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02 Oct 11

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For the last few weeks, we have been considering the good and the evil that are associated with the internet. Every technological advancement opens the door for new possibilities for good and for ill. Every field of science moves ahead by improvements in technology. But it seems that every gutter of moral filth also flows faster and fuller with every technological advancement as well. A knife can be a murder weapon, but it can only kill one person at a time. An automatic firearm enables a deranged person to carry out mass killings. The printing press allows the cheap and rapid dissemination of good books and pornography.

The good of the internet is somehow negated by the evils that come with it. The internet is a market place for ideas – good and wicked, true and false. Devoid of gatekeepers, the internet also opens the door to all predators and perversions.

Place for Truth and Falsehood

The first of these dangers is information overload. While the internet gives the Christian a voice and an alternate medium to present the Gospel and teach the truth, the freedom to publish also means that those who intend to spread falsehoods about the Christian faith also have the same access.

To the post-modern mindset, where there are no absolutes, where truth is relative, the internet is the perfect tool for such a worldview. On the internet, all ideas are equal. And all ideas have equal access on the World Wide Web. Search engines – such as Google – do not discriminate. Hit “enter” and they list all the sites. With no objective standard and uniform criteria, it is up to the user to figure out the truth, and filter out the falsehoods.

Place for All Morals and No Morals

The internet promotes freedom. In recent months, the uprisings in the Middle East are kept alive by Tweeter and Facebook. In such countries where there are strict controls of the mass media, it was the internet that fuelled the Arab Spring.

However, the very freedom of the internet that can bring about much good is also the freedom that allows the worst perverts to roam. One writer observes that the dangers of the internet are shadows of its benefits. Freedom to speak the truth gives the right to the wicked to espouse their hatred.

In previous generations, it is the community as a whole – in and out of the home – that enforced morality. Inside the homes, we are brought up with the values of our parents. What they taught and did more or less determined what the children would be. And no self-respecting parent would teach his children to be wicked.

Outside the home, there are laws to restrain bad behaviour. If a person wants to carry out a sinful desire, there was the police to act as a deterrent. Paul tells us that “rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil....For he [the civil authority] is the minister of God to you for good. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid; for he bears not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that does evil” (Romans 13:3-4).

Besides the home and the community, there is a third mechanism that acts as a restraint on our morality – shame. Shame is the internal mechanism that God places in man to keep a check on his conduct. Often, it is shame and public embarrassment – the fear of “What if I am found out?” – that stands in the way of a person committing a sin.

A generation ago, these moral restraints were real. However, in the 21st Century, with the breakdown of the traditional family, increased individuality, and open access to the world through the internet, these restraints are loosening their grip.

On morality, a person can pick up his values which are alien to his own community. So while the Asian mindset is relatively conservative, the younger generation of Asians have adopted values which are radically different from that of their parents.

As far as the civil laws are concerned, the law makers and law enforcers are more concerned with being politically right than they are with being biblically right. Besides, the privacy of the internet also makes it difficult for the arm of the law to nab the law-breakers.

The internal mechanism of shame is also eroded by one’s anonymity on the internet. The use of screen names gives internet users a cover to do and say what they want with total disregard for decency or truth. Proof: One just has to read some of the postings on the internet chat rooms and news sites (including Christian ones). The worst letters – the most vile and vulgar – are those by anonymous writers. I have received emails from people who had listened to the sermons online, and when they find something disagreeable, they have no qualms spewing off the vilest invectives – words which I believe they would never say face to face or use in a signed letter.

Place for Theft and Fraud

The anonymity of the internet breeds not only spammers, flammers, stalkers, but also cheats and scammers. Scams from phony investment schemes to credit card fraud are common and made easier through the internet.

Scammers break the law. Online gambling, on the other hand, is legitimate. And online gambling has become a major internet application. It is like having a personal seat at the table. Before the casinos came on line, online gamblers have been going on in the privacy of their homes. The two local casinos merely add legitimacy (sanctioned by the government) to the vice of gambling.

With easy and equal access and anonymity, Christians should not be surprised to find – and be warned of – the worst of vices that come forth the hearts of unregenerate men. Our Lord Jesus warns, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matthew 15:19).

The internet increases freedom to the point of depraved moral licence. The internet is truly the place for every perversion imaginable. It is the morality free zone where there are no inhibitions. Christians must realise the capacity for good and capacity for evil. However, that the internet can be abused does not mean that Christians cannot use it in positive ways. But we need to be weary and alert.

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Christians – parents and children – need to confront the dark side of the internet.

Christian teenagers must be alert to the dangers of the internet. There are some places and people that you should not be with off and on line. Paul told Timothy, “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, love, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).

Christian parents must be in touch and in sync with their children so that they do not become targets by internet predators. More importantly, Christian parents need to take responsibility for the spiritual development of their own children. If we do not teach, someone will, and we can be sure that they will more likely not teach the biblical values that we want to see in our children. May the Lord help us!

04 Oct 11

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09 Oct 11

Some Christians regard the internet as a garbage bin where one can find – if he is willing to plough through the refuse and put up with the stench – some scraps of goodness. Is it that bad? And if it is, can the internet be a good tool for the Christian? But if there is some redeeming hope for the internet, what helps are there for the Christian to ensure that he can use the internet as a tool in a way that glorifies God and edify himself and others?

The internet, as we have seen, is a media that has no gatekeepers. It also defies censorship. The internet is porous. The authorities in Singapore have attempted to shut out the pornographic sites. Recently, it has all but given up by legalising these websites; proof that national censorship laws have failed. They failed because the laws of a country cannot cover the global scope of the internet. The internet which is without physical borders and moral boundaries evades and circumvents all laws.

What can Christian parents do to protect their children from the evil that is on the internet? Some parents use filtering software that blocks access to unsavoury sites. Increasingly there are companies that are resorting to the same method to keep their employees from using company time to surf the internet.

The problem with filtering software is that it is a short-term solution to what is essentially a heart problem. The well said adage is true: you can take yourself out of the world, but you cannot take the world out of you.

The other problem is that these kinds of software are not smart enough. They block websites when certain words appear in them. But without the context, even good websites are also blocked simply because they have those words.

Another possible solution is using tracking software. This keeps a record of the sites that have been visited. A person roams anywhere on the internet but he knows that his cyber surfing will be recorded.

The advantage of tracking software is that it instils self-control. Instead of preventing misuse of the internet by totally blocking some websites, which does nothing to build character, tracking software — to some extent — builds character and internalizes good values.

But the best solution is neither restriction by enforcement nor shame by embarrassment. Both methods are ineffective because of the open nature of the internet. John Milton, the English writer, says that those who think that they can control by censorship, “are not skilful considerers of human things.”

He was commenting on the advancements made to the printing press, which had been around for some 200 years and thousands of books — some good, some bad — have been printed. There were some in Milton’s days who had urged for strict control and censorship. But Milton says that it is impossible to “remove sin by removing the matter of sin.” His point is that by making the committing of sin more difficult will not remove the sinfulness of the one who thinks of committing sin.

Milton, the author of *Utopia*, a satire on a perfect society, was an idealist. He believed in the free exchange of ideas in which truth will emerge victorious. He believes that when ideas compete, truth will win. In a sense he is right. The Bible says, “For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth” (2 Corinthians 13:8).

However, the Bible also warns us about the wiles of the devil. And the only way to protect oneself against the devil’s darts is to put on the whole armour of God. Paul exhorts us to “put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:11-12).

Peter tells us to “gird up the loins of your mind, be sober” (1 Peter 1:13). Solomon says, “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it *are* the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23).

These scriptural exhortations presuppose spiritual training and building of Christian character by the Word of God. Christian parents can keep their teenage children from the unsavoury websites, but the parents cannot make their children more righteous and pure just by doing so. External conformity is not to be confused with internal transformation.

