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Getting The Right Message Across

(ANS) When the church considers evangelism, it needs to consider the following questions: What is the message? Who should spread the message? How should the message be spread? These questions were raised at a national Self-Propagation Symposium held in Shanghai in November 1997 (see ANS 98.2.2.). Now, a year later, Rev. Cao Shengjie notes in January's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, that plenty of attention has been given to the "who" and "how" of evangelism but little attention to the "what", the content of the message.

Rev. Cao commends most churches for concentrating on basic Christian teaching within the pulpit since churches re-opened in the early 80's. This has led to many believers being firmly rooted in their faith and able to withstand attacks by groups preaching heresy. Preachers have also stressed the need to "Give glory to God and benefit people," leading to a greater social awareness among believers and a willingness to serve within society. This was seen clearly in the response of believers up and down the country during the devastating floods last summer.

However, certain problems with the messages being preached in some churches still remain. In some areas, preachers have received little education and no systematic theological training. As a result, they tend to interpret the Bible both literally and as they see fit, leading to misinterpretations and erroneous teaching. Many such preachers encourage a superstitious attitude toward faith, portraying it as a mere tool for getting God to grant wishes and requests. This can result in people outside the church viewing Christian faith as nothing better than a folk superstition.

A second problem identified by Rev. Cao lies in the instruction believers receive concerning relations with unbelievers and people of other faiths. Some preachers condemn China as an "Atheistic State" which is cursed by God. Non-Christians are condemned as "outcasts", "damned" and just downright evil. In Rev. Cao's view, such an attitude only serves to alienate believers from people outside the church. It prevents believers from sharing in good works undertaken by those outside the church and spreading God's love to those who have not yet heard the Gospel.
Many preachers concentrate so much on spiritual matters in their messages that they give no guidance to believers on how to cope with the realities of day-to-day life in the material world. Some preachers make no distinctions and dismiss all material, worldly and financial things as evil. Furthermore, now that the new millennium is approaching, many preachers have become "end of the world" prophets of doom, overemphasizing and misinterpreting Biblical prophecies and passages concerning the Second Coming of Christ.

Rev. Cao believes these problems all stem from the fact that the Chinese church as a whole has not yet managed to create an atmosphere of general theological enquiry, discussion and debate among believers. This being the case, evangelists take their inspiration from outside sources when composing their messages. Preachers either still reflect the views of the former Western missionaries, from whom they received their training, or else adopt the teachings of hostile foreign church groups who have infiltrated China today. This being the case, Rev. Cao stresses the urgent need for the Chinese church to work on developing its own solutions to theological questions through involving more and more members of the church. Unless the Chinese church develops its own standards, preachers have no tools with which they can assess what is beneficial and what is unhelpful in the former and current teachings of overseas church groups.

In order to create an atmosphere within the church where theological reflection can take place, Rev. Cao stresses three main pre-requisites. Firstly, the church needs to separate questions of theology from questions of faith. Believers need to understand that faith never changes, only the understanding and interpretation of faith changes through the ages according to different times, places and situations. Secondly, theological discussion needs to reflect the special time, situation and social background in which the Chinese church finds itself today. The Chinese church exists within a socialist society, and so it must interpret the message of the Gospel in the light of that society. Rev. Cao notes that differing theologies around the world always reflect the presuppositions and backgrounds in which they take place, and there is no escaping this fact. Finally, Rev. Cao emphasizes that open theological discussion can only exist within an atmosphere of mutual respect for differing theological viewpoints. Although Paul and Peter differed on their understanding of faith, as did the church fathers Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, nobody would ever question their allegiance to God. If believers can accept that God is too great for any one person or group to contain the whole truth about Him, then the Chinese church can finally move forward in its thinking.

The Issue Of "Face"

(ANS) "When tigers die, they leave behind their skin; when people die, they leave behind their reputation." In most cultures, maintaining one's reputation or "keeping one's face" is important, but this is especially the case in China. In modern China, newspapers, magazines and TV shows are full of instances of one person destroying another's reputation, writes Weng Suli in the December 1998 edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church. Unfortunately, as Weng notes, this trend is spreading to the church as well.
Weng cites cases where pastors in the church misuse the pulpit as a chance to attack certain members of the congregation. Although pastors rarely mention the person by name, they deliver their sermons and arrange their choice of Biblical passages in such a way that there can be no doubt as to who they are attacking. After the sermon, members of such congregations can hardly wait to discuss among themselves who the person might be who has incurred the pastor's wrath and why. As Weng points out, some pastors are all too happy to confirm such rumours. Through such behaviour, Weng believes, a pastor loses his or her credibility as a servant of the Lord. He or she leads believers into thinking that it is acceptable to damage a person's good name in public.

