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Vesak Day

Nehemiah (1)

1st Gen Interview

Kolkata Update

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Vesak Day



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Vesak Day is the most significant festival celebrated by Buddhists all around the world and will be celebrated in Singapore on 22 May this year. It is a day that commemorates the birth, enlightenment and death of Gautama Buddha, the founder of the religion that carries his name. Buddhism is the most prevalent religion practised in Singapore (~26%), and has the second most followers in South-East Asia, after Islam. There are 3 main schools of Buddhism, which are divided by differences in philosophy. Locally, majority of Chinese Buddhists are Mahayana Buddhists, while Myanmar/Sri Lankan Buddhists are Theravada Buddhists. With many of our immediate neighbours and secular friends observing and celebrating Vesak Day in Singapore, it would be prudent for us, believers in Christ, to understand some of their practices and beliefs, evaluating them from a Christian perspective.

On Vesak Day, devout Buddhists visit their temples to participate in religious ceremonies, including the hoisting of the Buddhist flag and the chanting of religious texts (sutras and mantras) in commemoration of the triple gem: Buddha, Dharma (his teachings) and Sangha (disciples). Candles are lighted and flowers are offered at the feet of religious leaders, representing the fleetingness of life. Mahayana Buddhist temples, such as the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery on Bright Hill Road, practise the “three-step, one-bow” where devotees kneel after every third step, believing that the ritual would purify their minds and help in repentance. Many observe the ‘8-precepts’ which include the abstinence of 1) killing live creatures, 2) stealing, 3) sexual activity, 4) lying, 5) alcohol and intoxicants, 6) eating at inappropriate times, 7) use of luxurious beds and 8) participating in entertainment and the use of glamorous clothing. In some countries, Buddhists release animals in captivity, to symbolize freedom from bondage, though this is forbidden in Singapore.

While varied in practices and customs, many of these Buddhist rituals are based on key philosophies taught by Gautama Buddha. These may be summarised in the following:

- 1) The “4 Noble Truths” that teach that human suffering is brought about by cravings and that suffering can be brought to an end in this lifetime by attaining ‘Nirvana’.
- 2) That ‘Nirvana’ can be attained through the “8-fold path” which focuses on leading a moral and diligent life that is free of uncleanness and having a pure mind that is free of unwholesome thoughts and desires.
- 3) That wholesome thoughts and kind deeds contribute towards ‘Karma’, which allows one to reach a higher state of spiritual being in the cycle of life.

Christian believers who first encounter Buddhist teachings in reading or in conversations with friends may first identify similarities as there is great focus on a moral code of conduct, emphasis on kindness and benevolence and a consistent message to do away with attachments to the things of this earthly world. From a polemical point of view, it is valuable to dive deeper into the differences in spiritual motivation underlying our beliefs, which we hope to do in this article. While we do not strive in any way to have the basis of ‘choosing’ one religion or the other being based on their comparative strengths (neither do we have the qualification to, for faith is given through God alone), this understanding may strengthen our personal religious position and have a perspective towards the manner of non-Christians. We will discuss a few aspects in the following sections:

The Role of Good Works

In Buddhist teachings, good works serve to achieve physical, verbal and mental purification of the self through the accumulation of ‘merit’. Some view this more intangibly, in the gradual, subconscious positive effect on the mind and consequent influence on behaviour. Others see it more tangibly, in that ‘merit’ can be enduring, being brought from one life into the next life, with an overall progressive spiritual climb toward ‘Nirvana’.