The only real solution to help us and our children keep away from the evils of the internet is have Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour and to satiate our minds and hearts with God's Word. Christ alone is able to give a new life, and the Holy Spirit alone is able to renew our minds.

“Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed *thereto* according to thy word. With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Psalm 119:9-11).

In a medium with no gatekeepers, Christians must learn to be our own gatekeepers. In a medium where all ideas — good and bad — are equal and all values — moral and perverse — are valid, Christians must be scripturally competent to examine every idea and judge every value against the light of Holy Scripture. The solution to living in a world where the prince of darkness rules is to be regenerated in our heart and renewed in our minds by the Light of the world, who is Christ Jesus.

16 Oct 11

Your Vocation is God's Calling

“It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). These were the words of our Lord Jesus Christ as He faced the temptations from Satan. Our Lord Jesus was quoting from Moses (Deuteronomy 8:3), affirming the point of the importance of the Word of God to the life of the people of God. Just as bread maintains the body, so spiritual bread nourishes the soul.

One man twisted the verse by saying that man should not live by bread alone because if he had bread to eat, he was not alone. Contextually, his interpretation was certainly off the mark, but he said it to make another point — that God uses people from all walks of life and strata of society for His glory.

This morning, if you have had toast for breakfast, you know that there was the farmer who had sowed the seeds and harvested the grain; the miller who had ground the flour; the baker who baked the bread; the distributor who brought the bread to the retailer. Farmers, millers, bakers, truck drivers, cashiers at the supermarket — all work in tangent and not always aware of the others to bring that slice of bread on your plate this morning.

On the grander scale, a business goes on, a nation progresses, and the world's economy turns because there are millions of people from all vocations doing their jobs.

Before you sank your teeth into that slice of bread, you would have done what the Psalmist did when he wrote that the LORD “who remembered us in our low estate: for his mercy *endureth* for ever... Who giveth food to all flesh: for his mercy *endureth* for ever. O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy *endureth* for ever” (Psalm 136:23-26).

In the history of Israel, this provision was at times miraculous; God provided manna for the Israelites for forty years. Other times and more often, God provided food to all flesh through other flesh. Case in point, Abigail brought food for David and his men (1 Samuel 25). The LORD gave the people laws of mercy so that the poor might be taken care of. Farmers were told not to glean the vineyard but to leave the remnants for the poor and stranger (Leviticus 19:10). The people were told to show kindness to the “fatherless and widow, and...the stranger, in giving him food and raiment” (Deuteronomy 10:18-19). God provides to human beings through human beings.

God could have made every man and woman the same way He made Adam and Eve, but God told them to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28). When God wants to populate the earth, He uses human beings to bring about new life. It is still God who gives life; “children are an heritage of the LORD: *and* the fruit of the womb *is [the LORD's] reward*” (Psalm 127:3), and yet it is through a man and woman coming together in a covenantal union that new life comes about.

When we are sick, we pray to God for healing; yet there is no contradiction in going to the doctor. There is no question that God can heal a sick person miraculously; yet He also gives doctors, nurses, pharmacists, lab technicians to help us get better. It is still God who heals, but He works through His creatures.

The fact that you are in church this morning, and you are able to sing hymns, read the Bible, listen to the sermon is the result of thousands of people doing their jobs over the years, from the teacher who taught you to read, to the bus driver that got you to church this morning, to those who prepare the sanctuary and the list goes on.

The point is that God uses people to serve other people. When you ate your breakfast, when you had been healed of your sickness, when you worshipped, you have received of God's blessings. However, from the point of view of the people who have to work so that you can enjoy God's blessings, they may not necessarily see their work as a blessing to you. Work is often regarded as a daily grind, a hard, boring and thankless job, and most people stay at their job simply because they have to make a living.

There could be people who love their work; but to some (and I suspect most), it is a means to an end. We work to survive, but more often than not, it seems that we survive only to work. So companies today invest in wellness programmes and modify work environments to help workers integrate their work into their lives.

Work was meant to be a blessing. Work was meant to be God's calling for a person. After all it was God who "took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Adam's work was appointed by God. That work was a blessing, but after the fall, the ground was cursed; there were thorns and thistles, and work became harder and no longer enjoyable.

Like Adam, we have forgotten that our work is appointed by God. Christians, in general, believe that God is still active in the world. Sadly, Christians who see God's calling them to be His children do not see God's calling them in their vocation. There seems to be a dissociation between His calling us to be His children, and His calling us into our vocation. There is an ignorance of the spiritual dimension of our work.

Christians who do not see this link between their calling and their vocation are frustrated in their work. There is a lack of purpose. There is meaninglessness in the routine – a routine endured in part because of the need of survival and soothed in part by the paycheck at the end of the month. There is confusion of what they should do, how they should live, and God's purpose in their vocation.

Christians therefore need to rediscover the understanding of and finding God's purpose for and in our work. The Word of God exhorts us that "whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). This is a general exhortation for Christians to glorify God in all that we do, including our work. How Christians can do that not just in our ministry in the church but also in our vocation is what we intend to flesh out, God willing, over the next few weeks.

23 Oct 11

VOCATION – A HOLY CALLING

Vocation, what is it? One dictionary defines “vocation” as “a particular occupation or profession especially regarded as needing dedication and skill.” A secondary definition of vocation is “a divine call to the religious life.” The word “vocation,” however, originally refers to a spiritual calling. The root comes from Latin, which means, “to call.”

In the New Testament, “vocation” appears only once – Ephesians 4:1 – “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation [Gk: *klēsis*] wherewith ye are called.” It is also translated “calling” (Rom. 11:29; 1 Cor. 1:26; 7:20; Eph. 1:18, etc.). The word is always used in association with God being the One who calls (Rom. 11:29). This is a spiritual calling. It is a high calling (Phil. 3:14). It is a holy calling (2 Tim. 1:9). It is a heavenly calling (Heb. 3:1).

In the medieval church (A.D. 500 to 1500), “calling” is reserved only for those who were engaged in church work, namely the monks and nuns. The other jobs – farmers, shopkeepers, soldiers – were considered as necessary worldly occupations. The Roman Church regarded those who engaged in these secular jobs as saved but mired in the world. For this reason, entering the priesthood is known as Holy Orders, one of seven sacraments of the Roman Church. So there is a divorce between the sacred and the secular in the Roman Church. The poor farmer in the Roman Church would never regard his work as a vocation.

As the Roman Church moved further away from the Holy Scriptures, there was a wider distinction between the clergy and the laity. The clergy was a class of spiritual elites specially called of God. The rest were merely tag along's in the church who knew nothing and did nothing. Even in the area of marriage. The Holy Orders forbade marriage. Celibacy was prized as spiritual virtue without realizing that the family is also God's calling. That is why the Bible describes the prohibition to marry as a doctrine of the devil (1 Tim. 4:1, 3).

This separation between clergy and laity was removed by the 16th Century Reformation. The Reformers reinstated the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers. “But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). All believers therefore have access to the throne of grace. All believers can and should read the Bible. All believers can and should proclaim the Gospel. All believers can and should pray. There is no need to do these things through the priests.

The Reformers insisted that the priests and nuns did not have any special claim to God's favour. The priest's vocation/calling was no more special than the peasant's. The baker could live the Christian life to the fullest and for God's glory as the bishop.

It would be a mistake to think that “the priesthood of believers” renders the work of the pastor unnecessary. The priesthood of believers does not denigrate the office of the pastor. Rather, it looks at the office of the pastor as a calling from God with its responsibilities, authority and blessings. It also regards all other work as God's calling with their responsibilities, authority and blessings.

Not all believers are called to the pastoral ministry, but every believer is called by God to a particular work. The “priesthood of believers” does not turn every believer into a church worker, but it does turn every work into a sacred calling.