In a similar manner, when believers are dissatisfied with a pastor in some way, they rarely seek to directly resolve this with the pastor. Rather, believers often gossip about the pastor among themselves and, even more destructively, to others outside of the church. Weng comments how this does great harm to the view those outside of the church have of Christians and Christianity.

"I never thought I would see scenes reminiscent of Cultural Revolution behaviour within the church," comments one believer about two pastors warring against each other. These pastors attack each other from the pulpit, visit members of the congregation to get believers "on their side", openly attack each other at church meetings and even occasionally come to blows. This makes some Chinese believers say that "The way is true but the people are false." Weng reminds readers that "in judging others, we condemn ourselves." (Romans 2:1), and calls on all members of the church to forgiveness and tolerance of each other's shortcomings.

Leading Family Members To Faith In Christ

(ANS) Many believers in China live in families where, at best, only half the members share their beliefs. Often, it is the case between married couples that one spouse believes and the other does not. This can create certain tensions within the family. In January's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese Church, Guo Sanshun from Henan Province gives some ideas on how to be a good witness to non-believing family members.

Christianity is a religion of love. Believers feel the need to meet together often to worship God, bring the needs of others before God in prayer and to care for those in distress within the church and community. Many unbelieving family members cannot understand this need. When faced with resistance to their Christian activities, Guo suggests that the believer's first response should be to pray and bring the situation to God. Guo tells the story of one woman believer whose husband was violently opposed to her faith and how he would scold her about it. When she went to church or tried to explain her faith to him, he would get angry and even lock her out of the house. This woman refused to retaliate or give in but instead offered up the situation to God. After a year of constant prayer, the husband saw the strength of his wife's faith and suddenly came to accept it himself. Their relationship changed from one of suspicion and anger to one of love and understanding. Guo believes that this was a direct result of the woman's faithfulness in prayer.
Guo stresses the need for believers to seek opportunities to present family members with an opportunity to get to know, understand and accept Jesus. Guo describes how, when she and other church members visit a believer’s home for a prayer meeting, the believer often first of all shoo’s away other family members, saying that they will get in the way. This sends a confusing message to non-believing relatives, making them resentful and even against Christianity. Believers should invite their relatives to join them in their religious activities and show that no one is unwelcome as far as God is concerned.

Finally, Guo maintains that the best witness of all is through the consistent loving kindness and good behaviour that a believer displays. Only when believers display the difference that Christ makes in their lives will they attract others in their family to find out more. Guo cites the case of one Christian couple who, for various reasons, were on bad terms with his mother, who was not a believer. In the end, the son realized that his behaviour was not reflecting God’s will, so he talked with his wife and they both agreed to put things right. After apologizing to his mother on their knees, the mother was quick to forgive and now she herself boasts to others how great Jesus is, that He could work such a change in her son and daughter-in-law’s hearts.

"Selected Writings Of KH Ting" Published

(ANS) On 25th November last year, a symposium was held in the national Meeting Hall of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) to mark the launch of "Selected Writings Of KH Ting" (see ANS 98.5.1). The symposium was attended by the author as well as over 60 representatives from the CPPCC Minorities and Religion Committee, the China Christian Council, the National Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the publisher, Yilin Publishing House. Representatives from institutes involved with research in social sciences and religion also attended the launch.

Participants noted the overriding themes expressed within this collection of writings by Bishop Ting. These include a call for mutual respect within the Chinese church in areas of theological thought as well as styles and forms of worship. Unity is another recurring theme, with a call to bring the Christian faith in China into harmony with the Chinese situation at the present time, capturing both Christianity's timeless and universal nature with its local expression. Linked to this point, Bishop Ting stresses the need not to lift thoughts and ideas wholesale from Western theology but for the Chinese church to develop its own thinking and ways based on its own situation and experiences.

Scholars present at the symposium underlined the importance of the work in providing topics for further dialogue and research for Chinese intellectuals interested in the field of religion. They also noted Bishop Ting's positive influence within the political life of the country as a vice-chair of the CPPCC and a member of the Constitutional Revision Committee of the National People’s Congress. Through these political responsibilities, Bishop Ting has managed to bring a Christian voice to political debate within China and has helped move thinking away from the old
"Religion is the opiate of the people" viewpoint. Bishop Ting has always stressed the need for a person's faith and theological thinking to be integrated with society and the world outside the church, and his own life is a good example of this in practice. This current work frequently mentions how Christian morals and ethics have a role to play within socialist society, and his writings give good pointers as to how this might be achieved.