In contrast, one of the tenets of Reformed Protestant theology, emphasises that salvation is by faith alone and that good works are a necessary consequence that is seen as evidence of that salvation. Apostle Paul states: “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ... for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” (Galatians 2:16). A believer in Christ, ought not in any way to be motivated in doing good works to earn any spiritual ‘purification’ nor better standing in the sight of God. In fact, in our depraved nature, man is unable to do any good works by our own effort, for “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one.” (Job 14:4). It is only through faith in Jesus Christ, that “the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” (2 Timothy 3:17)

Views on Suffering

All of Buddhist philosophy is centred on an understanding of suffering in human life. Taking it a step further, the ultimate spiritual goal of Buddhism, ‘Nirvana’, is defined by one’s eternal escape from suffering. Gautama Buddha taught that human suffering results from cravings for things, aversions against things and ignorance towards things. As these 3 desires originate from within man’s self,



the way out of suffering is also focused on changing man's actions, thoughts, and desires through the 8-fold path; thereby driving home the message that man is able, through himself, to be free of suffering. In certain Buddhist cultures (particularly among the Chinese), men who are seen to be incapable to do this on their own merit, seek the aid of 'Bodhisattvas', who were humans who had already reached 'Nirvana'. A well-known example is Guan Yin.

In the Bible, man's descent into suffering followed Adam's descent into sin. In Genesis, after the fall, God declares unto Eve "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16), and unto Adam "cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life" (Genesis 3:17). Hence, human suffering ensued once sin pervaded humanity, with sorrow on earth as our punishment. As the descendants of Adam, we inherit his sin and sorrow, for "...as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so, death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12).

Consequently then, Christians believe that such suffering cannot be eradicated, certainly not through man's own actions or works, for we have been condemned to this state in eternity. Only through the blood of Jesus Christ, who was both God and Man, who bore the enormity of the punishment of all our sins on the cross, could our sins be atoned for. Therefore, our only hope of escape from suffering, can only be through Jesus, who "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45). For he "hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:4-5).

Hope in Eternity

Every Buddhist aspires towards 'Nirvana', to be free from the eternal cycle of human suffering, also known as 'Samsara'. Various sects within Buddhism, view "Nirvana" differently.

Some believe that it is a state of mind that is attainable on this earthly world, whether in this lifetime or the next (with reincarnation). Others have a certain celestial image that is beyond this world. What remains a common perception, however, is that there is an herculean effort on man's part required to achieve this, to the point that it seems like a distant and unattainable state. Any positive progress made can also be lost with wrongdoing. It is unsurprising to hear of Buddhists who would remark that "I will have a better chance in my next lifetime", as they make reparations in the current one.

Christians, on the other hand, are given a clear picture of the end of times in Revelation with Jesus' second coming. In the "new heaven and a new earth", we have assurance from scripture that "God shall wipe away all tears... and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." (Revelations 21:1,4). We are given hope, in a not only attainable future, but one that is definite and perfect, one that we have full confidence that we will be a part of. With our salvation through faith, 1 John 5:13 assures us "that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God." Moreover, even as we journey through this lifetime and struggle with our old man of sin, we need not fear demotion or losing our position, for through Jesus, we have an "everlasting covenant" with God, that He "will not turn away from them, to do them good." (Jeremiah 32:40).

Conclusively, while the outward manifestation of diligence, compassion and even antithetical living may not seem all that different between Buddhists and Christians, the spiritual motivations behind each are vastly different and with deeper interrogation, become obvious. In this season around Vesak Day, as we witness practices and festivities around us, may we be disciplined in reminding ourselves of our own spiritual foundation in Christ and renewing our knowledge and convictions in our beliefs.

Nehemiah's Godly Enquiry Concerning Jerusalem



Rev. Angus Stewart

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Introduction

The Bible itself often identifies the spiritual significance of its major characters and it is also instructive who makes these identifications. Abraham is called "the father of all them that believe" by Paul, the great proponent of justification by faith alone (Rom. 4:11). David is spoken of as "the man after [God's] own heart" by no less than Jehovah Himself, who moulded and knew David's heart (I Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22).

John the Baptist is the one who would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord," as stated by the angel Gabriel, who was preparing Zacharias and Elizabeth for the birth of their son (Luke 1:17).

