Dear Reader,

How did Chinese Christians cope with SARS? While the disease was posing an immediate threat, church life like much of the rest of public life in China came to a standstill, with many churches bringing Easter preparations to a grinding halt. Now that the immediate threat of atypical pneumonia is over, more enduring problems emerge. For many Chinese Christians the theological questions raised by the threat of SARS remain a matter of concern. Find out more about the discussions among church workers on p1.

As China continues to modernize at a breathtaking speed, new challenges for the church come up. How do church leaders view the role of the Chinese church vis-a-vis the problems raised by globalization? What role can the church play in ensuring a healthy and secure living environment for people? We present one viewpoint on p5.

With a large percentage of first-generation Christians, the Chinese church is a young church, and among many believers, uncertainty about "right" Christian behaviour abounds. Differing viewpoints among believers of the same congregation, depending on whether or not individuals are steeped in rather conservative traditions, add to the confusion of converts. In this edition of ANS, we offer two perspectives on the same problem. One recent Tian Feng article highlights the type of ethical problem conservative believers may encounter (p12). In a second contribution, Ray Whitehead discusses the problem of Christian ethics from his background as a visiting professor of theology at Nanjing Seminary (p13).

With kind regards from the editorial desk,

Katrin Friedler

A Christian Response To SARS

(ANS) While SARS seems to be over in China for the time being, the theological questions raised by the threat of atypical pneumonia remain a matter of concern for many Chinese Christians. Can devout Christians become victims of disasters such as deadly illnesses or natural disasters just like ordinary people? Is God trying to punish certain people through catastrophes? How should Christians respond to disasters that affect the wider community? Previous crises, most notably the 1998 floods, had revealed similar doubts and concerns within the Christian community, ensuing in a debate whether the floods were a divine punishment or rather God's call to reach out to all, believers and non-believers alike. Below we present excerpts from an article that appeared in June's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council and the National TSPM. Several pastors, one elder and also Bishop K.H. Ting voice their experiences with SARS.

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During the SARS crisis, churches all over China tried to minimise the risk of contagion through extensive cleaning measures as well as by encouraging believers to worship at home rather than crowd into a church building. With large numbers of elderly within their rows, many churches even resorted to completely cancelling gatherings.

In Shanghai's Hongkou district, for example, the message reached about 90% of believers within the first week. "Still, there were some believers who turned up at church. Our pastors were there for them, and all of them were very understanding of the measures taken," reports elder Lu Jianming. And for many of those involved in church work, the time off caused by SARS was an opportunity to seek some spiritual renewal or catch up with long overdue administration work.

Whenever a disaster occurs, there are some who are quick to point out that "This is the end, the final days are near," Rev. Xu Xiaohong, Vice Secretary of the National TSPM, comments on the topic of SARS. This is not the way Christians should look at disasters, as "No one knows, however, when that time and that day will come." (Mt 24:36)

As Christians watching nurses and doctors tirelessly fighting the disease, as believers surrounded by volunteers who show love to their friends and neighbours, witnessing the struggle of scientists against the virus, what should our own response be like? Sometimes, we delay our good deeds, thinking that "in the future, there will be another chance to do it," or we treat outsiders different from family members. If we act like this, how will we express our love for our neighbours?

We ought to pray for those who suffer from SARS, be they believers or not. Of course we hope that Jesus will have compassion on them and heal them. But this attitude does not allow us to neglect our own responsibilities. If SARS can change our narrow ideas, this also is a positive outcome of the disease. We can start by learning to change our perspective, by giving a smile to those around us, and by embracing and enduring everything...

Rev. Kan Baoping, Vice General Secretary of the CCC, makes the following remarks: Whenever a disaster occurs, there are people who rejoice in the midst of tragedy, having finally something to talk about. But is it the case that under normal circumstances Christians have nothing to say? Can Christians only say extraordinary things in times of crises? What kind of Gospel is Jesus giving to his apostles to spread?

In the 12th chapter of Mark we read about the Pharisees who ask Jesus Christ to choose between the sacred and the secular. His answer makes it clear that faith cannot transcend the sphere of faith, and by no means can a religious meaning be attributed to everything. The individual actions of Christians, including social, religious and ethical actions, are social, Christian, and ethical choices. Every Christian has to try hard to act in word and deed like a Christian, and choices should be made from a Christian perspective, but this does not mean that all our choices have a faith-related meaning. Whether I want to help someone in need is a religious as well as an ethical choice, but what colour jacket I wear today is a choice without a
religious meaning, even though we can try to give such questions a religious meaning.

If we relate SARS to God's will, we can say: SARS does not correspond with God's will, because it disturbs the peace of mind of humans, and it also disrupts the harmony of God's creation. God is an all-loving God, and anything evil stands in conflict with God's nature. God cannot use something evil to communicate his will.

Christian duties include social duties, and when the whole nation is fighting SARS, it is also the duty of Christians to join the battle against the disease. Christianity is not a religion that rejoices in bad luck, but that stretches out a helping hand, just like the good Samaritan.

Rev. Dan Weixiang, Vice President of the Ningbo TSPM, emphasizes the role of absolute and enduring trust in God. This trust is a dominating feature of a Christian's relationship with the "God who gives human beings hope". This spirit of hope gives us peace of mind, and at the same time we keep bringing our concerns to God in prayer. Likewise, we pray for those who are engaged in the battle against SARS, asking God to give them wisdom, courage and strength, as well as protect them. This does not mean, however, that we strip ourselves of any responsibility and leave everything in the hands of God. Instead, Christians need to follow the necessary precautions like frequently washing hands, maintaining proper ventilation etc. Moreover, this is an opportunity to give testimony. In a time when many entrepreneurs make donations and volunteers sign up to give medical care, Christians should also come forward to offer help and show the Christian spirit of love for one's neighbour.

