our minds, to be spiritually discerning, to think biblically in our life-style decisions. The goal of which is that we dress in a way that reflects the holiness of God.

19 Jun 11

Over the last few weeks, we have been considering the philosophical and biblical underpinnings of our behaviour. The ideas with which we fill our minds do have an impact on our lifestyle choices. Christian modesty, therefore, is not about blindly following a list of do's and don'ts; rather it is conscientious decision-making that is based on biblical principles.

In trying to inculcate Christian modesty, there are two extremes that we must avoid. On one extreme is a focus on external appearance without the right spiritual motivation. This is the position of the moralist (Pharisee), where modesty is determined by what one dresses and how one looks from the outside.

The other extreme is a focus on the heart without the corresponding external evidence. This is the position of the antinomian, who argues that as long as one's heart is right, it does not matter how one dresses.

BODY or SOUL

Both positions present a false dichotomy. God and the Bible do not teach one at the expense of the other. God is both concerned about the external appearance and the heart motivation. God's judgment is meted based on what we do. The Apostle Paul warns: *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad"* (2 Corinthians 5:10).

God's judgment is also based on the motivations of our heart. Our Lord Jesus says: *"For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies"* (Matthew 15:19).

BODY

What we think is just as important as what we do. Here are some biblical facts about the body:

First, God is the Creator of the body. *"And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul"* (Genesis 2:7). Adam was presented to us with a human body and soul. The absence of any one of the two parts would render Adam a non-human.

Second, Adam and Eve were created naked but not ashamed (Genesis 2:25). This tells us that the human body was created good. There was no need for embellishment or ornamentation. There was nothing wrong with the human body at Creation.

However, Adam and Eve sinned against God. What God created good and beautiful, sin marred. *"And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons"* (Genesis 3:7). Adam and Eve recognised their sinfulness. They tried to clothe themselves, but their efforts were inadequate.

It was God who properly clothed them. *"Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them"* (Genesis 3:21). The reason for the animal skin over the fig leaves, as suggested by John Calvin, could be that the "garments formed of this material would have a more degrading appearance than those made of linen or of woolen. God therefore designed that our first parents should, in such a dress, behold their own vileness – just as they had before seen it in their nudity – and should thus be reminded of their sin." It could be, as suggested, by many others that it is a type of the sacrifice of Christ. The fact is that God is concerned about how Adam and Eve were clothed after the fall.

BODY and SOUL

To be human, one has to have a body and soul. It is therefore a grave error to think that all that really matters is the heart. If the heart is right, it does not matter what we do. This statement is true or false depending on its context. If by the statement means that God cares about our internal motivations and intentions just as He cares about our external actions, then it is true. If it means that the heart is the fountain of our actions, it is true.

However, if the statement is taken to mean that God does not really care about what we do with and to our bodies, then it is blatantly false. This is Gnosticism which teaches that the flesh is evil and the spirit is good. There are two strands of Gnosticism; one that teaches self-deprivation (since the flesh is evil, man must punish the flesh);

the other self-indulgence (since only the soul is important, it does not matter what one does to the flesh). Gnosticism is still prevalent today in many subtle forms.

There are devotees in many religions who punished their bodies (self-mutilation, flagellation, deprivation, etc.) thinking that by punishing their bodies, they can purify their souls.

The self-indulgent aspect of Gnosticism is more prevalent in the mindset of evangelicals. It is not uncommon to hear Christians argue that all that really matters is the heart or as long as the heart is right, the actions are of no concern. To have this mindset is to ignore what the Bible says about the human heart. *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9).

After the fall, the body is subjected to the effects of sin. It tires, breaks down, ages and finally dies. After the fall, the body is also subjected to covering not because the body is evil, but because the desires of the soul are evil (Proverbs 4:23; Mark 7:21-23). God, having mercy on us, sent His Son to redeem us from the penalty of sin and the power of sin.

The redemption accomplished by our Lord Jesus Christ is for the body and soul. Many Christians think that salvation is only of the soul. But the Bible teaches that Christ died to save us – body and soul. Paul taught about the *“redemption of our body”* (Romans 8:23), and that God will preserve the *“whole spirit and soul and body...blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Thessalonians 5:23). We are saved from the power of sin, and that is why we are able to *“yield yourselves [body and soul] unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God”* (Romans 6:13). The physical body of the redeemed person is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Paul told the Corinthians that *“the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body”* (1 Corinthians 6:13).