Nehemiah is a man who sought the welfare of Israel, the Old Testament church. This is what God's enemies thought regarding him. This is a good testimony to have from the ungodly and their fears regarding Nehemiah were accurate.

te! "When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel" (Neh. 2:10).

Here are three well-known roles or works of Nehemiah. First, he was the cupbearer of Artaxerxes, the Medo-Persian Emperor. Second, he became the governor of Judah. Third, in this office, he was the moving force in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's perimeter wall. In all these roles, whether as cupbearer, governor or wall builder, he was a man who sought the welfare of Israel. The church needs more men and women like him!

Two members of Nehemiah's family are named. His father was called Hachaliah (1:1; 10:1) and he had a brother named Hanani (1:2; 7:2), as well as at least one other brother (1:2). If Nehemiah had sisters, they are not mentioned in this book.

Here are two good reasons to think that Hachaliah and his wife had a godly home. First, they had Nehemiah for a son. Second, they had Hanani for a son, whom faithful Nehemiah appointed one of the leaders in Jerusalem, the holy city (7:2).

Our covenant God especially uses homes like that of Mr. and Mrs. Hachaliah to produce men and women who seek the welfare of Israel, the elect, redeemed and gathered church of our Lord Jesus Christ. These are the sort of homes we need in our congregations!

Nehemiah's Specific Enquiry

What does Nehemiah ask at the very start of his book? He makes a double-barrelled enquiry about the people back in Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem (1:2).

The people about whom Nehemiah asks are those who had returned to Judah out of the Babylonian captivity in two main groups. First, there was the group under Zerubbabel the governor. They numbered about 50,000, including Joshua the high priest, and they rebuilt the temple (Ezra 1-6). These people arrived in Judah over 80 years before the events of Nehemiah 1. Second, there was a smaller group under Ezra the scribe. Ezra 7-10 deals with the arrival of this great priest and focuses on his leadership in promoting spiritual edification (rather than physical construction). Ezra and his group arrived just 13 years before Nehemiah 1.

How are these two groups doing? Are they amalgamating and uniting in the Lord's service? Why did Nehemiah enquire about them? Because he cared about their welfare! Why did he ask about the place, Jerusalem? Because he knew that there was rebuilding work that needed to be done. He hoped to hear that the city wall was progressing. After all, Ezra's party was there to inject new energy into the people of God in Judah.

To whom did Nehemiah make these enquiries? Nehemiah asked Hanani because his godly brother knew the issues

If we approach Jehovah as the God of the covenant in the Lord Jesus, we have access to Him and confidence that He will answer our prayers for His people.

and understood the importance of the people's spiritual morale. Nehemiah asked the "men of Judah" who were with Hanani because they had recently been there and so they had first-hand knowledge.

Do you see the significance of this? In general, you need to ask the right people to get accurate and helpful answers. This is perhaps especially true as regards the church. Ask people at the heart of the church, spiritually attuned people.

When did Nehemiah ask Hanani and these men of Judah these questions? When, after journeying from Jerusalem, they had arrived in Shushan the palace, also known as Susa the citadel, one of the places where the Medo-Persian emperor resided and where Nehemiah worked. In other words, these people had up-to-date information on the situation on the ground or, at least, information as current as possible in those days.

Let us follow the text in Nehemiah 1:1-2, which summarises our exposition so far. "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah" (v. 1)—here is the book's heading. Next, the scene is set: "And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace" (v. 1). Then comes the arrival of the party from the west: "Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah" (v. 2), followed by Nehemiah's enquiry about the people and the place, "I asked them [1] concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and [2] concerning Jerusalem" (v. 2).

What was their reply? "And they said unto me, [1] The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: [2] the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire" (v. 3).

Nehemiah's Deep Mourning

How did Nehemiah respond? Not merely with pleasantries: "And how was the weather during your long journey?" Was he a little bit saddened or fairly upset? No! He was deeply troubled and you know why, reader! Because Nehemiah was a man who loved God's church, her distress was his distress. Doubtless Nehemiah had sung Psalm 137 in the captivity many times and he had meant it! "If I



forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy" (vv. 5-6)!