With the Reformation, the Church of Christ is given the biblical understanding of “vocation.” Christians are to see their work as God's calling, and to see God's calling in their work. Martin Luther included in his Small Catechism a “Table of Duties” in which he spelt out the duties of Christians in their various vocations. To the workers of all kinds, Luther writes, “Obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ....Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does.”

John Calvin also emphasized the Christian's vocation in the world. He wrote, “We know that men were created for the express purpose of being employed in labor of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than

when every man applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavors to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage.” (*Calvin’s Commentaries on Matthew, Mark and Luke*). He also wrote that “in following your proper calling, no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have a splendour and value in the eye of God” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3.10.6).

Calvin taught that all men must work because to work was the will of God. It was the duty of men to serve as God’s instruments here on earth. This was later relabelled by sociologists as the Protestant work ethic. It must be pointed out both Luther and Calvin did not approve of work solely for the acquisition of wealth or the pursuit of worldly success. Later the Puritans would apply the teachings of Calvin in the New World.

As far as the Reformers are concerned, a person’s work is his calling, and all callings are of equal spiritual dignity. All work – farming, baking, teaching, nursing – are an occasion for priesthood, and is to be regarded and performed as a holy service to God and for His glory.

Every man is unique. God has called, equipped and blessed every person with gifts for the work that He has prepared for you. There are two possible responses to this: you can be proud of and be self-centred in the exercise of your talents; or you can exercise God’s talents in the community with other individuals.

Luther said that the Christian’s vocation is a mask of God. “All our work in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the home, in struggle, in government – to what does it all amount before God except child’s play, by means of which God is pleased to give his gifts in the field, at home, and everywhere? These are the masks of our Lord God, behind which He wants to be hidden and to do all things.” Luther is saying that while God cannot be seen, yet He is visible through the daily lives and mundane activities of His people, including our vocation.

This is how every Christian ought to look at his vocation. God has endowed you with skills, equipped you with gifts, presented you with opportunities that are unique to you so that you may make a difference for Him in your vocation. The Puritans did that, and they were a major influence upon the society in which they lived and worked. I pray that you will do the same – regard your work as God’s calling, make God real in your vocation, so that others will see how real He is in your life! “Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (Ephesians 4:1). Walk worthy of the God who has called you!

30 Oct 11

Luther's 95 Theses

The event that radically changed the religious, social, and political direction of 16th Century Europe, and whose effects were felt several hundred years later, is the Protestant Reformation. Church historians pinned this event to Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle on 31 October 1517. To be sure Luther, an Augustinian monk, was not the first person to attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church. There were others before him – John Hus of Bohemia who was charged for preaching against the Roman Church and was burned at the stake for trying. John Wycliffe, also known as the Morning Star of the Reformation, who died before Rome could get to him, but he was posthumously declared a heretic, and whose bones were exhumed on command of the Pope and ashes thrown into the river.

Luther succeeded where Hus and Wycliffe failed because of God's providence. The time was right. The right men – men of great learning and godliness – were in place all across Europe so that the fires of the Reformation could not be snuffed out.

Literacy was on the rise. The people were beginning to learn; the more they knew, the more they wanted to know. The more they learned, the more they thought and discerned. Truth was no longer locked up in cathedrals and churches and dispensed only by men dressed in clerical garb. Truth was found in the books and especially the Bible.

So when Luther nailed his 95 theses challenging the Roman church to a debate over its teachings, it caught the interest of the people. But what exactly are the 95 theses? I reproduce for you here a sample of the theses (which are nothing more than statements for debate). I trust that as you read, you will be able to see the light of truth that God has shone into the heart of an Augustinian monk. The words in parenthesis are my comments.

Out of love and concern for the truth, and with the object of eliciting it, the following heads will be the subject of a public discussion at Wittenberg under the presidency of the reverend father, Martin Luther. . . .

1. When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said "Repent", He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. (*Salvation demands true evangelical repentance.*)
2. The word cannot be properly understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, i.e. confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy. (*Repentance is not conferred by external rites such as confession and mass.*)
3. Yet its meaning is not restricted to repentance in one's heart; for such repentance is null unless it produces outward signs in various mortifications of the flesh. (*Repentance must manifest itself in the holy living of the believer.*)
5. The pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties beyond those imposed either at his own discretion or by canon law. (*Only God can forgive sins.*)
8. The penitential canons apply only to men who are still alive, and, according to the canons themselves, none applies to the dead. (*There is no more repentance after death*)
10. It is a wrongful act, due to ignorance, when priests retain the canonical penalties on the dead in purgatory. (*There is no purgatory*)
11. When canonical penalties were changed and made to apply to purgatory, surely it would seem that tares were sown while the bishops were asleep. (*Purgatory is a false doctrine*)

14. Defective piety or love in a dying person is necessarily accompanied by great fear, which is greatest where the piety or love is least. (*The teaching of purgatory is founded upon fear*)
21. Hence those who preach indulgences are in error when they say that a man is absolved and saved from every penalty by the pope's indulgences. (*Indulgences are notices endorsed by the pope to absolve the people of their sins. Indulgences, like purgatory, is a false doctrine*)
22. Indeed, he cannot remit to souls in purgatory any penalty which canon law declares should be suffered in the present life. (*The pope has no power to commit any one to purgatory*)
24. It must therefore be the case that the major part of the people are deceived by that indiscriminate and high-sounding promise of relief from penalty. (*Purgatory and indulgences offer false hopes*)
27. There is no divine authority for preaching that the soul flies out of the purgatory immediately the money clinks in the bottom of the chest. (*Purgatory and indulgences are false doctrines*)
28. It is certainly possible that when the money clinks in the bottom of the chest avarice and greed increase; but when the church offers intercession, all depends in the will of God. (*Purgatory promotes greed in the church*)
31. One who bona fide buys indulgence is as rare as a bona fide penitent man, i.e. very rare indeed. (*Indulgences promote sins because no truly repentant person would need to buy an indulgence*)
32. All those who believe themselves certain of their own salvation by means of letters of indulgence, will be eternally damned, together with their teachers. (*Those who entrust their eternal security to indulgences would be damned*)
33. We should be most carefully on our guard against those who say that the papal indulgences are an inestimable divine gift, and that a man is reconciled to God by them. (*Beware of those who promote indulgence as God's gift*)
35. It is not in accordance with Christian doctrines to preach and teach that those who buy off souls, or purchase confessional licenses, have no need to repent of their own sins. (*The Bible does not teach that indulgences can cover a multitude of sins*)
36. Any Christian whatsoever, who is truly repentant, enjoys plenary remission from penalty and guilt, and this is given him without letters of indulgence. (*Indulgence is not necessary for forgiveness of sins*)
37. Any true Christian whatsoever, living or dead, participates in all the benefits of Christ and the Church; and this participation is granted to him by God without letters of indulgence. (*Salvation is by the grace of Christ*)
39. It is very difficult, even for the most learned theologians, to extol to the people the great bounty contained in the indulgences, while, at the same time, praising contrition as a virtue. (*If indulgence works, then there is no need for a believer to sorrow for his sins*)
40. A truly contrite sinner seeks out, and loves to pay, the penalties of his sins; whereas the very multitude of indulgences dulls men's consciences, and tends to make them hate the penalties. (*A truly repentant person will not despise God's chastening*)
44. Because, by works of love, love grows and a man becomes a better man; whereas, by indulgences, he does not become a better man, but only escapes certain penalties. (*Buying of indulgences does not make for a better person*)