The recent success in curing patients and containing the disease shows that SARS can be prevented and can be cured, Bishop K.H. Ting points out. Since that is the case, how can people still say that SARS is a divine punishment? If SARS was a punishment from God, would people be able to protect themselves against it? The peace and health we enjoy were given to us by God. God guides all those who take care of the patients. "Therefore I don't want to believe that SARS is a punishment from God. Many people are doing good things in the name of God, and God has no reason to punish [them]. God is love, and God does not like to punish us just because of certain people or certain things."

2003.7/8.2

The Adaptation Of Religion To Socialist Society

(ANS) If religion is going to exist and develop in its own right, religion and socialist society must adapt to each other. This is already commonly acknowledged among us Christians. The question is, how should this happen? How shall the religious circles adapt religion to the socialist environment and do it in the best possible way? ... With these words, He Hong from Liaoning Province starts his reflections on religion and socialism in May's edition of Tian Feng. Below we reprint a slightly abbreviated and edited version of his article. Translation courtesy of Sune Nielsen.

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... As I see it, a way of improving this process of adaptation are the present efforts by Chinese Christians in actively developing and strengthening the construction of theological thinking. These efforts solve the problem of profound adaptation from a cognitive,
theological aide. Over the past years, the Chinese church has continuously reflected and experimented in the practical adaptation process. For example, at the Seventh National Chinese Christian Conference last year, a new Social Service Department was established.

In my opinion the notion of "adaptation of religion and socialist society to each other" means that the Party wants to give religion a role in society through its adaptation policy and that role is to be an active force in the building of a socialist society. "Actively guide" further indicates the Party's acceptance of religion and its warm and sincere invitation to cooperation with the religious world.

There are no ready-made solutions when handling the role of religion in a socialist society. However, it made many people happy to hear Jiang Zemin, as the first of the third generation Chinese communist leaders, say "We must actively guide the adaptation of religion and socialist society to each other". This was a statement of extraordinary value as it is a very important innovation in the Party's theoretical as well as practical work with religious affairs, and for us from the religious world it was a limitless blessing.

1. The idea of adaptation has solved the problem of the relationship between religion and society

During the National United Front Work Conference in 1993, Jiang Zemin clearly pointed out in the Three Statements that: "We must actively guide the adaptation of religion and socialist society to each other". This statement was warmly welcomed in the religious field, as it was a major breakthrough in the Party's guiding role regarding the theory behind religious work, reaffirming the coordinating role of the Party in this field.

2. The demands regarding the adaptation of religion to society voiced at the conference on religious affairs are very objective

There have been Chinese Christians who were worried about the consequences of the adaptation process, fearing that their religion might lose its characteristics and independence. The General Secretary of the National Conference on Religious Affairs stated very clearly that "to actively guide the adaptation of religion and socialist society to each other" does not require religious people to give up their faith. It demands that they love their motherland, embrace the socialist state system, adhere to the leading role of the CCP and respect laws and regulations and the correct political line. People engaged in religious affairs must do this to the greatest benefit of our motherland and people.

The present national conference on religious affairs again brings new contributions to the adaptation process. Adaptation is in fact the way to solve problems in the relationship between religion and society. How is then the relationship between religion and society in China? What role should religion play here? These are fundamental questions as they relate to how our society is going to look upon religion and how the administration will handle religious affairs in the future.

What if for instance we looked upon religion as a dissident force, well... that would mean the end of religion. How about then looking upon it as opium for the people... that would mean merciless condemnation. Not to speak about looking upon the pluralism of religion as an antithesis of the political leadership... then we might as well stop talking about adaptation right away. Actually, it would be a question whether religion could exist here at all.

The general secretary also discussed two other ideas. One was to support those working on religious doctrines to expound those in ways that suit the development of our society. This suggestion gives further hope to the adaptation process and we must actively implement this thought in the process of theological reconstruction. The general secretary further said that: "The active promotion of the adaptation of religion to socialism is a scientific conclusion of the experiences of our religious policy in the past decades, and it is the correct direction for religion in our country to develop in." At the meeting, the general secretary furthermore explained that the management of religious affairs had implications on four types of relations. These are the relationship between the Party and the people, the promotion of the "two civilizations" [material and spiritual civilizations, The Ed.], the strengthening of the unity of the people, and finally, the relationship between China and other countries.

Below, I will summarize the ideas gained through the National Conference on Religious Affairs and further studies, and I will try to relate these to concrete circumstances in Liaoning Province and Shenyang City.
1. To resist religious infiltration. We must be very aware of the risk of infiltration and keep an eye on the new situation in our province and cities and pay special attention to what is happening regarding South Korea. At the national conference on religious affairs it was pointed out that we face more severe risks of religious infiltration after entering WTO. The work of resisting infiltration has become more complicated and more urgent. As Bishop K.H. Ting analyses the situation, the risks for Christians in China are bigger than the opportunities. How to effectively and realistically approach this problem in our new historical setting will demand some studies, discussions and reflection. This not least because we are situated at the forefront of this “battlefield.”