Christian Modesty of the BODY

Although the Bible describes certain women as beautiful – Sarah was a “fair woman to look upon” (Genesis 12:11); Rachel was “beautiful and well favoured” (Genesis 29:17), the Bible does not define what physical beauty is. There is no biblical standard for physical beauty. This is most evident in Isaiah’s description of the Messiah. *“He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him”* (Isaiah 53:2).

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” William Shakespeare expressed a similar sentiment in one of his poems: “Beauty is bought by judgment of the eye.” In other words, beauty is determined by a person and the culture in which he lives. What is beautiful in one culture may not be in another culture. It also means that Christians need not feel pressured that they have to dress a particular way so that they would be accepted.

Today’s standard of beauty, set by the fashion models that don the covers of popular magazines, is totally unrealistic. It is a standard imposed on society by advertisers who want to sell their products, and they exploit the insecurities of men and women who are discontented with what God has given them. That discontentment has driven many girls (increasingly men as well) to go under the knife to make themselves more beautiful. *Time* magazine called plastic surgery “personal re-engineering.” Not too long ago, I read a news report about girls in China who paid thousands of dollars to break their legs, endure painful traction so that they would be taller by an inch or two.

A person’s worth is not determined by his/her external looks. God does not set a standard for physical beauty. However, God does have a standard for internal and moral beauty. Read Proverbs 31:10-31 (for women), 1 Timothy 3:1-13 (for men), and these are standards that transcend all cultures. Christian modesty must therefore accentuate the internal beauty over the physical.

Because the body and the soul are inseparable, Christians are not to be indifferent in our dressing. The argument that “God only cares about the heart” is wrong. What we do with our body and how we dress reflects our worldview and spirituality. Of course, external modesty may be no more than a façade. But a godly Christian will never dress immodestly.

A person who is only concerned about his physical appearance and cares not about his soul has a sin problem. On the other hand, a person who does not care about how he dresses and claims that it is only the heart that matters is clearly mistaken in his idea of true spirituality.

To be modest in dressing without regeneration of the heart is self-delusion. To claim to be regenerated and not care about one's dressing is sacrilege because the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:17; 6:19). The true Christian will be concerned about his soul and his body because they are both God's (1 Corinthians 6:20).

26 Jun 11

Praise the LORD for a blessed Bible Conference. The Calvinists who met at Le Grandeur at Senai surely can testify of the LORD's goodness toward us. The passage through the customs was smooth as a breeze. No one was held up at the immigration counters. The coaches departed from Singapore nearly half an hour later than the appointed time, but we still managed to get to the resort in good time. The spirit at the Conference was wonderful. This year, the two additional sessions – one on church music, and the other on Christian living – were very beneficial for our people as well.

The Conference was preceded by the homegoing of a member from the Mandarin speaking congregation, and I am most impressed by the young people who rallied around the family during this time of bereavement. There were several carloads of young people who returned to Singapore on Tuesday evening to keep vigil with the bereavement family. This is what true Christian fellowship is all about.

And let me add my personal appreciation to the Bible Conference Committee – Deacons Dehan and Kenny and their team who worked tirelessly behind the scenes so that the rest of us can enjoy the Conference.

The Missions Conference preceding the Bible Conference was also a most blessed event. The Rev Du Guangyao's sermons on the two nights brought a great challenge to me personally. I also want to record my appreciation for the Missions Conference Committee – Eld James How, Deacons Jeff Soh, Bendick Ong and Bro. Chuan Yu for their hard work. Just a note to all Calvinists. The work of missions is the work of the church. So please come for the missions conference in 2012.

Christ is Saviour and Lord. This is a truth that no Christian will dispute. The Apostle Peter tells us that believers are to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). Christ Himself declared, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18).

The Lordship of Christ is universal and all-encompassing. It is universal in the sense that He is not only Lord of believers but also of unbelievers. He reigns over all. God has "highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). Even His enemies will be His footstool (Luke 20:43). This is so now, and it will be evident in the day of judgment.

The Lordship of Christ is all-encompassing in the sense that it extends in all areas of our lives. He is the Lord of the universe. He is the Head of the Church. "All things were created by Him, and for Him: And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church...that in all things He might have the preeminence" (Colossians 1:16-18). Even our thoughts are to be held captive to Him (2 Corinthians 10:5). In other words, Christ is the Lord of the church, in our family, in our lives.