Head of the State Religious Affairs Bureau, Ye Xiaowen commented that this new selection offers unique insights, suggestions and reflections on religious theory and practice. Furthermore, "Selected Writings" offers frank and open criticism of areas where the government is failing in its implementation of religious policy. As a consequence of this, the book will become recommended reading for officials responsible for religious affairs. Above all, Ye notes, it is a deeply patriotic work, revealing a deep love for China on the part of its author.

The Chinese edition is now available from Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. It is hoped that the English translation will be completed some time within the coming year.

99.1/2.5

Shepherd-less Flock Exposed To Threats

(ANS) Guanyun county in Jiangsu Province has around 40,000 believers and 98 registered meeting points yet not a single ordained minister or elder to look after their spiritual needs. This being the case, the church in Guanyun currently has to rely on its lay members to keep things running, and on ministers from outside the county to visit regularly and perform duties such as baptism. Pastor An Xiaohui has visited the county several times in this respect and offers observations on the church in Guanyun in January's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church.

The first thing Pastor An notes about believers in Guanyun is their great thirst for teaching and guidance. On a recent visit, Pastor An preached at over ten different meeting points. Less than half of the county's 98 meeting points have designated rooms where believers can meet. Most are very simple, with no pulpit, piano, sound system or, sometimes, even stools to sit on. Believers often come to church and have to sit cross-legged on straw mats on the floor for hours at a time. Nevertheless, believers are more than happy to put up with discomfort when they are offered solid teaching. After preaching for over three hours in one church, believers petitioned Pastor An to stay and preach some more, with some even following him to his next meeting at another church in order to hear more.

Believers in Guanyun are desperate to have pastors and elders of their own to provide for their spiritual needs. The main problem, according to Pastor An, is that those who decide on these matters within the church do not believe that there is anyone in the Guanyun church who is qualified for training and ordination. Pastor An works hard to convince believers they must act according to their situation and maybe accept that, if they want a pastor, they might have to propose someone who is less than ideal. Pastor An believes it would be better for the Guanyun church to
have pastors and elders who are just average in their abilities but enthusiastic in their duties rather than continue having no leadership or guidance at all.

Since the Guanyun church currently relies so heavily on lay leadership, Pastor An sees lay training as imperative for the church there. Heretical groups have already been at work in Guanyun, confusing believers with their erroneous teachings. Lay workers in the Guanyun church are not equipped to preach and cannot offer sound teaching to counter heresies. Therefore, Pastor An believes that the faith of the tens of thousands of believers in the county hangs in the balance unless help and training soon comes from outside.

Finally, Pastor An notes that there is a lot of confusion about the nature of the Three-Self Movement among believers in Guanyun. In one county township, when Pastor An asked to be taken to a local CC/TSPM church, the reply came, "We don't belong to Three-Self, since we know that the Three-Self Movement is run by the Communist Party." From this, Pastor An could see that believers within the county need clarity about the background, achievements and necessity of the Three-Self Movement for running the Chinese Church well.

99.1/2.6

ANS Feature:

**The Feminist Awakening Among Chinese Christian Women**

The following article is taken from *Chinese Theological Review*, Volume 11:1 and is written by Peng Yaqian, Lecturer at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