2. Facing the influence and impact of the market economy, our provincial and municipal church organisations must concentrate on work for social stability and social service. It may be that you do not imagine Liaoning Province as a place where market economy sets the agenda as it does in a place like Shanghai, but you can see the negative consequences when plenty of laid off workers are now coming to our churches here. This demands that we engage in concrete adaptation activities. We must help to stabilize people and ease their worries. Besides, church leaders must consider how they can develop social services.

3. We must further strengthen the building of the church as well as our theoretical work, so that we can pass every test that we meet on our way. At home and abroad, within the church and outside the church, everywhere are big changes taking place. Constantly, we face new agendas and new problems to be solved. At every crisis, every challenge and opportunity, we in the church have to find out how to pass the test, how to adapt religion to society. In Shenyang they just inaugurated the Shenyang Working Conference on Religion. At this meeting, concrete measures have been proposed to strengthen the religious work of my city. One important tool is to strengthen the theoretical work of the religious world and find ways of organising this work. It goes without saying that the different religious organisations should actively cooperate to obtain this.

4. In connection with the entry of China into the WTO and the ensuing economic and social development, the church needs to educate believers in fields like social ethics and sincere faith. This is in fact a very urgent matter for us and it is the proper response to the challenges that WTO poses to us. I have been told the following story, which might serve as an illustration: There was once a shop sign at a store owned by a Russian, which said: No Chinese goods are here! That is equivalent to saying – no fake goods here. Fair and honest business conduct is the most basic rule of international business. When China wants to take part in international trade and develop at an even higher speed than now, it is really a problem that there are stores with “No Chinese goods!” signs. But we Christians can help educate believers, as honesty and morality are basic Christian virtues. This is our strength that all disciplines should learn and use. Right now Shenyang is experiencing great changes and the “hardware”, i.e. the construction and planning of new parts of the city, is developing at a very high speed. Now it is time that we also take care of the “software”, i.e. the people. In this way we have a chance to make progress in international business and benefit later.

2003.7/8.3

Our Concerns And Obligations For Promoting People’s Security

Ms. Lin Manhong from the National CCC/TSPM made the following presentation (reproduced here in an abbreviated version) at an international meeting in Kyoto, Japan, in March 2001. The conference titled “Peace, Justice, and People’s Security” was co-organized by the World Council of Churches and Council for World Mission. “All the statistics in the article are based on information released on the website of the State Statistics Bureau of the P.R. of China,” the author notes about her article.

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In the post-Cold War era, as we step into the new century, more and more concerns towards people’s security have emerged. The understanding of human security has also been broadened. From a new concept proposed by the UNDP, we learn that people’s
security in today's world does not only mean the threats to a country's border, rather, it is something that is closely related to people's daily life, such as job security, income security, health security, environmental security and so forth. These human security issues are emerging concerns for people all over the world including us Chinese, for large numbers of people in China are facing problems caused by these issues due to the impact of a changing world and society.

Nowadays economic globalization is one of the most important developments, and nations all over the world are widely experiencing opportunities as well as challenges brought about by economic globalization. Being the largest developing country in the world, China is experiencing the same.

Since China's reform and opening up in 1979, we have gone through tremendous changes. The economy has gradually shifted from a planned to a market-oriented economy. To catch up and keep pace with the global economy, while further accelerating her economic reforms, China has had to lay-off workers, which creates a severe problem of job security for many.

During China's planned economy period, once a person was assigned to a state-owned factory, this person had job security forever. They probably never imagined that at the end of the 20th century, some workers in the state-owned enterprises would be asked to leave from their job. According to recent statistics, by the end of 2000, there have been 30 million laid-off workers in China. In the city of Shenyang, the population is 6.7 million while there are over 1 million people facing the problem of unemployment. It is predicted that our society will have another 12 million laid-off workers this year.

The lack of job security not only threatens the workers in the state-owned enterprises but also people in rural areas. With the rapid growth of China's economy in the cities, since the early 1980s many young farmers have migrated to the urban areas to become temporary workers without job security. Moreover, a recent survey indicates that around 30% of the rural population are extra labor force. These people can hardly have any job security, and this lack of job security inevitably results in the lack of income security.

The insecurity of job and income is threatening our people and it has become one of our major concerns. Some other problems, if we do not pay enough attention to them, will become a severe threat to us very soon. Hence, we are also concerned about the areas of resource security and environmental security.

Resources include human resources and natural resources. I will put my focus on the natural resources, especially on water resources. We are all aware that human beings are threatened by lack of water. It is estimated that by the year 2025, 3 billion people will suffer from water shortage. Serious lack of water may lead to regional or even world conflicts. Already, water has become one of the key reasons that drives people away from their homes, and there are now 25 million "environmental refugees" globally.

China as the largest developing country in the world is likewise threatened by the scarcity of water. The wasteful use of water and water pollution have greatly intensified the water crisis in China and caused the country to become one of the 13 countries in the world suffering from water-poverty.

The issue of water pollution, in fact, is an environmental problem; and pollution is one of the greatest problems that need to be tackled when we talk about environmental protection. China has serious pollution problems, such as air pollution, sound pollution, white pollution, water pollution and so forth.

I believe that the aforementioned problems are not only problems in China, but also in many other Asian countries and even in developed nations. These concerns are not just ours, but regional and global concerns. I believe that this is the very reason that brought us, a group of Christians representing our churches and people, here together. What shall we do to facilitate the transformation of our societies and to influence the policies and practices of our authorities? In this respect, I want to share with you what Chinese Christians think we should do in our society.