Though deeply troubled, Nehemiah did not keel over, as some do when they hear terrible tidings. He did not need anyone to put a chair behind him lest he collapse but that godly man did realise that he needed to sit, so at once he lowered himself to the ground or into a chair, for he was heartbroken: "it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept" (Neh. 1:4).

Nehemiah's reaction is all the more remarkable given that he was a grown man, not a child. He was not an emotional wreck or a fifth-century BC snowflake, in modern language. Nehemiah was a responsible person, even the emperor's cupbearer.

Even though he was personally affluent and working in Shushan the palace (the citadel of Susa) some 1,000 miles from Jerusalem, her distress was his distress. Nehemiah's tears were genuine, for God had put into his heart a love for the church and so he suffered with Israel's suffering.

Nehemiah was not only deeply grieved immediately after hearing the sad report concerning Jerusalem. Afterwards, he continued to do three things: he "mourned ... and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven" (v. 4). You could say that he prayed with lamentations and fasting.

For how long? Scripture says on "certain days" (v. 4). During how long a period? For the four months from Chisleu (v. 1), the ninth month of the year, to Nisan (2:1), the first month of the year. At what times? Nehemiah tells us: "day and night" (1:6).

Nehemiah has been seeking the Lord for the welfare of His church deliberately, and with resolution and perseverance, for about 120 days. These are the actions of a man who sought the welfare of Israel for a long time even before he exhorted the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem's defensive walls (2:17) or oversaw this massive construction project. The genuine and deep distress that he manifests for the people of God over 2,400 years ago puts us to shame and stirs us up to pray for the body of Christ in our day!

Nehemiah's Covenant Prayer

Nehemiah 1:5-11 contains a summary of his covenantal praying for four months in Mesopotamia. It begins with the covenant address: "I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments" (v. 5). Here, as elsewhere, the Lord's "covenant and mercy" refer not to two separate things but to His one covenant mercy in Christ.

If we approach Jehovah as the God of the covenant in the

Lord Jesus, we have access to Him and confidence that He will answer our prayers for His people: "Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants" (v. 6). Next Nehemiah laments Israel's covenant breaking. I "confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses" (vv. 6-7). Notice that Nehemiah includes in this confession of sin both himself and his family and that he makes no excuses: "We have dealt very corruptly against thee" (7). This is the way that we too must confess our sins to God: with shame and without cover up.

Nehemiah acknowledges God's covenant judgment upon Israel's covenant breaking. This is the explanation for the Jews' fall to, and exile by, the Babylonians, as God had warned repeatedly in the Pentateuch (e.g., Lev. 26:33; Deut. 4:27): "the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations" (Neh. 1:8).

Then Nehemiah recalls God's covenant promises (e.g., Lev. 26:40-45; Deut. 4:29-31; 30:1-5): "But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there [i.e., Jerusalem with its temple]" (Neh. 1:9).

Nehemiah reminds Jehovah of Israel's identity and His deliverance of her from Egypt: "Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand" (v. 10). Specifically, Nehemiah requests the answer to the prayers of two parties, not only himself but all of God's covenant people: "O LORD, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name" (v. 11). Even more particularly, he asks, "prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man [i.e., Artaxerxes, the Medo-Persian Emperor]" (v. 11).

Beloved, we live some 2 ½ millennia after this profound prayer in Nehemiah 1. Our hope is in our Lord Jesus Christ, whom Nehemiah's contemporary, Malachi, called "the messenger of the covenant" (3:1). He bore our covenant judgment on the cross of Calvary because of our covenant breaking of the law of God. In Him, we have all the covenant promises: the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of God, a new heart and a new life, and the new heavens and the new earth! Let us seek the welfare of Christ's church—often troubled by false doctrine, worldly members, divisions and persecution—by seeking God's face in covenant prayer for her!