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Traditional Chinese culture, deeply influenced by Confucian thinking, emphasized human relationships; for example, that between subject and ruler, between father and son, between (older and younger) brothers. Such relationships were unequal ones, based on status and rank. That between husband and wife, for example, like that between male and female, was not only a relationship of inequality, but of servitude. In this type of culture, the relations between the sexes were compassed within the precincts of philosophy and the concept of sexual difference embraced within the system of the Confucian world view. The male was defined as qian, or heaven, and the female as kun, or earth. The relationship between qian/male and kun/female, heaven and earth, was used to illustrate the relationship between father and mother and that between man and woman. The relationship between men and women was defined as one of yin and yang, with corresponding relationships of male domination and female submission, and of honoring the male and disparaging the female. Therefore, a woman's status has always been determined with reference to men. In the classic Shuowen Dictionary, the same principle is explained etymologically: "Woman (fu) is submission (fu)." "Women bow to men." During Han times, Liu Xiang's *Lives of Virtuous Women*, and Ban Zhao's *Precepts for Women* set forth the limits of women's lives even more concretely; these were what is called the "three obediences and four virtues" of women: in youth, obedience to father and brothers; in marriage, obedience to husband; as a widow, obedience to sons; and the virtue, speech, deportment and merit expected of women. This meant that the husband was heaven and the wife should submit to him, safeguard his interests and fulfill his needs. This unequal relationship between men and women lasted several thousand years in China and even today still influences our thinking and behavior.
The arrival of Protestant Christianity in China in 1807 precipitated a crisis in the ancient nation with its thousands of years of feudal culture and influenced the advancing course of modern Chinese history. When missionaries brought the Christian gospel to China, they brought Western culture at the same time, for example, respect for women, equal education rights for women, the proposal that all are equal before God. Such thinking brought hope to women who had been fettered by traditional culture and who found themselves on the bottom rung of society. Moreover, a number of outstanding women appeared in early twentieth-century Christianity and a feminist consciousness began to awaken among them. Women such as Bing Xin, Wu Yifang and Shi Meiyu, Christian women intellectuals, directly or indirectly participated in the women's movement of the time, opposing traditional ethics and morality, running schools and founding hospitals, brav ing social opprobrium to set up the "anti-footbinding league," and proposing slogans such as "oppose opium smoking, taking concubines and selling sex." They made a contribution to the women's liberation movement of the times.

We have seen that a feminist consciousness was already awakening among Christian women in the early twentieth century and that they took the initiative to join the ranks of the women's liberation movement. However, in the 50s and 60s, due to social changes, the emphasis of concern for Christian women had reverted to individual spirituality and service to the church. At this time, Church and society were gradually separating and the Church was falling behind the society.

There were many reasons for this "separation" and "falling behind" and for the fact that Christian women were missing from the women's movement. I will consider these below.

Social Factors

A Chinese women's movement as an independent entity had never appeared. From the beginning, women's liberation had been an important part of social reform. During the Constitutional Reform and Modernization Movement, for example, Kang Youwei, in his *The Great Commonwealth*, discussed the women's issue at some length, and called vigorously for women's liberation. In the 1911 Revolution, Sun Yat-sen too strove to promote male-female equality and full political rights for Chinese women. During the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun called for women to come out and struggle side by side with men, gain their economic rights and change the irrational social system. Li Dazhao, an early proponent of Marxism in China, said that the women's issue was basically a social question, and believed that a thorough solution required "women to come out in force to break the monopoly of the social order." The socialist revolution postulated that "women hold up half the sky" and women then became one of the forces essential to socialist revolutionary construction.

In each of these historical periods, the initiators and organizers of the Chinese women's movement were primarily men. In this kind of women's movement, women's consciousness of themselves as subjects had been expropriated. This also shows us that Chinese women had to seek their own liberation through social reform.

Religious Factors

Christianity promotes freedom and equality for all, but such equality and freedom is not total and it can be said that traditional Christian theology has provided the theoretical basis for inequality. When Protestantism came to China in 1807, the various denominations followed and set up their own churches. Evangelical churches predominated and these have a very strong mass base in China. They are marked by the stress they lay on the Bible, emphasizing that not one jot or tittle may be changed. They particularly stress the epistles of Paul and his explication of morality and ethics. But they do not much emphasize theological study. Due to having been influenced by "literalism," they are prone to relying solely on text-based exegesis of Biblical texts. For instance in I Corinthians, chapter 11, they stress only that "the head of a woman is her husband (man)," "for man was not made of woman, but woman of man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man." Chapter 14 stresses "the women should keep silence in the churches. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." And in 1 Timothy 2:12, it says "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men." Some missionaries used these verses as their authority for not permitting women to preach or to be ordained and from this inferred that women's position was inferior.
to that of men - women came from men, men are the head of women and therefore it is only natural that men should have authority over women. For these missionaries, every chapter and verse of the Bible had absolute authority.

Such superficial exegesis offered as the basis for women's lower status reinforced and rigidified concepts of male superiority in some Christians who had been deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture to begin with. And Chinese women, originally very submissive, became more so.

We can say that Chinese Christian women carried a double burden: one originating with traditional culture, the other emanating from the unreasoning and superficial Biblical exegesis of traditional Christian theology.