Christians in China are a minority as they are in many other Asian countries, but as a community, the church is an indispensable part of society. What can the church do to help solve the problems? The church, as part of the Body of Christ witnessing the glory of God's creation and as a social community on earth, should have her own reflections and put them into action.
The church should first consider social issues to be her own concerns. Although many Christians in China have come to abandon the traditional understanding that the church should stay distant from society, still quite a number of Chinese Christians show indifference to what is going on in society. They still believe that Christian faith has nothing to do with secular society and with people's prosperity. What the church needs to do is to keep reminding herself that to follow Christ is to take up the cross, which Jesus did, by participating in society. The church should understand that to take the responsibilities to protect resources and the environment, to promote people's prosperity and to safeguard peace, justice and people's security is to fulfill God's mission for us on earth. Hence, the church should have her own voice in society speaking for justice and her own actions to help with difficulties.

Back to specific issues. It is the lack of opportunities for receiving enough education and inadequate professional skills that result in the laying-off of workers. The church should call on society to provide more professional training opportunities for laid-off workers and encourage them to take on new challenges in the new era. I am glad to report that church-related organizations such as YM&YWCA and the Amity Foundation are very much involved in providing opportunities for training laid-off workers. Classes for computer training, learning a foreign language and other professional skills have been held many times. We hope that in the coming future, there will be more church-run professional training programs in society.

We also need to call on society to optimize the social security system in China, for it not only will bring good to people who do not have job security but also guarantee people's income security to a certain extent. In addition, to help some people solve their financial problems, Christians should call on their churches to donate part of their church offerings to the needy people and help them find a way out.

We need to call on society to educate people that natural resources are limited. It is everyone's responsibility to treasure and protect our natural resources. Due to the scarcity of water, we do need to find ways to economize on water.

Environmental degradation affects human survival and development. Only some of the causes of environmental problems are natural, the rest are artificial. Therefore, we need to call on society to first grant a good environmental protection law. To date, an initial draft of the "environmental protection law" exists. The law aims to provide a healthy environment for people by adjusting human environmental behavior. It claims that every citizen has the right to protect the environment and to live in a safe environment.

We should also call on society to learn from good examples of implementing the environmental protection law. In many big cities, afforestation is being done, and since 1998, Beijing has invested nearly 30 billion RMB in adopting dozens of measures to treat air pollution. The city of Jinan recently released an announcement on the "blue sky project." It states that all restaurants and dining halls should complete pollution emission declarations before March, and wastewater from restaurants must be filtered. Another part of the "blue sky project" are regulations regarding the tail gas emissions of new vehicles. There are many good examples from society showing people's concern for the environment.

We hope that with the influence of these actions and people's awareness of environmental protection, people can live in an environment with clean air, clean water, sunshine, and tranquility. We believe that with the joint efforts and prayers from all nations and peoples, the world will be better tomorrow.

2003.7/8.4

Evangelism And Pastoral Work: Pastors Discuss Contemporary Evangelism

(ANS) Continuing with its discussion forum, June's edition of Tian Feng deals with the question of how to adapt pastoral work and evangelism to the particular needs of a time and place. Four male and two women pastors voice their opinions.

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Xu Lunsheng (Chongqing)
The mission and character of evangelists

Evangelists lie at the heart of church development, and the Bible tells us that we need to be up-to-date evangelists. The evangelist is rooted in his spirituality, and this relationship deepens as he continues to practise his spiritual life. However, we sometimes lack spiritual cultivation, and this can lead to weak faith, exhaustion at work, and the emergence of pride and problems within the church. Today, evangelists are exposed to temptations and secularization; they cannot wait leisurely for these trends to happen. The spiritual cultivation of evangelists is central to the development of the church and for the fulfilment of God's mission.

An evangelist's moral character is the transmission belt through which he expresses the fruits of his spiritual cultivation, and through which he can influence believers. It is very important to be morally excelling as well as to provide believers with spiritual nourishment in sermons. A lot of the problems the church is encountering these days are related to the moral character of evangelists. The Bible contains many stories about the unity of faith and actions, yet there are some who always distinguish between the two. Evangelists today are facing the challenges brought about by rapid social change, such as conflicts brought about by money and the indulgence in creature comforts.

The overall personal cultivation of the evangelist is an important tool for the evangelist as he is spreading the message. Apart from studying theology well, evangelists need to be well versed in other disciplines. Following the demographic changes in the church, our evangelists are already facing challenges in their pastoral work with younger and better-educated believers.

Tong Ping'an (Qinghai)
Preaching and real life

Working for God, we need to bring God's message for our times to his children, and we need to give them pastoral care with a message that is suited to our times. There are plenty of examples of this to be found in the Bible. For example, when Jesus meets the woman from Samaria at the well of Jacob, he uses the image of water to explain his message of everlasting life. Likewise, Jesus' talk to the crowd who brings an adulteress to be stoned to death (cf. John 8:7) is so convincing because he uses an image that is perfectly suited to that particular time and event.

So how can we spread the message in a way that is suitable to our times? There are indeed sermons to be heard that are not suitable to our times, and there are even people who say: "Preaching from a prepared sermon is not spiritual. You have to let yourself be led by the Holy Spirit and speak according to what He inspires you to say." While I do not deny the work of the Holy Spirit, this kind of attitude is very irresponsible and will ultimately cause some people to leave the church. As society develops and believers become better educated, the demands on evangelists rise as well. A superficial sermon following the simple recipe of "one Bible reading and two testimonies" will simply not fulfil believers' demands.
Liu Bin (Shanghai)
The Bible and contemporary environment

At the very beginning of Paul's letter to the Hebrews, we read: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one through whom God created the universe, the one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end." (Hebrews 1:1,2). This shows us that God will call his servants in a way that is suitable to the times, God will express his will in a way that can be accepted by people.