The Presbyterian theologian, A.A. Hodge writes: "The allegiance we owe is not to a doctrine, but to a Person, the God-man, our mediatorial king. We are bound to obey the Bible in all our actions...because it is the law that He has promulgated as the rule of our action, and because He is our supreme Lord and Master."

Christ and the Law

In His Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus told the disciples that He came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). Then He added, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Was our Lord Jesus telling the disciples to do more than what the Pharisees did? The answer is no!

Our Lord Jesus was not pointing out any deficiencies in the law; neither was He contradicting the law. Rather, he was pointing out the wrong interpretations of the law rendered by the scribes and Pharisees, and applying the law as God had intended.

In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord was taking a superficial reading and understanding of the law to a deeper level, applying it not merely to our actions but also to our intentions. So our Lord Jesus said that murder was not just the act of killing, but it was also the intent of hatred in the heart. And adultery was not merely the act of engaging in physical relationships outside the bounds of marriage, but that “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).

To our Lord Jesus Christ, the law as to be applied in the heart and not merely to the body. Our Lord Jesus was concerned not with outward conformity but also the renewal of the mind.

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE LAW

“When we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter” (Romans 7:5-6). Christians are to serve the law not in the letter only, but also in the spirit, meaning to say that it is not obedience in outward forms but also from the heart.

Believers are saved by grace, and we are delivered from the law (Romans 7:6; 8:2). That means that believers are not justified by the law; we do not obey the law as a means to be accepted by God. The law does not and cannot save, but it does reveal to us the perfect righteousness of God and serves as a guide for holy living for the Christian. The law is God’s revelation, and through it, the Holy Spirit will convict and reprove.

For the Christian, obedience to the law is dictated not by fear but by love. It is obedience displayed in our actions that is the result of the work of grace in our hearts. Paul tells us that we must “yield [ourselves] unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and [our] members as instruments of righteousness unto God” (Romans 6:13). It is body and heart obedience. It is heart obedience that manifested in the obedience in actual actions.

the letter and spirit of the law of modesty

In His Sermon on the Mount – an exposition on the Ten Commandments – our Lord Jesus said that “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). The Jews had defined adultery as the physical act of having extra-marital relationships. To avoid the sin of adultery, the Jews liberalised the laws of divorce so that a man who had eyes on another woman, would then divorced his wife, and marry the other woman. That way, he would not be guilty of violating the seventh commandment.

Our Lord Jesus saw the wickedness of man’s heart, and gave the real intent of the law – not only the act of adultery was sin, the desire for it was also sin. And the act and the desire were equally condemned. By applying desire to the law, our Lord Jesus is saying that all forms of lustful desires are sinful. This would include expressed in speech, pictures, imaginations, and anything that may incite lustful desires in a person. Our Lord Jesus therefore demands no more than complete purity in body and heart, in public and in private, in deed and in thought.

The seventh commandment is designed to guard the institution of marriage and the family. Lust is a destructive sin. Our Lord’s remedy to lust was radical surgery, figuratively speaking. “If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (Matthew 5:29-30). The seriousness of the remedy indicates the pernicious nature of the sin.

The Bible does not specifically mention the law of modesty. However, it is the want of modesty that is a great temptation to men. Immodesty is an invitation to impurity for the single person, and infidelity for the married.

A furtive glance or simply flattery or even an impure thought has sparked many an illicit relationship, and Christians therefore are to be sensitive. Christian men – single or married – have to avoid situations where their passions may be aroused. Christian women have to be sensitive to dress in a way that would not attract unnecessary and untoward attention.

Does the dressing matter? Yes! The fisherman's wisdom is that the bait determines the fish. Young people ought to ask themselves, "By wearing in a particular way, what kind of man am I attracting?" If a young woman is really interested in looking for a godly man, the last thing she would wear would be something immodest.

A godly woman ought to be communicating her respect for the institution of marriage and her own purity. By this she is telling her would be suitors that they must be willing to respect her and pay the price of commitment. Her modesty conveys and demands commitment from him. Likewise, a godly man must learn to appreciate beauty that is more than skin-deep. Godly discernment is needed in both.

In Christ,
Pastor Isaac Ong