46. Christians should be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they are bound to retain what is only necessary for the upkeep of their home, and should in no way squander it on indulgences. (*Indulgences is a waste of money*)
48. Christians should be taught that, in granting indulgences, the pope has more need, and more desire, for devout prayer on his own behalf than for ready money. (*The pope needs prayer more than he needs the money from the sale of indulgences*)
50. Christians should be taught that, if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence-preachers, he would rather the church of St. Peter were reduced to ashes than be built with the skin, flesh, and bones of the sheep. (*The selling of indulgences had resulted in unscrupulous monks who exploited the fear of the laity.*)
51. Christians should be taught that the pope would be willing, as he ought if necessity should arise, to sell the church of St. Peter, and give, too, his own money to many of those from whom the pardon-merchants conjure money. (*If the Roman Catholic Church needs money, the pope should consider selling St. Peter's basilica. Pope Leo X used the sale of indulgences to raise funds for the renovation of the basilica.*)
53. Those are enemies of Christ and the pope who forbids the word of God to be preached at all in some churches, in order that indulgences may be preached in others.
54. The word of God suffers injury if, in the same sermon, an equal or longer time is devoted to indulgences than to that word.
56. The treasures of the church, out of which the pope dispenses indulgences, are not sufficiently spoken of or known among the people of Christ. (*The RCC teaching that indulgences were based upon the "treasures" [or merits] of dead saints is unscriptural.*)
62. The true treasure of the church is the Holy gospel of the glory and the grace of God.
66. The treasures of the indulgences are the nets to-day which they use to fish for men of wealth. (*Indulgences is really salvation to the highest bidder. Only the rich can afford to be saved*)
67. The indulgences, which the merchants extol as the greatest of favours, are seen to be, in fact, a favourite means for money-getting. (*Indulgences is big business.*)
76. We assert the contrary, and say that the pope's pardons are not able to remove the least venial of sins as far as their guilt is concerned. (*The pope cannot forgive the smallest of sins*)
79. It is blasphemy to say that the insignia of the cross with the papal arms are of equal value to the cross on which Christ died.
81. This unbridled preaching of indulgences makes it difficult for learned men to guard the respect due to the pope against false accusations, or at least from the keen criticisms of the laity.
82. They ask, e.g.: Why does not the pope liberate everyone from purgatory for the sake of love (a most holy thing) and because of the supreme necessity of their souls? This would be morally the best of all reasons. Meanwhile he redeems innumerable souls for money, a most perishable thing, with which to build St. Peter's church, a very minor purpose. (*If the pope had the power to forgive sins, why did he not do it for nothing? The same argument can be applied to Charismatic preachers who claim to heal the sick, why not pay a visit to the hospital?*)
83. Again: Why should funeral and anniversary masses for the dead continue to be said? And why does not the pope repay, or permit to be repaid, the benefactions instituted for these purposes, since it is wrong to pray for those

souls who are now redeemed? (*If indulgences were effective and souls were released from purgatory, why the need for more funeral masses?*)

86. Again: since the pope's income to-day is larger than that of the wealthiest of wealthy men, why does he not build this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of indigent believers? (*Why did not the pope use his own wealth to build St. Peter's basilica?*)

89. What the pope seeks by indulgences is not money, but rather the salvation of souls; why then does he suspend the letters and indulgences formerly conceded, and still as efficacious as ever? (*Luther was questioning why Leo X annulled the effectiveness of indulgences of former popes. To get more money, Leo X had decreed that only indulgences that bore his imprimatur were effective.*)

92. Away, then, with those prophets who say to Christ's people, "Peace, peace," wherein there is no peace.

93. Hail, hail to all those prophets who say to Christ's people, "The cross, the cross," where there is no cross.

94. Christians should be exhorted to be zealous to follow Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell.

95. And let them thus be more confident of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through a false assurance of peace.

The 16th Century Reformation is a true spiritual revival of the church – something which we sorely need today. May the LORD have mercy on His Church!

06 Nov 11

WEEK OF PRAYER (22-25 November, Tuesday to Friday, 8:15pm nightly)

Our annual week of prayer will be held from the 22-25 November. This is the start of the school holidays, and I urge all – young and old – to come and pray together for God's work in local or foreign missions, and for your own families. It will be like any Tuesday prayer meeting, beginning with the singing of hymns and a short exhortation followed by prayer. Every evening, we will focus on one particular area of ministry in the church and Christian life.

As Martin Luther said, "We cannot afford not to pray!"

God Working Through Man

Every day we go through life serving and being served by a whole host of people. In the morning, we get our favourite cup of coffee; we read the morning newspaper; we drive into the gas station to fill up our tanks. Then we are off to work, and that means having to come into contact with people through the telephone, fax, and email. Later in the day, we return to our home, we drive on the well-paved roads in our air-conditioned cars; to fight the boredom of the evening traffic, we slot in our favourite CD. After dinner, we get a brief respite as we catch with the events around the world on television.

In a day, we would have to count on the services of hundreds of people from the person who makes your coffee, to your colleagues, to the unnamed people who prints the newspaper, report the news, keep the elevator and your car moving. So appropriately, at the end of the day before we turn in, we ought to pray a prayer of thanksgiving because it is God who makes life and living possible.

God Works in Mysterious Ways

The question is how many of us are actually conscious that God is working in and through all these people. William Cowper writes, "God moves in a mysterious way/His wonders to perform;/He plants His footsteps in the sea/And rides upon the storm."

It is true that God, at times and according to His sovereign will, moves and acts in ways beyond our human understanding. The Westminster Confession states that by "God [who is] the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly" (WCF, 5.2).

When we pray for a person who is seriously sick, we expect God to do something miraculous. After all, our Lord Jesus gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, strength to the paralysed, life to the dead. And sometimes Christians have the idea that if God is going to heal a person, He must do it in a spectacular way that would stump the doctors in the hospital. To be sure, God can heal the sick that way if He so wills, and there are times when God does intervene in such mysterious ways.

More often than not, God heals us in the slow and mundane ways of going to the doctors, seeking the right treatment, and taking the right medication. The Westminster Confession says that, "God, in his *ordinary* providence, maketh use of means" (WCF, 5.3); the key word being "ordinary."

When Christians seek God's direction, some expect to see a bright light or hear an audible voice, similar to what Paul experienced on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:3); others expect God to send a vision as He did Paul, when he saw the vision of a man from Macedonia (Acts 16:9). More often than not, God uses the ordinary means of His Word – the faithful and sound preaching of His ministers and the conscionable hearing of His people. No blinding lights or invisible voices, that to some can seem disappointing.

God Works in Ordinary Ways

This view of God seems to put an unbridgeable distance between God and us. We think that He is indifferent; we think that the world runs on its own. We expect to see Him only in the big events and not in the mundane routines of day-to-day living. Not so, Paul says, adding that "they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and

find Him, though He be not far from every one of us: For in Him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:27-28a).

The reason that Christians expect to see God only in the spectacular and see nothing of Him in the ordinary is that we have lost the sense of God’s providence. The Confession defines providence as the work of God to “uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things” (WCF, 5.1). God’s providence is different from the pagan philosophy of determinism or fate because behind the governance of the world is a God who is infinitely wise, just, good and merciful.

Urban living leads to a secularising of the mind. Science and technology provide the answers to all things around us. There is a rationale for everything that happens in the world we live in. Science provides the explanations in the so called real world.

Christianity – as a religion and like all religions – is good for the individual, and it is a private matter. It deals with the unscientific soul or inner being. It may make a person feel good, but Christianity has neither relevance nor reality in the “real world.”

Beginning in the 19th century, on the heels of the Industrial Revolution, when the world became more and more mechanized, the view is that the physical world was meaningless. It ran on its own, governed by the laws of nature. Meaning in life was found in and originated from man. Every person is responsible for giving meaning to his or her life. If Christianity can do that, that is good, but the Christian cannot impose his/her Christian views on a person to whom Christianity means nothing. In other words, the Christian faith is privatised. Christianity is good if it is kept in a person’s mind and within the confines of his home.

This is the thinking today. Sadly, this is the thinking that Christians have too. Even though, Christians reject atheism, and the other false religions, we have succumbed to the pressures of the world and have kept our faith out of sight and underground.

Christian ethics and morality become a matter for the individual and has no place in the public domain. And Christians go about their work/vocation without seeing the connection between their faith and their work, without considering how they may express the Christian faith in the work that they do.