In recent years, many evangelists feel a growing pressure when it comes to preaching. The increasing diversity of believers makes it more and more difficult to give each believer the feeling that he comes feeling empty and leaves feeling spiritually satisfied. We also have to use the language of our times when expounding the Bible if we want to attract believers and give a correct message.

The Bible is eternal, but it is only through repeated corroboration that people are able to recognize its eternal character. Only if we manage to let the contemporary message of the Bible shine through, will we be able to let the whole Bible speak. This is the task lying ahead of all those who strive to be loyal servants of the Lord.

Sunday services and Bible study groups, youth meetings and prayer groups all need to be prepared and dealt with in different ways. Spreading the Gospel in a way that is suitable to our times means to give believers an ongoing opportunity to grow in their faith lives, to emphasize the benefit of others rather than one's own, and to work with beautiful testimonies. We need to recognize our responsibility towards society as well as society's demands towards us. "If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with wrong. Try to do what everyone considers to be good." (Romans 12:17)

Dong Yanjing (Shandong)
How to spread a Gospel of faith and deeds

Three aspects are of particular importance as we try to spread the Christian message in a way that is suitable to our times. First of all, we have to train a pastoral force that is highly educated, and we need to raise the general level of faith among believers. As believers become better educated, the demands on evangelists rise if they want to fulfil the spiritual needs of all believers, not only those of an ordinary background. This means that pastoral workers have to be well versed in the Bible, deeply reflective, generally well educated and be able to preach in a truly inspired way. Every single sentence of a sermon needs to be well prepared in prayer and reflection, if preachers want to enhance their ability to interact with people from all levels of society.

Secondly, Christians need to put their faith into practice through good deeds. Actions always speak louder than words, and deeds are the most convincing way of spreading the Gospel. Today, the Chinese church does not lack testimonies of this kind. The connection between faith and deeds is also inextricably linked to Chinese
culture with its emphasis on ethics and morals. A Gospel uniting faith and deeds will have the power to appeal to many more Chinese.

Finally, we need to feel the pulse of our times if we want to spread the Gospel in a suitable way. If the church follows social developments, this will bring great vitality to its work. And how to talk or how to spread the Gospel should always be determined by the circumstances and the person we are dealing with.

(Ms.) Wang Aiqin (Gansu)
How to understand a pure faith in a correct way

Jesus says: "Who, then, is a faithful and wise servant? He is the one that his master has placed in charge of the other servants to give them their food at the proper time. How happy that servant is if his master finds him doing this when he comes home!" (Mt 24:45-46)

This verse tells the evangelist about the need to be a loyal and knowledgeable servant to the Lord in his efforts to spread the Gospel in a suitable manner. It means that we need to use the intelligence given to us by God in order to make sensible judgements. We do not act as servants following blindly, but try to keep the effects of our actions in mind as well. If we do not spread the message in a way that is suitable to our times, believers' spiritual needs may not be fulfilled and they can fall victim to sects and heresies. Examples of believers and congregations who come under the spell of sects and heresies abound. A correct and lively understanding of the Bible helps evangelists to "keep their sheep in the flock".

(Ms.) Li Yonghong (Beijing)
Spreading a timely message in step with the times

The question of how to offer pastoral care, of how to spread the Gospel in a way that is suitable to our times was recently highlighted again as churches in Beijing were fighting SARS. When all church gatherings were cancelled, some believers couldn't understand this, arguing that it was in times of crises that Christians most needed to congregate in prayer and bring their concerns before God.

It is important to know God's word well if one wants to do appropriate evangelism. We have to remember that God's word is a living word. At the same time, we need to have a feeling for our times. We need to adapt to the changes in society, and this applies to religion as well. Only if our pastors are in touch with their times will they be able to spread a message that is suited to their contemporaries. Finally, we need to strengthen our own educational background. Religion is not only a faith, but also a set of attitudes and values. When a new health challenge in the form of SARS came up, Christians joined in prevention work and also prayed for the sick. And when churches decided to cancel meetings, this was not because they lacked faith or feared death, but to prevent the spread of the disease just like other Chinese citizens were trying to preserve public health and stability. In such moments, a pastor needs to give the faithful comfort and strength in the face of the situation.
Spreading The Word In Black And White: Calligraphy And More In Shandong

(ANS) Foreign visitors to churches in China are often surprised by the lack of Chinese elements in church architecture and decoration. In areas where Christianity goes back to the influence of foreign missionaries, older church buildings often reflect the worship style of a particular denomination as well as western tastes of that time. Today, brand new Chinese church buildings are still being constructed in an eclectic mix of western styles. As Chinese Christian artist He Qi once put it, "China is the only country on earth where they still build neo-Gothic churches."

However, awareness for the possibilities of inculturation in Christian art has risen in recent years, and a number of initiatives aimed at promoting genuinely Chinese Christian art have been started. Liang Hui from Shandong Province reports about one such enterprise in June's edition of Tian Feng.