Factors Originating with Women Themselves

Ideas about the supericity of men, formed through a long period of feudal society, were deeply ingrained. The majority of women, as well as the majority of men, had been deeply influenced by such traditional thinking and believed that the main duty of women was "Look to the husband and honor the son; manage the affairs of the family," i.e., be a good wife and mother. There were a few women intellectuals who, taking on Western progressive thinking, were awakened first and threw themselves into the women's liberation movement. But these women intellectuals came, for the most part, from the middle and upper rungs of society and were a minority among women. Though they poured their enthusiasm into the women's liberation movement, they did not have an impact upon the masses of women at the lower levels of society or prompt their participation in the movement.

(2) The Awakening of a Feminist Consciousness in Christian Women in the 1980s

Feminist consciousness has been increasing among Chinese Christian women along with the widening and deepening of economic reform and cultural exchange in China. This awakening, and the reflection on their role by women in society, is not unrelated to the separation of women's issues from the bounds of traditional philosophy and their identification as a specialist subject for research. Concrete expressions of this include:

1) Attention to the role of women in the Bible; for example, women prophets, women teachers, women disciples, women stewards, as well as popularizing Biblical models for Christian women. Some preachers are beginning to use the stories of women in the Bible as sermon topics; for example, Mary who anointed Jesus' feet, maintaining that she loved Jesus even more than the other disciples and could understand his heart. Or, Mary the Mother of God who poured out her love for Jesus all his life, maintaining that her influence can be seen in the person of Jesus.

2) Reasonable exegesis of certain passages in Paul's epistles. When speaking of the order of creation, some people feel that Paul, influenced as he was by Judaism and Jewish culture, could not transcend his own era. In discussing the covering of women's heads, there is an attempt to do reasonable exegesis against the cultural background, recognizing that the submission Paul speaks of should be mutual.

3) Reflection on the traditional concept of God. Some feel that God possesses not only a father's righteousness, but also a mother's mercifulness. If we speak of God only as the stern father, as the Lord on high, this is an incomplete picture. This incomplete picture ignores the love that is an attribute of God, and affects the fullness of the gospel. The feeling is that in addition to speaking of Paul's teachings, the Church should speak more of Jesus' teaching, for example, his treatment of women.

On another aspect, women leaders are being raised up in the Chinese Church. In the rural and border areas, especially, where men have left home to seek work, women are naturally taking on the responsibilities of home and society. And in the Church they have resolutely taken up the responsibility of the work of the Church. In many rural meeting points, women participate in the leadership. For example, in Yinchuan county in Henan, a group of elderly Sisters built the church with their own hands. According to statistics for 1994, there are currently 387 women pastors in the Chinese Church and some of these are senior pastors.
The examples above fully illustrate the awakening of a feminist consciousness in the Chinese Church. Women have become conscious of their own worth and have begun to look at the Bible through women's eyes and re-evaluate traditional theology. In May 1995, a questionnaire sent out by the Commission on Women's Work found that 90% of the respondents felt that there was still a failure to give women their due in the Church; while 94% felt that "male and female pastors should be treated equally and without discrimination." Only 3.4% felt that "a female pastor can take over only in the event that no male pastor is available;" while 93.5% felt that Paul's statement "I permit no woman to teach" was simply a response to the situation prevailing in the Corinthian church of his day; only 0.03% felt the passage should be taken literally.

It must be said, however, that the Chinese Church has not yet produced a systematic feminist theology; for example, "sin" and "Christology" have not been addressed from its standpoint. But we can say that a feminist consciousness has awakened among Chinese Christian women and that it is actively seeking space to develop in church service and administration. There were Chinese Christian women representatives at the September 1995 Fourth NGO Forum in Beijing. And we can say with full confidence that in the near future the Chinese Church Commission on Women's Work will be more active. The prospects for Chinese Christian women in the Church are bright.

ANS Feature:

Statement By Bishop K.H.Ting, 9th November 1998

The theme of my statement is a long one but not in the least bit complicated. It is, "The Biblical God's Self-revelation is gradual. It is not completed all in one go. Moreover, people's understanding of God's revelation is also not completed in one fell swoop. It is also gradual, and increases progressively."

In its written form, a period of roughly 1,000 years separates the earliest parts of the Bible from the later parts. Over this long period of time, and in many ways, God corrected people's mistaken understanding of Him, eagerly looking forward to people coming to quite a good understanding of Him one step at a time. It is really just as Hebrews 1:1 says: "In the past, God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets."

We can look at John 16:12,13 to see how Jesus expressed the same meaning in His own words: "There is much more that I could say to you, but the burden would be too great for you now. However, when the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all truth."