Salvation is of the LORD (8): God's 'Repentance' (Jonah 3:10)



Pastor Marcus Wee

Minister of CERC.

In the aftermath of Jonah's preaching and Nineveh's repentance, which we considered last time, we read of God's 'repentance': "And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not" (Jon. 3:10).

Repentance, as we understand it of men, refers to a radical change of mind and heart that leads to a transformation of life. It refers to a turning from sin. How could such a word be used of God, that God "repented"? How could there be a change in God?

God's 'Repentance'?

The force of this question comes, not because we have a pre-conceived notion of who God is, but because of God's own express testimony in Scripture. One of God's attributes is His immutability, the perfection that God never changes. This attribute is reflected in various passages of Scripture, of which we mention only a couple.

Malachi 3:6: "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."

Numbers 23:19: "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" God does not "repent"; the same word that is used in Jonah 3:10, indicating that God "repented".

Adding to the force of the question is this reality, that this passage in Jonah 3:10 speaking of God's 'repentance' is not an isolated passage. There are multiple Scripture passages that do so (cf. Judg. 2:18; 2 Sam. 24:16; 1 Chron. 21:15; Ps. 90:13, 106:45, 135:14; Jer. 18:8,10, 26:3,13, 42:10; Joel 2:13; Amos 7:3,6). Once again, we mention just a couple.

Genesis 6:6: "And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart."

1 Samuel 15:11: "It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to

The infinite and incomprehensible God condescends to speak to us finite humans in a way that we are able to grasp, with our finite minds.

be king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the LORD all night."

1 Samuel 15 is an especially striking passage, because it is said that God repents (vv. 11, 35), and yet, we read this in v. 29: "And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent."

'God's Repentance' as an Anthropopathism

How do we account for these passages of Scripture that, on one hand, proclaim that God is immutable, including that He does not "repent", and on the other hand, proclaim that God repents? Our starting premise is that there is no contradiction in God, nor in His Word. God is the God of Truth, and it is impossible that God both repents and does not repent, change and does not change, in the same sense of the word. Any explanation that attempts to teach a contradiction in God, or in His Word, must be rejected.

When the Scriptures speak of God's 'repentance', it is using an anthropopathism. It is using the emotions (Greek: 'pat-hos') of humans (Greek: 'anthropos' for man) to describe something in God. Human repentance, especially the notion of sorrow or grief, is used to teach us something about God.

We can think of anthropopathism as God lisping to us, not unlike the way that an adult speaks to a little child, using simplified words and examples that the child can grasp. The infinite and incomprehensible God condescends to speak to us finite humans in a way that we are able to grasp, with our finite minds. Hence, He tells us that He 'repents'.

But what does it mean that God 'repents'?

Negatively, it does not mean that God has changed, in Himself. God is immutable. God is not a man, that He should repent. According to His eternal, immutable counsel, God had always decreed that He would not destroy Nineveh, 40 days after Jonah's preaching, and He never changed from that. There was no change in God, nor His decree. That God 'repented', as an anthropopathism, does not in any way negate the truth of God's immutability, that He does not change in Himself.

Rather, from our perspective, it seems as if God has chan-



ged. There had been impending judgement. Nineveh was about to be destroyed in 40 days. Then, judgement was averted. Nineveh was not destroyed. “God repented of the evil, that He said that He would do unto them” (Jon. 3:10b). From man’s point of view, there seemed to be a change in God. And the phrase “God repented”, as an anthropopathism, reflects that reality: the seeming change in God from our perspective, and yet, God’s immutability in Himself and in His decree.

But there is more that we can learn from the anthropopathism “God repented”.