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As Chinese congregations keep mushrooming, new church buildings emerge nearly every day. How to decorate them in a way that is solemn, elegant but also fresh, is turning into a question the church needs to answer soon. Bishop K.H. Ting once said: "There is no religion that would not have expressed its message through the language of art." How can we use art in a way that is suited to the Chinese aesthetic sense so as to make a church building in itself into a vehicle for the Gospel? In Shandong Province, an "Arts Service Society" was set up in autumn of 1998 with precisely this aim in mind.

The overall purpose of this society is to serve the church and believers through the arts. After the society was set up, one of its artists travelled the length and breadth of Shandong Province in order to reach lay training classes and write Biblical pieces in calligraphy for the students. In some places, classes were so big that the calligrapher had to start early in the morning and write all day through until his legs were numb and his arms sore. But the smiles of the brothers and sisters who received the calligraphies were reward for all his hardships. The participants of the lay training classes were offered not only to choose the Bible passage, but also the calligraphic style they wanted it to be written in. All these pieces, whether whole psalms or short sayings, served to transmit the Christian message through the word.

Apart from serving believers, the arts society has also provided churches with beautiful gifts to be used in friendly exchanges. When the Shandong Provincial Christian Council visited Korean churches in 1999, they took along calligraphies written by Han Xingguang, pieces that were greatly appreciated by the Koreans. Later, the Chinese were very pleased to see that one of their calligraphies had been exhibited in the Korean Bible Museum.

The eleven employees of the Arts Service Society, who work in calligraphy, stone carving, painting and paper cutting, have also actively tried to cultivate ties with the Amity Arts Centre in Nanjing. In 1999, eight pieces of Christian art work from Shandong, supplied by the Shandong Arts Service Society, entered a national Christian art exhibition in Nanjing organized by the National CCC/TSPM committee. The society also regularly creates paintings and calligraphies for big events organized by the Shandong Provincial Christian Council.
Calligraphy and paintings can serve as a bridge between the church and society by bringing the Gospel in artistic forms to those who have not heard it yet. In the history of Chinese culture, many artists have recognized the power of the arts, from famous scholars in the Western Han dynasty to contemporary calligrapher and educator Shen Yixian: "Calligraphy is a traditional art form that is singularly Chinese and is good at reflecting high human cultivation and the spirit of a time." It is true, a good piece of artwork will allow the observer to savour its meaning as well as its form. And calligraphy and Chinese painting as specifically Chinese art forms can indeed create a unique feeling of affinity in a Chinese observer.

In the future, the society hopes to build on its existing foundation and strengthen the ties between artistically gifted Christians and artists with an interest in Christian art.

2003.7/8.6

Are Christians Allowed To Watch Plays?

(ANS) Over the years, the "Letters to the Editor" column has become one of the most popular and longest-running items in Tian Feng, the magazine of the National CCC/TSPM. With many congregations relying on ill-trained lay workers for the running of their day-to-day affairs, insecurity in matters of orthodoxy is rampant in a church where most believers are first-generation Christians. For many, a letter to "Auntie Jin" is the last resort when doubts over proper Christian behaviour and faith threaten to split local congregations. The following letter was taken from July's issue of Tian Feng.

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Dear Tian Feng Editor,

in recent years, a "Yellow Plum Theatre Troupe" from Anhui has performed in numerous villages here, bringing plays onto the stage like "Mother- And-Daughter-In-Law", "Bao Gong Comes Into The World," "Qin Xianglian" and others. They have a certain educational value and are very popular with the villagers.

But there are some people here who say that Christians cannot watch plays, that watching plays will bring about unholiness and restlessness of mind that opens the door to the devil. Some people give testimonies saying things like "After I went to see that play, I got a cold, this play is really bad." After hearing this, I am really at a loss, and I would like to ask the Tian Feng editors for clarification.

Cheng Fei, Jiangsu Province

Dear Brother Cheng Fei:

The Bible tells us to be prudent in our actions to avoid stumbling or bringing others to fall. The fact that you write asking about whether Christians are allowed to watch plays or not shows that you are prudent in your actions and that you wish to understand how we should act in order to follow God's will. I hope my answer will be of help to you.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, it says: "Someone will say: I am allowed to do anything. Yes; but not everything is good for you. I could say that I am allowed to do anything, but I am not going to make anything make me its slave." (1 Cor 6:12).
Paul's words here give us a general principle, which is that we can do all things as long as they are useful, and we must not let ourselves be controlled by each and every little thing. If we use this principle to decide whether or not we can watch plays, the answer is very clear. Yellow Plum plays are a traditional theatre form in our country, and as you have said, they are very popular. The plays you mention in your letter teach people to strive for harmony in the family, they praise justice and castigate superficial feelings. These are healthy and beneficial topics, and you can watch this kind of play.

However, all things should be limited, you cannot watch plays in a compulsive way that will lead you to neglect the things that you ought to do. If you have such a weakness for plays, this means you are in the grip of plays, and Christians should not let this happen. As for play, films and other leisure activities with unhealthy contents, Christians cannot watch or participate in them, and they should not even think about them, as this would be a sin.

Some people love peace and quiet, they dislike watching plays, they prefer to read the Bible and pray. This is good, but if some people do not watch plays themselves and judge other brothers and sisters as "not holy" or "opening up space to the devil" because they watch plays, this is not an action based on true knowledge, but only temperament. These people may often read the Bible, but they still do not understand the truth, because they are being deceived by their prejudices. Watching plays has got nothing unholy about it, it is only when your thoughts are filthy that it is unholy. It is too strong to say that watching plays opens the door to the devil; what really makes room for the devil are increasingly selfish desires.