Why are things this way? Why doesn't God tell us everything he wants to tell us all at once, instead of spending more than 1,000 years within the Bible to say what He has to say? This is because we cannot understand everything over a short period of time and, even if we could, we would not be able to accept it. Each of us, aside from all the sinfulness and weakness which we inherit at birth, also get many preconceived ideas as we pass from youth to old age. These come from our own cultural background and ethnicity and from the traditions of our forebears. Our many ideas, points of view and ways of thinking come from our families, our parents, teachers, neighbours, friends, classmates, colleagues and also from novels, films and television. Once they have taken shape, these ideas, points of view and ways of thinking become so deeply rooted they are difficult to change.

We know full well that God's concern and love extends from Israel to many other people. God explicitly made this point early on in the Old Testament at many times and in many ways. In Amos 9:7 God announced, "Are you Israelites like the Cushites to me, says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, the Aramaeans from Kiriath?" Another example is Isaiah 19:25 "This is the blessing the Lord of Hosts will give: 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel, my possession.'" However, by the time of the New Testament, many people heard all this but paid no attention to it, still insisting that God is only the God of Israel and that God only loves the Israelites. This being the case, how could God avoid taking a long time if He wanted to correct the Israelites erroneous understanding of Him?
Everyone can recall how God wanted to have Peter use the Gospel of Christ to break the fetters lying down the Jewish people and evangelize each race throughout the earth. As a first step, God wanted him to go and make contact with the gentiles in Caesarea. However, Peter's resistance was great (Acts Chapter 16). Peter had a deep-rooted understanding of what was meant by so-called "unclean beasts," with which a person should not come into contact. This was an obstacle to God's good intentions. Step-by-step, God had to use other methods to turn Peter's thinking around. Afterwards, Peter's thinking changed to a certain extent but still retained a certain stubbornness. Moreover, at that time in the church, many other people still upheld their old traditions and refused to bend an inch on these.

There was a very long period where, in the mind of the Israelites, God was only the God of Israel. He had led the Israelites into Canaan. The Israelites believed that God wanted them to totally destroy and wipe out the original inhabitants of Canaan. Today we think such actions are cruel, inhumane, and couldn't possibly be God's will. Yet, we see that Joshua and others believed this was in essence "God's righteousness." This view of God was preserved carefully in books such as Deuteronomy and Joshua. Let us examine two typical scripture passages: Deuteronomy 20:16 says, "In the towns of these nations whose land the Lord your God is giving you as your holding, you must not leave a soul alive. As the Lord your God commanded you, you must destroy them under solemn ban - Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites." Joshua 10:40 says, "So Joshua conquered the whole region - the hill-country, the Negeb, the Shephelah, the watersheds - and all its kings. He left no survivor, destroying everything that drew breath, as the Lord the God of Israel had commanded." This point of view was upheld for quite a while, right up to the time of Captivity. In Psalm 137:9 we still find a call for the babes of Babylon to be dashed to death against rocks. Jonah is also a good example. He started out from a very narrow, preconceived idea that the people of Nineveh should incur the wrath of God and be annihilated if they did not repent. But God is a compassionate God. God told Jonah that within the city of Nineveh there were 120,000 people who couldn't even tell their left hand from their right, and said "Shouldn't I be sorry about them?" We can see that the Israelites misperceptions of God were a case of old ideas dying hard.

However, in the end, through God's revelation and instruction over a long period of time, the view that God's love extends to all nations came to be accepted by more and more people. Finally, in 1 John 4:16, we read that "God is love." We can say that this represents the summit of the Bible's understanding of God's nature. We can also say this is the pinnacle of humankind's understanding of God. A time span of more than 1,000 years separated Deuteronomy and Joshua from 1 John. After the passing of such a long period of time, God believed human beings had progressed to such an extent that at least some people could embrace the revelation that God is love. So, He spoke this simple truth through 1 John. Or, to put it another way, it was only after this long period of time that there existed on earth some people who could understand, accept and take up the simple truth that God is love.

Therefore, some people say that there is internal development within the Bible itself, and I think we have no reason to doubt this claim.