God’s ‘Repentance’ Revealing God’s Mercy

The specific term ‘repentance’ used in those passages indicates a deep sorrow and grief. God “repented” of creating man (Gen. 6:6) and of making Saul king (1 Sam. 15:11, 35). The actions of wicked men before the flood and of wicked Saul grieved God greatly. Sin grieves God greatly. This is what the Holy Spirit seeks to convey by speaking of God’s ‘repentance’ in those passages.

In Jonah 3:10 and other passages which speak that God “repented” from His judgement, the Holy Spirit is teaching us about God’s mercy, and the infinite depth of it. Such is God’s mercy for His people, for the Ninevites, even for wretched sinners such as you and me, that He is greatly moved and takes great pity on us and our affliction. Although we de-

serve God’s eternal wrath and destruction for our sins, He takes pity upon us. In the multitude of His mercy, He does not destroy us as we deserve, but He turns His wrath away from us. He ‘repents’.

This ‘repentance’ of God, revealing His infinite mercy, is rooted in the cross of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. For it is only in the cross that all of our sins are fully satisfied by Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice for sin, such that God averts His judgement upon us and gives us instead the blessedness of salvation. It is in the cross of Christ that God ‘repents’.

Praise be to God that He ‘repents’, that He takes great pity and compassion upon us in Christ, bringing us to repentance for our sin, and in that way, forgiving us and averting the destruction that we deserve.

Our calling, then, is to turn from our sin daily, our sin which makes us worthy of God’s just judgement in hell. In the words of Isaiah 55:6-7a: “Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD”.

Why? Because God is a God who ‘repents’; who averts the condemnation that we deserve, but shows to us abundant mercy, in Jesus Christ. Because “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jon. 2:9b).

Our Rejection of Conditions (6): Critiquing a Novel Definition



Rev. Martyn McGeown

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A new definition of condition has been coined recently, a definition which to my knowledge was never used by theologians of the Protestant Reformed Churches before. In earlier blog posts I provided abundant evidence from our literature to demonstrate what a “condition” is. The new definition is this: “A condition is any activity of man which must precede the reception of a blessing from God.” Therefore, if faith must precede justification, faith is a condition; if repentance must precede the forgiveness of sins, repentance is a condition; if prayer must precede the reception of blessings from God, prayer is a condition. These things are, according to the novel definition of condition, conditions even if they are worked in God’s children by the Holy Spirit, even if they are God-given or God-worked.

First, the fact of the matter is that faith does precede justification, repentance does precede the forgiveness of sins, and prayer does precede the reception of blessings from God. If

we are afraid to say that, write that, confess that, and preach that, we are afraid of what the Bible teaches. In other words, the Bible presents a certain relationship between the activities of men and the blessings of God, a relationship that God himself in perfect wisdom has ordained. If we do not like that relationship, God will not change it to accommodate us. “We have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified” (Gal. 2:16), not “We were justified before we believed.” “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31), not “You were already saved before you believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Yes, the Philippian jailor was regenerated—in that sense he was saved—but he was not saved in the sense of justified, consciously enjoying the forgiveness of sins, etc.). “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3, 5), not “Ye shall be saved even without repentance.” “Let [the wicked] return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7),

God does not wait for us to do something as if his work depended on us, or as if his work were contingent on us.

not “You have mercy and abundant pardon already, even if you do not turn from your sins.” “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8), not “You shall receive, find, and have opened to you, even if you do not ask, seek, and knock.” Could God give to the non-asker, non-seeker, and non-knocker? Yes, absolutely, and he gives us exceedingly abundantly above what we ask or think (Eph. 3:20), but ordinarily, he is pleased to give when we ask: “Ye have not, because ye ask not; Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:2b-3). “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). Or, to quote from the creeds: “God will give his grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of him, and are thankful for them” (Heidelberg Catechism, A 116). But why multiply examples when the Word of God is so clear?