I would also like to remind you of something else. Some people want to prove their correctness by giving misleading testimonies like the one mentioned by you - somebody claims to have fallen ill after watching a play. There are so many Christians who watch plays, but how many do fall ill afterwards? And even if this is the case, how can we be certain that this is an effect of the play? We have to be cautious in our actions and the Bible teaches us "not to give false testimony."

I often feel surprised when brothers and sisters watch a play and then there is somebody who jumps up and gives a testimony that is at the same time a criticism, often along the lines of "I have committed great sins". And then there are some who, no matter how overbearing these speakers are, no matter how they let the church and their brothers and sisters down, speak up for them, not to prove that they have committed a sin, but to remind the audience to be loving, patient and forgiving. I wonder what God would think about seeing and hearing the "lovingness", "patience" and "forgiveness" taught by Him abused in that way?

2003.7/8.7

ANS Feature:

Christian Ethics

(ANS) The lecture presented below was the last in a course on Christian Social Ethics taught at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary by Ray Whitehead, former Dean of the Faculty of Theology, University of Winnipeg in Canada. The students, around 75 altogether, included 51 fourth-year B.Th. students and 14 graduate students in addition to a number of graduate student auditors.

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Christian ethical thinking is necessarily theological; it must be set in the context of theology. Christian theology is necessarily ethical; it must be judged on its ethical implications as well as its theological consistency. There are a number of confusions in theology that may lead to unethical behaviour. Let me mention five.

Five confusions in Christian theology and their ethical impact

Confusion number one: the person of Jesus. Many Christians fall into a "traditional" "heresy" about the person of Jesus. That heresy is docetism, the view that Jesus was really God walking around pretending to be human, wearing the costume of humanity but not living within human limitations. Therefore Jesus was omniscient and almighty. But if Jesus did not really sweat and bleed, and if he was never afraid or tempted to sin, if he did not have sexual feelings, if he did not sometimes have bad breath and smell like garlic, if he did not wash his underwear, if he did not get tired and irritated and angry, then the whole point of Christian theology, that Jesus, the word become flesh and who suffered under Pontius Pilate, is lost. But sometimes people treat Jesus like the goddess in the White Snake legend who took on human form but could at any time flip back to godlike status, who could not really die. To think of the earthly Jesus that way is to distort theology. And it distorts Christian ethics. If Jesus was only pretending to be human, then he cannot be a role model for us. But if he was really human then he lived with human limitations. He changed his mind at times. He made mistakes.

Confusion number two: God and evil. Many Christians are "Manichean" (another "heresy"). The Manichees believed there were two great powerful forces in the world, God and Satan, and that either could reign supreme. Some Christians place upon themselves the burden of fighting a Satan who is so powerful he might win against God unless humans help in the fight. Such Christians become "defenders of God" in a great struggle or war that is taking place on earth. This confused theology also leads to bad ethics. It causes some Christians to assume that they are fighting on the side of ultimate good, that they are God's soldiers. Such Christians can become cruel in their treatment of those who do not agree with them. They have a false sense of certainty and an aggressive attitude because they think they are on the side of God and that God is on their side. They are always ready to condemn, to judge, to cast the first stone. They go against the simple and obvious ethics of Jesus, who said take the log out of your own eye before you worry about the speck in your sister's eye, who said let the brother who is without sin cast the first stone.

Confusion number three: The bible as a rulebook. Jesus did not treat the bible as a rulebook. He criticized the way some understood the Sabbath. He brought new insights to many areas. The bible is our authoritative source for understanding the faith journey of our spiritual ancestors. We need to read it constantly and closely. But our faith journey continues, and we discover things that people in the bible did not know. The bible points to the eternal truths of God. The bible also reflects the culture and contexts in which it was assembled. It accepted slavery and patriarchy and national chauvinism. The bible is our foundation, but we are still building the house. The Gospel is a freeing message and it is a message that calls us to use our own common sense, our rational ability, to live to the fullness of our humanity. To treat the bible as a rulebook is to be in danger of making ethical decisions based on outmoded cultural values.

Confusion number four: The superiority of Christians. Over 2700 years ago the prophet Amos, the simple farmer turned prophet, recognized that God is not exclusively concerned with Israelites. "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?" When will we Christians learn from Amos? Are you not like the Buddhists to me, O people of Jesus? Did I not call the Muslims and the Hindus? Christian superiority leads to bad ethics, to a lack of respect for those who do not join the church. It leads to conflict, and war. It undermines the peace that Jesus Christ represents.

Confusion number five: Faith and belief. Many Christians are confused about what faith is. They think it is something they have to "do" and "believe". In the synoptic gospels Jesus commends people's faith14 times. Twice to foreigners, such as the Roman Centurion, once to a "sinner", three times to anonymous sick people, and almost always without knowing what these people's belief system is all about. Faith is not a formula or a set of principles. Faith is not from the mind, it is from
the heart and the gut. We cannot establish a set of criteria to measure faith. Faith is a basic trust in God. Jesus found faith in nonbelievers. Why do so many Christians turn faith into an exam in theology? Faith comes first. After faith we develop our beliefs and our theologies. To be a person of faith you do not have to believe someone else's theology or rules and what someone else says you must do. Faith is between an individual and God. The heart of the Gospel is that God loves us, that God's grace is sufficient for us, that we cannot earn God's grace, that people running around trying to save others do not control God's grace, that God does not relate to the world only through the church. When will we overcome the arrogance of thinking of ourselves as the agents of salvation?