God is love. Love is not an attribute which God sometimes possesses and sometimes does not. Love is not merely one attribute among the many which God possesses. Love is the first and foremost of God's attributes. The Good News consists only of this. John 3:16 begins by saying "God so loved the world..." Only then does it continue by saying that He sent His only son into the world to complete His plan for salvation, becoming flesh and blood, giving eternal life to all people who believe in Him. If there were no love on God's part then there would be no way to talk about God's holiness or righteousness or any of God's other attributes. If we only talk about God's holiness and do not talk of God's love then that is like seeing God as one who only pays attention to His own uplifting without any thought for others. Such a God is one who is only concerned with preserving His own holiness and doesn't care much about the people of the world. And if we only talk about God's righteousness and do not talk about God's love then we bestow upon God the image of one who punishes. The Christian faith thus becomes a way of fear and dread, sinking to the level of a common primitive folk religion. In fact, righteousness is derived from love, and only given the prerequisite of love can we begin to talk of righteousness.
There were four siblings in my family. One day, our parents had to leave home for a few days. Our father knew that we would fight over food so he made a rule - whenever we ate cake or fruit or some other food, whoever divided the food into four parts among us had to let the other three children choose first, with the last part going to the divider. In this way it was much fairer and no-one squabbled any more. I always remember this and believed at the time that our father was the most intelligent and just man there was. He loved us four children and his love never changed. His justice and righteousness was the embodiment of his love.

When love spreads to many people, the righteous nature of love becomes apparent.

During the Second World War, Hitler incarcerated Germany's Jews into concentration camps, then sent them on to special places to be murdered. The Jews had their gold fillings extracted and their hair cut off, their clothes were taken and then, batch by batch, they were shut into windowless chambers and gassed to death. Over five million Jews died in this way. In some languages we find a special word for this cruelest, most savage atrocity committed against humanity by Hitler's fascists - "Holocaust". Yet, at that time in Germany, there were some supporters of Hitler who said that the Jews had killed Jesus so they deserved their punishment. These people made use of passages in the Old Testament to support their views. They pointed to the Israelites' "Holy War" attacks on smaller, weaker peoples as they entered Canaan. They said that large-scale massacres of this nature are at times an order from God. In the name of "God's righteousness" they negated God's love. In fact, they extinguished God's love, portraying God as a brutal disciplinarian who thoroughly despises human beings and sees some of them as His enemy. We need to shout out loud and long to people who uphold this view of God: God is not Satan! God is not a fascist! The whole world should spurn those who talk of the Holocaust as a kind of justice. When we talk of God's righteousness, we cannot for one second forget God's loving kindness, which takes precedence over everything else.

When China suffered during the invasion by the Japanese military, 40 million soldiers and civilians lost their lives. At that time, some people in the church also said that this was God's punishment against China. At the same time, quite a few people in the church asked why God didn't punish the Japanese aggressors instead of punishing the Chinese who were being invaded.

God is love. God is a righteous God, but this righteousness can only exist under the rule of God's love.

God loves His whole universe and, through His loving heart, unceasingly carries out creation and redemption. Within my own spiritual journey an understanding of this revelation has been crucial for me - it has deepened my faith, my hope, and my love.

This revelatory way of viewing things helps me to achieve a fairly complete and consistent way of approaching the Bible. I would like church workers to consider whether there is an element of development in the view of God and of other things as they are presented to us in the Bible. And can such an understanding of the Bible help us to discover the hidden treasures contained within it?

The God of Joshua and of 1 John are the same God. The Bible does not contain two different Gods. But, because people are slow to catch on, God's revelation cannot help but be gradual and developmental, going from the low to the high. Correspondingly, the view of God which people in the Bible have develops gradually until it reaches a certain level of perfection. If we deny that the picture of God presented in the Bible undergoes a certain development then which other means do we still have at our disposal to explain the supposed contradictions within the Bible?

May we humbly wait for God to give us wisdom. May the Chinese church adopt a view of the Bible and of God which God Himself approves.

(End)
ANS Feature:

Excerpts From The Letter Page Of Tian Feng

The letters to the editors of the Chinese church magazine, Tian Feng, give readers a glimpse of daily church life with all its joys and problems. To give our readers an idea of the breadth and width of the issues discussed, we are documenting here questions and answers from the December 1998 issue of the church magazine.

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Can We Take Part In Lay-Training?

To the editors:

Ever since I began believing in the Lord, I have received many blessings and have also made some progress in my spiritual life. Responding to the needs of the church, I have also become a lay worker in the Lord's service. However, I find it difficult to be competent in this work because I lack the necessary knowledge in so many different areas. For this reason, like so many other believers, I long to receive proper training in spiritual matters.