God Works Through Ordinary Providence

One of the reasons is that Christians have failed to see the power and presence of God in our daily lives. In bygone days, it was God who brings the rain. The Psalmist says, “He causeth the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; he maketh lightnings for the rain; he bringeth the wind out of his treasures” (Psalm 135:7). Today, the same rain cycle is explained changing air pressure, relative humidity, cold fronts and rising hot air; very much like Psalm 137 except that God is left out of the picture. But knowing the science behind the rain cycle does not and should not diminish the fact that God causes the rain. He works through means; that is God’s ordinary providence.

The 16th Century Protestant Reformers understood this very well. They saw two kingdoms, one spiritual and the other physical. In both, God works through ordinary providence. God could have appeared to every man the same way He appeared to Paul, but God uses weak instruments as human beings, and the means of preaching. Paul writes, “It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21). “So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). Human preaching is the means that God uses.

God also uses the church (body of believers) as His means to minister to one another. Christians are told to “bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). We are to “do good unto all *men*, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). We are to be “distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality” (Romans 12:13). In so doing, we “let [our] light so shine before men, that they may see [our] good works, and glorify [our] Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

That is how our vocation becomes a spiritual ministry. Christians must regain the understanding that God works through ordinary providence, and be thankful that for most times, we are the beneficiaries of God’s wonderful providence, and sometimes, we are called to be the benefactors of God’s goodness to others.

13 Nov 11

HUMAN INSTRUMENTS IN CIVIL AUTHORITIES

God's providence is seen in His use of man as His agents to fulfil His will. God has committed to His people the preaching of the Gospel, the caring of the old and weak, the feeding of the poor, the caring for the grieving. Previously we have considered God's ordinary providence being manifested in the running of our daily lives.

Today, we also see divine providence being extended in protecting the innocent and punishing the wicked. In Romans 13, we also see that God has set up human government for the ruling of the people. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same" (Romans 13:1-3).

Every earthly power is derived from God. He is the One who ordains the authorities at every station in life – parents in the home, teachers in the school, supervisors at work, church leaders, and police officers and judges. All these authorities are instituted by God, who alone is the supreme authority. There is no earthly authority that is not derived from God Himself.

Paul also adds that those to whom God has given the power to rule, God has also given them the strength to serve. These God-ordained authorities are His agents. "For **he is the minister of God to thee for good**. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for **he beareth not the sword in vain**: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to *execute* wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Romans 13:4). Man is God's minister for good. Man also bears the sword, meaning to say that he is God's minister to punish evil.

Just as the authorities have the power and responsibility to maintain social order and the laws that call for just society, so the citizens have the responsibility to obey the laws. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers..." (Romans 13:1a). In the preceding verses, we are told, "Avenge not yourselves, but *rather* give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance *is* mine; I will repay, saith the Lord....Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:19-21).

This means that under no circumstances (even when there is a miscarriage of justice) can a person take the law into his own hands. As Christians, we are to rely on God's ordained authorities to carry out their duties.

In a sinful world, where there is no law or respect for law, the only outcome is anarchy. The word is a compound Greek [*anarkhos*] word meaning "without ruler." In recent weeks, the "Occupy Wall Street" movement in some major American cities is an example of anarchy. Sinners must be restrained or we would tear apart the social order and that living impossible. In these cities, the authorities have failed to be God's agents to protect the innocent and punish the wicked.

That these words should come from God through the pen of Paul is in itself a powerful lesson for us. Regardless of what we think of the civil authorities that God has set over us, we must bear in mind that the civil authority that God set over Paul was the Roman Emperor. In Paul's days, it was the mad and wicked Nero, and yet Paul did not once instigate "Occupy Rome." Instead, he wrote, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers" (Romans 13:1).

The theology behind this is God's providence. In Isaiah, God revealed His purpose for raising Cyrus of Persian, "Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him....For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me" (Isaiah 45:1, 4).

From the point of view of the Jews, the Persians were just another occupying force, just like the Assyrians and Babylonians before them. The reality is that “all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him” (Psalm 72:11). “For promotion *cometh* neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. God *is* the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another” (Psalm 75:6-7).

God, in His providence, raised up Cyrus, for the sake of Jacob and Israel – His elect – whom He “called by name.” There are some who said that the word “vocation” should only be reserved for Christians. They reasoned that whereas the unbelievers see their work as a means to make a living, hold on the power, extend their legacy, Christians ought to see their work as a calling – means to glorify God and extend His kingdom.

Christians are called to a particular work or position, and we ought to see this as an integral part of our life of faith. An unbelieving politician holds an office; the believer who is a politician ought to see his office as a calling.

As Christians, we must realize that God’s authority extends beyond the church, and His care for us extends beyond our spiritual well being. He rules in every aspect of our lives – from the farmer who plants the rice to nourish our bodies to the police officer who protects our lives and property to the men in the pulpit who watch over our souls. In all of these, God works through them, for whom we thank God for His providence. And God works through us, and thus to Him and His calling for us, we must be faithful.

20 Nov 11

PRAYER WEEK

From Tuesday through to Friday, we will have a week of prayer. Every evening at 8:15, there will be a prayer meeting in the church. Let me urge as many as possible to set aside time to come and pray with and for the church. Every evening will begin with singing of hymns, testimony by a member of the church, a short exhortation, and we will end with a season of prayer. During the four nights, we will be praying for our country, our church, our families, and our mission stations.

God said, "Call unto Me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not" (Jeremiah 33:3). Every work of God must begin with prayer. We can do no more than pray until we have prayed. So please set aside the time, come and pray.

WHY WORK?

The Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" The answer was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:30-31).

Salvation is free! That is the good news that we gladly proclaim. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. There is nothing we can have that can buy salvation. There is nothing but to believe on Christ!

Salvation is the "gift of God: not of works" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Salvation does not come "by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5). *Sola Gratia*. It is all of grace alone!

Faith and Works

However, there is a link between saving grace and good works. It is true that we are saved by grace through faith in the atoning work of Christ, and not by our works; yet Paul adds that "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Literally, "workmanship" means that we are the things that God has made and ordained for the purpose of doing good works. We are prepared by God for good works. That brings into focus the purpose of work and our vocation.

Martin Luther, in his *Large Catechism*, writes, "For in the sight of God, faith is what really renders a person holy, and alone serves Him, but the works are for the service of man." Luther is saying that our relationship with God is not based on our good works, but our relationship with man is. God has placed us on earth so that we may do good works. Our Lord Jesus exhorts us, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). As God's children, we are the light that shines for God, and that which shines is our good works.

Our Lord Jesus distilled the Ten Commandments into two. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second *is* like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

We are commanded to love God, but we must not forget that our love for God is reactive. Of our own, we do not seek God much less love Him. "There is none that seeketh after God...there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Romans 3:11-12). Our love for God is in response to His love for us. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins....We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:10, 19).

Our love for man, on the other hand, is proactive. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). We are commanded to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek. Our Lord Jesus says, “Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

Serving God

Before God, all men are all equal. We – princes and paupers, rich and poor, well read or illiterate – are all sinners. However, on earth, we have different callings and vocations, and it is in these different earthly relationships between ourselves that provides the occasions for us to live out the love of God. Again, Luther says that by faith we serve God, but in good works, we serve man.

We often talk about our service for God. But our Lord Jesus told the disciples, “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 10:45). So strictly speaking, it is God who serves us. We are not serving God. In our vocations, we are in fact serving man in the name of God.

The fundamental problem with ascetic monasticism was the monks thought they were serving God by pursuing personal piety out of mainstream society. They withdrew from the world, and they rendered themselves irrelevant.

The biblical understanding of vocation places the Christian in the midst of the real world, with its challenges, complications, and conflicts. And it is in this imperfect world that the Christian is to there to do good works. It is in this world that we “may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:15).