My hopes for you students

I count it a privilege and a joy to have had this chance to learn with you over the past several months. You are the salt of the earth. You are lovely and lovable. You are an inspiration to me. So I thank you for that.

I hope you will continue to learn and to change your minds. Sometimes any of us are like the frog living at the bottom of the well. We think the sky is only as big as the opening of the well. Our theology is only that big. Our God is only that big. I hope we can jump up and see that the sky is huge and limitless. God lives and moves in ways beyond our knowing. I hope none of us will say, well now I have my theology and ethics, all written down in a notebook, there is nothing more to learn. That is like staying at the bottom of the well with a little tiny sky.

I hope we can grow into the maturity of Christ without too much pain. Some of us become Christians through a difficult process of prayer and reflection. We have a faith in God that needs to be spelled out in beliefs that are clear and solid and firm. We do not want to let any of that go. My hope is that from the starting point of belief systems we can open ourselves to new understandings. The earth has its depressing sides, of war and oppression and greed. But the earth has its glory and its wonder and its awe-inspiring majesty. It is a challenge to let go of our certainties that mean so much to us. It is painful for some to move out of a narrow box. So my hope is that we can move, that we can get new ethical insights and look at the world with ever-new eyes of faith. Once we move out of our little box we will wonder how we ever could have stayed there so long.

My hope is that we can move beyond any theology that is cruel towards other human beings. That we can overcome attitudes that look down on others because of their ethnic background, or their religion, or their sexual orientation, or their gender, or their language, or their age, or their poverty, or their simplicity of belief.

Closing thoughts

I want to thank you for asking questions, giving me responses, raising issues. Through your words I have come to think back on how I presented my ideas in the course. I want to correct some impressions that I did not intend to make.

My starting point was that, as a foreigner, I should present my thinking with caution. I do not want to tell you what you should believe about theology and ethics. I respect your experience and your context. So frequently I said "this is my view" but you may have your own view. Frequently I said I speak from a western perspective and background but you are Chinese and have different perspectives.

What I now realize is that taking this approach led to at least two wrong impressions about me. One is that it seemed I was building a wall between myself as a westerner, and you as Chinese; that I thought one way, and you thought another way. Such a wall makes dialogue difficult. So I want to correct this by saying I think of you first as human beings, sharing a common humanity with me. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither Chinese nor westerner. Let us break down the dividing walls. Let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred theologies contend. Let’s not build dividing walls between these views.

Second, my approach may have given the impression that my beliefs and theology are not that important to me; as if I think one way and you think another and it does not make any difference. I know that the most powerful theologies, the richest theological schools in the world today, have moved toward a closed-minded view of God, have climbed down into the well with the frog. I want to tell you that I consider that a disaster of no small importance. My faith, and my beliefs and theology about my faith, are crucial to me. I feel very sure about the direction my theology has taken. I hold on to that theology with all
my strength. I think my faith and ethics are on the right course. I am always ready to learn new things, to reconsider every aspect of my faith and life. But in doing so I also know that I am not willing to live in a way that is closed minded, that sees God from the bottom of a well, that makes my ethical choices limited by some earlier culture and some earlier language that have been given a false sacredness. I honour the Bible and I honour the faith of our spiritual mothers and fathers by moving toward the future and not being stuck in the past.

Thank you for helping me in my faith journey. May God bless you on your faith journey.

2003.7/8.8

NEWS

Fighting SARS. The Christian Council of Lianyungang in Jiangsu donated 3,000 RMB [US$ 375 approx.] as support in the fight against SARS. This contribution was only the latest one in a series of major charitable donations made by the council, including support in kind and cash worth 11,000 RMB for poor rural areas, a supply of 365 winter quilts for particularly poor families, and 10,000 RMB for a school for the deaf.

The Social Service Department of the National CCC/TSPM also made contributions to the areas most seriously affected by SARS. Donations made to the Provincial Christian Councils of Hebei, Shanxi and Inner Mongolia were used to purchase disinfectants, thermometers, face masks and other equipment.

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Theological Reconstruction. On June 17 and 18 of this year, a seminar on theological reconstruction was held at China Eastern Theological Seminary in Shanghai. Aimed at the students on campus, the conference exclusively presented student papers exploring topics such as "The importance of theological reconstruction according to the definition of and the tasks of theology," the relationship between believers and non-believers, and a correct view of the Bible in the light of theological reconstruction.
"No Longer Strangers: Faith and Revolution in China"
Selected Writings of Bishop K.H. Ting

Edited with an Introduction by Raymond L. Whitehead

The Asian edition (1991) of "No Longer Strangers", with new covers, is available from the Philippine-China Development Resource Centre in Manila, Philippines and the Amity Foundation Hong Kong Office. Originally published by Orbis Books in 1989, this is the only collection of writings by Bishop K.H. Ting in English that includes a brief but interesting biography of Bishop Ting and introductory notes to each section. Raymond Whitehead, former Dean of the Faculty of Theology, University of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, has done an excellent job in organizing the writings of K.H. Ting and providing extremely useful notes to help locate the writings in their historical context. Currently a visiting professor at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, Prof. Whitehead taught at the Toronto School of Theology for 12 years (1980-92) and was Director of the Canada China Program of the Canadian Council of Churches from 1976-1980. The papers and talks of Bishop Ting incorporated in this 200-page volume were delivered between 1948 and 1987.

Price per copy: US$12 (in Hong Kong); US$17 (airmail) for Asia, Europe and North America.

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