Our county has quite a few believers scattered all over the countryside. Along with other members of local house churches, I was determined to get in touch with our brothers who work full-time for the Lord. So we went together to the local church hall to look for the pastor-in-charge in order to discuss the possibility of organizing training. We had to travel a long way over difficult terrain to get to the church hall. However, after we arrived and located the pastor to discuss this matter, it was like having a bucket of ice-cold water thrown over us. We never imagined that the pastor, who had been working in the church for many years, would become so furious with us and say: "I should tell you that you house churches, worshipping in your own homes, are illegal. I have a duty to point this out to you. By coming here to ask me to organize training for you, you are being deliberately provocative. Besides, I can't take care of so many things. If you want to believe in and worship God then you should come to this official county church hall."

Although we pleaded and discussed this matter repeatedly with the pastor we still came away empty-handed. All we could do was swallow back our tears and leave the church hall.

We feel puzzled and bewildered. Faced with this cold treatment by the church, what should we do? Since we have no designated pastoral workers to take care of us, we face attacks by heresy, which cause many believers to fall and admit defeat. We are at a loss about what to do. Could it be that our request for running one training course for believers within the county is asking too much? Please reply.

---- Li Yao, Yunnan Province

Response:

At present it seems that this county only has one church where believers can legally meet for worship, that is, the church hall in the county town. However, because the number of believers in the countryside is increasing, they are starting to form house meeting points on their own initiative. Having believers from all over the county converge on the county town does not seem very reasonable, especially considering that transport is not very convenient from mountain areas. Meeting only once or twice a year cannot satisfy Christians - we are the kind of people who like to live out our faith life every week, worshipping the Lord and receiving instruction. Therefore, the county church must do its best to serve believers better. It should do all in its power to help create the necessary conditions for setting up legal meeting points. These meeting points should satisfy reasonable demands and meet the requirements of the current regulations (the training of lay workers is one important requirement in these regulations). Although the registration of meeting points is handled by the government Religious Affairs Bureau, the county church can still do many works of service for these meeting points. These
include helping them to establish contacts or informing them of legal requirements. This is an attitude of heart and of mission which every shepherd should have toward his or her flock. Church workers who occupy a certain position of responsibility should use their authority well. They should be faithful to God's commission and loyal stewards for the Lord. They should receive brothers and sisters in the Lord with warmth. How can we turn away from our door those who ask us for help?

As it says in this reader's letter, the tide of heresy in country areas is devouring the flock. What's more, it is a threat to state security. If we don't increase our concern in the Lord and act on this, the results will be harmful to both church and state.

**NEWSBRIEFS**

**Meeting Points:** Remote Qianyang County in Shaanxi Province lies in a poor mountainous region with deep gullies leading to difficult transport and communication within the region. For many years, believers in the county have had to rise early on Sundays in order to walk several miles over difficult terrain to worship in the central county church. Believers often had to return home in darkness and conditions were especially treacherous during bad weather. Now, with efforts on the part of the local church and the local Religious Affairs Bureau, four villages within the county have set up their own meeting points, making things a lot easier for believers to attend worship safely and comfortably.

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**Social Service:** In response to a perceived need within the local community, Christians in Juye County, Shandong Province set up a medical clinic in September last year. The clinic serves those in need both within and outside the church, only accepting fees for treatment and medicines on a scale according to the patient's ability to pay. The clinic has been well-received by the local community and has helped raise the profile of the church in the county.

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**Youth Meeting:** The first ever worship gathering for different youth fellowships from all over Inner Mongolia took place in the provincial capital, Hohhot in October last year. Young believers from Linhe, Baotou and Wuhai cities traveled to the capital to attend the meeting, which helped raise the issue of outreach to young people within the provincial church.

**Amity News Service - Announcement**

As you may have noticed, this month's issue of *Amity News Service* is somewhat slimmer than previous issues. This is because we have temporarily had to cut back on our reporting due to staff transitions. We hope that later in the year we will be back to full strength and able once again to give you a comprehensive range of articles and features about the Church in China. Until then, we ask for your support and understanding.

*Thank You!*

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Places Mentioned in This Issue of ANS

1. Baotou (Inner Mongolia)
2. Guanyun (Jiangsu)
3. Hohhot (Inner Mongolia)
4. Juye (Shandong)
5. Linhe (Inner Mongolia)
6. Nanjing (Jiangsu)
7. Qianyang (Shaanxi)
8. Wu Hai (Inner Mongolia)
9. Yinchuan (Henan)

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