Serving Man

Our vocation therefore involves loving and serving others. The test of whether we are living to the fullest of the abundant life that Christ promised us is whether we are loving our neighbours as ourselves. The question is – how can we serve our neighbour with the love of God?

Without even realizing it, the fact is that we are mutually dependent. We live in a house we do not build, eat what we do not plant, and clothe what we do not spun because there is a division of labour. Like it or not, we are serving one another. The world sees this constant exchange of good and services as motivated by one’s pecuniary and self-interest. The farmer needs bread, the baker needs the flour; they both need clothes, and the tailor needs bread. And they do what they do not out of love but out of necessity. It is just business for them. That is how the world functions.

To the Christian, there is more. From the dawn of creation, God said, “*It is* not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18). God made man to be mutually dependent. God did not create a class of people that is totally dependent on other people (see 1 Thessalonians 4:12; 2 Thessalonians 3:10). Of course, in any society, there will be some who cannot fend for themselves. God provides for them through us. “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction” (James 1:27a).

Other than this small exception, God made us to be mutually dependent, serving one another. In this world, there is a constant exchange. We are always giving and receiving. To the world, it is business. To the Christian, this is not just a functional relationship; it is also a relationship in which we are called to serve others. Thus as God’s people, we serve others in our vocation in God’s name, by His strength and in His love.

An unbeliever and a Christian may do the same kind of work. But between them, there is a difference in the perspective and purpose of the work. For the Christian, our work is our faith in action, our vocation is the expression of love for our neighbour, our calling is where we serve God by serving people.

In the conclusion of our Lord Jesus' final discourse on the Mount of Olives, He told the disciples, "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed *thee*? or thirsty, and gave *thee* drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took *thee* in? or naked, and clothed *thee*? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, **Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me**" (Matthew 25:31-40).

God accepts what we do for others as if we are doing it for Him. Consider this: we serve God by serving people, and when we serve people, we are in fact serving God. May the LORD help us!

27 Nov 11

During the Week of Prayer, which had just passed, we heard many wonderful testimonies of God's goodness to his people, from the cry of a mother for the life of a newborn, the prayers of a family for the husband and father, the testimonies of God's faithfulness in our weakness and His moving in the hearts of His people toward missions. These are records of God's grace and goodness in the lives of real people who have faced real challenges and, by grace, have overcome them. They are evidence that God is real. Through the four nights, we also prayed for our nation, our families, our church and our mission outreaches. I thank God for all who came and interceded with and for the church. However, I pray that praying will not stop after this week of prayer, and that this is not the only time of the year that we pray. And I pray that more will come and share in the communion of prayer with the church before the throne of grace.

What Do You Want to Do?

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" This is the question that parents often asked their children. This is the question that teenagers asked themselves when they enrol in the university. This is what career consultants do as they try to match a person's skills and temperaments to the so-called right job. This is what the job seeker ponders as he flips the pages of the classified ads in the Saturday newspaper. "What job shall I choose?"

Let me suggest a different question to direct your thoughts to the biblical understanding of vocation. The Bible exhorts us "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called" (Ephesians 4:1). We have previously established that "vocation" is "calling" (see Romans 11:29; 1 Corinthians 1:26; Ephesians 1:18; etc.). We are to walk worthy of the calling wherewith we are called. In other words, our vocation then should be seen as something we choose for ourselves. Our vocation is something to which we are called. The question we should ask ourselves then is this: "What is God calling me to do?" or "Is this the job that God is calling me to do?"

We should not regard our vocation by a one-track definition. Our lives are multi-faceted. Every one of us operates in several realms – in our places of work, in our homes and communities, and in the church. A person, thus, has several callings – as a father, as a son, as a supervisor and subordinate, as a member of a local church. This alone should spur us all – in every station of our lives – to ask ourselves, "What would God have me do?" or "What is God's calling for me at this point in my life?"

In other words, vocation is not something that happens to a person after he has acquired enough education or skills, or when a person is retired, or when he has made it big. A vocation is what God has called you to do at this point in your life.

I am amazed by the maturity of young Joseph – a mere teenager – when he was sold as a slave to Egypt. Later, he was thrown in jail on a false accusation. And then at thirty, he was promoted to be the prime minister of the same country where he began as a slave. Yet at every station in his life, he was faithfully pursuing God's calling for him. In a person's life, there will be ups and downs, but at that every stage, God's calling is there. "The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, *and* lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set *them* among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth *are* the LORD'S, and he hath set the world upon them" (1 Samuel 2:7-8).

What Does God Want You to Do?

The world's understanding of vocation is that we choose what we want to do. The biblical understanding of vocation is that God has chosen what we want to do. That is the big difference. Consider the most fundamental relationship in which we have been called – our family. We did not choose our parents. We did not choose our siblings. Our parents did not choose us. For adoptive parents who may have exercised their choice, the reality is that they could not choose how the adopted child may turn out.

Those of us who are married may think that we made a choice for our life partner. Think about it this way – the one who chooses must also be chosen for the marriage union to be a reality. The choice is not one-sided. So we can say that marriage is more a matter of being chosen. And it is this relationship of which we did not choose but into which we have been called that we are to serve and minister.

The same applies to other relationships as well – country, church, work. We did not choose the country in which we were born. We may emigrate and change our citizenship, but that does not change the culture into which we were born. For children of emigrants, they did not choose the new country, it was chosen for them.

We did not even choose the church we are in. Of course, there are Christians who change churches, and there are legitimate reasons for moving on from one church to another, especially when there is a compromise of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, one should move on to one that preaches the truth. But in that case, it is really a calling from God; “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:17-18). That is a calling to be faithful.

Sadly, there are Christians who change church like they change the flavours of ice-cream. They like sweet one time, and they prefer creamy the next. Of course, Christians who church-hop may think that they are choosing churches, but they are really running away from God’s calling.

It is a market-place mentality that causes Christians to church-hop. It is like going to a car-repair shop. If you do not like the service, you take your business somewhere else. But a church is more than just a business enterprise. A church is family. It would be the height of irresponsibility and immaturity (not to say sin) if one were to walk out on one’s family just because he does not like some things.

The point is that a church, like the family, is a relationship into which we are called, and we are therefore Paul says, “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (Ephesians 4:1). It is interesting to note that Paul prefaced these words by identifying himself as “the prisoner of the Lord.” A prisoner is a position into which one is placed, not one that is of one’s choosing.

What about work? Did we not choose our work? Look at it this way; we do what we do because of the talents that God has given us. There are people who aspire to be singers but they cannot keep a pitch; as much as they would love to be performing singers, they cannot. So even when we ask our young people, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” There is a sense that our dreams and desires are dependent on our talents.

Thus, into all these relationships – home, country, church, work – God has placed you for a purpose. And He has equipped you with the talents and the temperaments so that you can serve Him. God has a purpose in the present position for which He has called you. And unless there is a compromise of His truth and morality (that is if you are asked to teach falsehoods or commit acts of immorality), you are to be faithful in your present calling even at the expense of great personal inconvenience. Consider Joseph, he would rather go to jail than be disloyal to Potiphar and sin against God. And even in jail, he was faithful to God.

That is not to say that we do not make choices. There are decisions in life that we have to make, and some are not easy ones. “Should I take this job?” “Should I marry?” “Should I marry him/her?”

“A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps” (Proverbs 16:9). That means, we must realize that God is sovereign, and in our choosing, we must ask: “God, is this job that You want me to do?” On marriage, “Is this the person You want me to marry?” By asking these questions, you are echoing the words and walking the steps of the Apostle Paul who exhorts us “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (Ephesians 4:1).

04 Dec 11

Today, we welcome into our midst new members. Church membership is one of service and commitment. The beauty of the church is reflected in her diversity, unity, and community. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Christians at Rome, said, “For as we have many members [diversity] in one body [unity], and all members have not the same office: So we, *being* many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another [community]” (Romans 12:4-5).

We are all different; that is obvious. We are to be united; that should be our desire. We are to be part of the community; that is our duty. In joining the church, we have made a promise of commitment to be identified with the church and all her ministries, and more importantly, we have made a promise to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the Church. I pray that the new members of Calvary would avail themselves to the many ministries of service, and Fellowship and Bible Study groups and grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus.

GOD MAKETH USE OF MEANS

We have been considering the vocation/calling of Christians. Paul says that we are “the called according to His purpose.” The biblical understanding of vocation is that which God would have us do, and we are to do it according to His purpose – for His glory and the advancement of His kingdom. This is quite different from the secular understanding, which defines vocation as something which a person would like to do to earn a livelihood, and advance his position in society.

The Bible defines vocation as God’s calling; the reason being He is the One who equips a person with the grace and gifts for a particular calling. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that “God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means...” (WCF, Chapter 5, Section 3).

People and Situations

In the area of our vocation, God also makes use of means through people and situations to open and shut doors. If we recognize that if God works through means (and not directly), it is to be expected that He will use people and situations.

People and situations in life may work against or for us, but one thing is certain, we are not in control of these situations or people. In my life, and I am sure in yours, there are many instances when I intend and plan to go in one direction only to have situations and people coming into my life interfering with and upsetting my plans. At that moment of time, the normal reaction is disappointment, but in the scheme of eternity, Christians must recognize that these interruptions and disruptions are part of God’s plans. Case in point: Joseph’s position as Jacob’s favourite son was interrupted by his being sold as a slave. But Joseph realized that it was God who had called him to be a slave and the prime minister of Egypt, and he told his brothers, “Ye thought evil against me; *but* God meant it unto good” (Genesis 50:20).

Gifts and Talents

The means that God employs to call a person also include the gifts and talents that He bestows upon us. Whom God calls, He equips. This is one way in which we can know God’s calling. A person who may think that his calling is to be pilot, but he is too short and has poor eyesight, so that he could not see well and could not reach the instruments that are necessary to fly a plane, then obviously he has not been equipped with the gifts and the talents for such a calling. Nor can this too-short, half-blind person insist that the flight school take him in just because he desires to be a pilot.

Joseph’s dreams of his brother’s sheaves bowing to his sheaf, and the moon and eleven stars bowing to his star were correctly interpreted by his brothers and father. Yet there was a long period between the dream and its fulfilment.

The lesson is this: we cannot be certain that God will always give us what we want when we want it. But we can be certain that God will always prepare us to be what He needs for His glory and for advancement of His kingdom. This means that while we plan and be equipped for our vocation, we must live with a spirit of surrender to the sovereign God.

WORKING WHILE WAITING

While we are speaking of our vocation in terms of something in the future, the reality that there is never a time in our lives that we are without a vocation. Undoubtedly, we must be preparing and equipping for the future. Yet we must also realize that life is a journey with ever changing landscapes, we never stop moving just as we never stop living. So our understanding of God's calling for us must also include the present – the present relationships and the present calling which we are presently engaged in.

This also means that we are to be faithful in our present calling. Again, back to Joseph. He was faithful as a slave in Potiphar's house. He was faithful as a prisoner. And he was faithful as the prime minister.

It is not good enough for a Christian to claim that he was faithful because it is useless living in the past. It is not good enough for a Christian to say that he will be faithful because it is impossible to live in the future. What God wants is for His people to be faithful now – where and when they are.

Paul says, "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but *this* one thing *I do*, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14). Paul did not live in the past. He was reaching forth into the future, but it was in the present that he was pressing – actively and daily – toward Christ.

This means that our calling is not found in the great things that we will do for God in the future, but in the daily work that we do in the present. Our calling is not found in the spectacular events that we experience and yearn for in our lives, but in the regular routines of everyday living. It means working, cleaning, washing, cooking, bringing up our children, ministering to others in the church; it means being engaged in our present relationships; and to do all these things faithfully for the glory of God.

11 Dec 11

Some months ago, an economics professor at Valencia College, Florida, assigned his second-year students an essay asking them to write what they thought the American dream was, and what they thought the government should do for them. For the first part of the essay, the overwhelming majority (80%) of his students described the American dream in terms of having a nice car, house, being able to travel.

It seems that the American dream is no different from the 5-Cs that most Singaporeans are familiar with. On the second part, the same group of people who described the American dream in material and hedonistic terms also said the government should provide free university tuition, healthcare, jobs; that the government should give down payment for their homes and money for retirement; and that the government should tax the rich more so that they can have money. I do not know if the responses were expressions of pent-up frustrations of a failing economy and a bleak employment future. The professor, however, attributed the mindset of his students to the diminishing work ethic of a “gimme” generation. I look at our next generation with a sense of alarm because they are brought up with the mindset of this “gimme” generation. Christmas is just a few weeks away, and all we need to do is to step into any shopping mall, and we will see this “gimme” attitude.

WORK IS GOOD

The Bible tells us that when God created man in His own image, He also ordained work. “God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). “The LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

When man is engaged in honourable work, he follows the pattern that has been set by God, and displays God’s attribute. We can look at the various verbs – multiply, replenish, subdue, have dominion, dress, and keep – not merely as expressions of work, but also imitations of God’s work. God does these things, and He has ordained man to do the same.

Work becomes burdensome with the entrance of sin into humanity. God told Adam that because of his sin of disobedience, “Cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground” (Genesis 3:17-19). To the woman, child-bearing will be painful; God said, “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16).

Work remains after the Fall, but man now labours under the curse of sin. Now the dressing and keeping of the garden would be done amongst thorns and thistles. Man’s work would be fraught with difficulties and frustrations. His effort would be increased, and his returns decreased. Work is still necessary and good, but it is tainted by sin.

WORK MUST BE GOOD

As we have pointed earlier that most of us go through life without ever realizing the significance of our work upon the lives of other people, and the significance of their work upon us. Our life and our work/calling is the providential power of God. He is working through us to touch the lives of others, and He is also working through them to touch our lives.

The doctrines of grace teach us that salvation is “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5). Yet it is also true that we are saved “unto good works” (Ephesians 2:10).

The good works are not directed at God but at people. Our Lord Jesus says, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The Apostle Paul says,

“As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all *men*, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). Hence, our works are others-directed, and in order to benefit them, our works must be good.

This means that there are some types of work that Christians ought not to be engaged in. The obvious ones are work that is intrinsically sinful (thief, contract killer, drug trafficker, phone scammers), and work that promotes sin and unchristian attitudes.

I used to work in television news, and from the brief contacts with those who work in the entertainment industry (making of movies and TV serials, etc.), I come to the conclusion that there is very little work that could be classified as good (or God-honouring) in the biblical sense of the word. That is not to say that there are no Christian actors and actresses, but because of the nature of the work, I can only say that the “righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed *his* righteous soul from day to day with *their* unlawful deeds” (2 Peter 2:8). Peter was alluding to Lot and the years he spent in Sodom. It is interesting to note also that Lot escaped because God delivered him. God did not allow Lot to remain in Sodom to Christianize the city.

WORK MUST BE FOR GOD

As God’s redeemed people, we live in a constant tension between where we are (we are in the world) and what we are (we are not of the world). That tension is seen in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ; He prayed, “The world hath hated them, because they are not of the world....I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world....As Thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world” (John 17:14-18).

Our Lord Jesus sends us into the world that hates us. What we are is God’s calling and vocation for us. And where He sends us (or where He calls us) is into the world where we are to make a difference for God. That is the reason for work.

The work place is the Christian worker’s mission field. A Christian and a non-Christian may be doing the same work. There is no biblical way to repair a car or to do plumbing. The difference is this: Christians are called to engage actively in the world by exerting a godly influence through our work. We are to be the salt and light in a world that is both tasteless in its values and dark in its morals.

18 Dec 11

Parents with children in the Junior Worship – TAKE NOTE! Please meet in the Studio on the third floor immediately after the Worship Service today. Today, Calvary BP Church (CBPC) celebrates another milestone in our literature ministry with the launch of the *DAILY MANNA JR (DMJ)*.

In 2007, CBPC launched the *Daily Manna*, a daily devotional for adults. What was intended for internal circulation in our own church, by God's grace, has increased in readership. Now the *Daily Manna* is distributed to churches beyond CBPC and even Singapore. The *Daily Manna* has been translated into Mandarin and Thai. We praise the LORD for His blessings upon this ministry, and we praise the LORD for the team of editors, writers, proofreaders, and designers who gave their time and energy in this work. To those who are familiar with *Daily Manna* would know the *Daily Manna* runs on a two-year cycle, meaning to say that the daily Bible readings would bring the *Daily Manna* reader through the Bible once every two years.

In September 2010, the idea of producing a companion children devotional was broached. A team led by Dn (Dr) Bendick Ong was formed. The *DMJ* would follow the format of the *Daily Manna*. The *DMJ* is a six-year Bible reading and devotional for children from Primary One to Six. The first two years of the *DMJ* will give an overview of the whole Bible. The third and fourth years will focus on Old Testament, and the fifth and sixth years will cover the New Testament.

In a typical *DMJ* devotional, your child will find Bible readings (which will also bring the *DMJ* reader through the Bible once every two years), a short write-up based on the day's Bible reading, and a fun activity. There is also a little section for your children to pen his/her own thoughts and prayers.

To encourage your child to make Bible reading and doing QT a daily habit, our Junior Worship teachers will be following up your children to make sure that they are reading the Bible and the *DMJ* at the JW class every Lord's Day. The JW teachers have also lined up some other extra activities to challenge and motivate the children in reading the *DMJ*.

Dear parents, the *DMJ* comes at great expense in both financial and manpower costs. The *DMJ* is a tool in your hands. Here is how you can help. You can begin by inspiring your child to read the Bible and do QT by taking the lead and setting the example. Paul told Timothy, "Be thou an example of the believers" (1 Timothy 4:12); in this case, it is the parents who ought to be examples of the faith and godliness of our own children.

In the Middle Ages, a man's station in life depends on his birth. There was a strong social hierarchy of emperors and royalty, nobles and middle class, and at the bottom were the peasants and serfs. The vocation of a person depends on his father. Just as the king passed on the throne to his son, so the baker passed on his trade to the son. There was very little social mobility.

The 16th Century Reformers taught the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believer (1 Peter 2:9). One of the effects of this doctrine is man's equality before God. In Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus...there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond *nor* free: but Christ *is* all, and in all" (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). And that eventually led to greater social mobility.

Social classes remain today, such distinctions are not necessarily bad as long as they are neither restrictive nor discriminatory. In the Gospels, the Roman centurion told our Lord Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this *man*, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth *it*" (Matthew 8:8-9). Our Lord Jesus, in turn, commended the centurion for his great faith. Here, faith is seen in the centurion's recognition of the authority of our Lord Jesus over him.

Similarly, in our vocation, while we work under the authority of our supervisors, we are ultimately working under the authority of God. “Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men” (Ephesians 6:5-7).

Paul is saying that when we serve men, we are serving God, and we serve God by serving men. Christ is hidden in our vocation. When we obey our employers, we obey God. When we serve men, we are servants of Christ, and doing His will.

To the masters, Paul says, “Ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him” (Ephesians 6:9).

The Apostle’s point is made stronger by the fact that he was speaking to slaves (*doulos*) and masters (*kurios*) of slaves on equal terms. The slave is to serve the master as if he was serving Christ because Christ is hidden in his calling as a slave. Likewise, the master is to treat the slave as he would have treated Christ because Christ is also hidden in his calling as a master.

Slave or master, it is God who calls. And both slave and master must fulfil their calling as they would to the Lord. So it is with us, regardless of what we do; it is God who calls, and it is to Him that we must give account. Thus in our vocation – regardless of what it is – we are more than just doing a job, we are “doing the will of God from the heart.” May the Lord help us to be faithful.

25 Dec 11

A blessed Christmas to you and your family in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Joy to the world because the Lord is come....Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!” These words of Isaac Watts aptly describe the mood of Christmas. However, strictly speaking on the first Christmas, the people, like most people today, were too preoccupied with themselves. The joy was certainly not universal.

The joy was experienced by Mary and Joseph because they knew first-hand the significance of the Baby that they cradled in their arms.

The angels were joyful too because they too knew because they were the heralds. One announced to the shepherds, *“Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord”* (Luke 2:10-11). And that was followed by *“a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men”* (Luke 2:13-14).

The shepherds were also joyful because of what they heard from the angels, and what they saw at the manger in Bethlehem. *“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them”* (Luke 2:20).

The shepherds were the first people to hear the good news of the birth of the Saviour. They were also the most unlikely group of people to be the first recipient of the good news. Shepherding was considered a low-skilled work. And shepherds were considered as nobodies. When the wise men came looking for the king of the Jews, I do not think that they had the shepherds in mind.

In the days of the New Testament, shepherds were considered the outcasts of society. In the rabbinic writings, the shepherds were not allowed to testify in court. Because the shepherds were out in the wilderness for long periods of time, they were not able to participate in the temple feasts and observe the ceremonial laws; shepherds were considered ceremonially unclean. Yet it was to these lowly shepherds that the angel announced the birth of the Messiah.

Why the shepherds? Perhaps, for the reason that the good news to be good must reach down to the lowliest of people. Perhaps the shepherds were chosen because they represented all that was true about the birth of Christ – the humility of the Saviour. The shepherds were humble. And must every recipient of the good news of salvation.

When the angel appeared to the shepherds, their initial reaction was one of extreme fear (Luke 2:9). But their hearts were put at ease at the news. *“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord”* (Luke 2:11).

What a message! A Saviour? The Christ? The Messiah? Born unto us?

How would the lowly shepherds respond? This was a promise that had been told to them by their fathers and the fathers before them for the last several hundred years. This was a message of hope to a people who had lost all hope. But finally now, the promise was fulfilled. And as soon as the angel left, *“the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us”* (Luke 2:15).

What a glorious message of hope! What good tidings of great joy!

The shepherds heard. They believed. They acted. The shepherds said one to another, *“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger”* (Luke 2:15-16).

The shepherd acted upon what they had heard and believed, and it was only when they came to the manger that they saw. This is faith at work; faith that allows one to see. Did not our Lord Jesus tell Thomas, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29). The shepherds heard. They believed. They went to Bethlehem. They **saw** the Babe lying in a manger. They had faith that opened their spiritual eyes to God's truth.

This Christmas and every Christmas, people put up their lights; they deck the halls. They repeat ad nauseam the Christmas jingles. Then 26th December comes around, and the lights will be taken down to be stored away for the rest of the year. Consider the shepherds and what they did after Bethlehem. "The shepherds **returned**, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them" (Luke 2:20).

To where did the shepherds return? Well, they returned to their sheep. They returned to their work of keeping the sheep. They returned to their lowly station in life, and the work of shepherding. They returned as poor lowly shepherds.

But there is a difference. Christ made the difference. In Christ, they were blessed. Now their work took on new meaning. Now they had a new purpose. They returned to their job with a sanctified attitude, and with a divine purpose. They returned to their keeping their sheep glorifying and praising God.

And so it should be with every believer at Christmas. Come to Christ. Believe in Him. Obey Him. Love Him. Worship Him. And return. Return with Jesus, take Him with you to your work, to your home, to your school, to your neighbourhood, to whatever you do and wherever you are so that you can be glorifying and praising God for His work of saving grace in your life. May the Holy Spirit impress upon your heart and mind this day so that this Christmas may be one that is a real blessing to you and your family, and be glorifying to God.

In Christ
Pastor Isaac Ong

+++The End+++