Second, as I indicated earlier, God is sovereign even concerning our believing, our repenting, and our praying. God is not sitting in heaven fretting, “I have blessings for my people—justification, forgiveness of sins, grace, and the Holy Spirit—but I am waiting for them to believe, to repent, and to pray; and until they do, my hands are tied.” What an absurd, and utterly dishonorable, portrayal of God that would be! Whom God plans to justify he calls, and he gives to him (the elect, regenerated, called sinner) the gift of faith so that he believes and is justified. God does not leave it up to his children to decide whether to believe or not, as it pleases them. Whom God plans to forgive, he grants the gift of repentance, so that the elect, regenerated sinner changes his mind, and turns in true sorrow of heart, with hope in God’s mercy, toward the God of grace revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. To the one whom God plans to bless with a particular blessing, he grants the gift of prayer, so that he brings the petitions that God himself has ordained, and in that way, God gives the blessing that he has prepared.

God does not wait for us to do something as if his work depended on us, or as if his work were contingent on us. God does not give us the grace to believe, repent, pray, forgive our neighbor, and then leave it up to us whether we will do those things or not, which would be resistible grace. God’s grace is never resistible, ineffectual, or impotent. Instead, God has decreed to deal with us as rational, moral creatures and to bestow his gifts in a certain orderly fashion.

Take the much-debated James 4:8a: “Draw nigh unto God, and he will draw nigh unto you.” The grammar of the text is this: first, “Draw nigh” is in the imperative mood, which is the grammar of a command or an admonition; second, “he will draw nigh” is in the future tense, which is the grammar of a promise. Apply our understanding of Reformed theology to the text. God is always near his people, but James’ readers were living sinfully and God had withdrawn from them. He calls them “sinners” and “double-minded” and calls them to “cleanse [their] hands” and “purify [their] hearts” (v. 8b). Therefore, God draws nigh to them in the preaching (or, in this case, in the inspired epistle) and commands them, “Draw nigh.” Does God then wait passively until these people stir up something in their hearts to draw near to God? Of course not. By means of the word, “Draw nigh,” he causes them by his sweetly irresistible grace to draw nigh, he causes them to believe, he causes them to repent and turn from sin, and in that way he draws nigh to them. God does not even work in their hearts by his grace and then leaves it up to them whether they will draw nigh or not, but he works irresistibly to draw them to himself, and they come. No other exegesis of the text does justice to the words that the Spirit inspires. To say that God draws nigh to us whether we draw nigh or not, is absurd. Then James had no good reason to write what he did. Rather, we believe that an exhortation such as this is a means that God uses to bring us closer to himself. Just as, when a husband says to his wife, “Come near,” in order that he might embrace her, or when a mother says to her daughter, “Come near,” in order that she might hug her, so God says to us, “Draw nigh.” The effect is that the wife comes, the child comes; and certainly, since God’s call to his elect is irresistible, the elect believer comes. That is not a condition that we must fulfill for fellowship with our God: God draws us so that we come.

Herman Hoeksema says it well: “Through the work of grace man becomes responsible in the highest sense of the word. Not, indeed, responsible for what God does, but freely responsible for the new obedience unto which he is called. Just because God works within him to will and to do of His good pleasure, he heeds the admonition to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12-13). Just because he has the glorious promises of God that He will dwell in them and walk in them and will be their God and they shall be His people, they cleanse themselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1). God regenerates them, and they live. God calls them, and they come. God gives them faith, and they believe. God justifies them, and they are righteous. God sanctifies them, and they walk in a new and holy life. God preserves them, and they persevere even unto the end. And all this work of God is without condition. That is the relation between the work of God and our work, as it is expressed in Canons 3-4.12, the end of which we quote once more: ‘Whereupon the will thus renewed, is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence,



becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent, by virtue of that grace received.' By faith, through faith, and in the way of faith we are saved, but never on condition of faith" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 14 [April 15, 1950], 317-318).

In conclusion, the Protestant Reformed Churches and her sisters still reject conditions in salvation and in the covenant. We insist that faith is not a condition so that the believer makes himself to differ from the unbeliever, but it is the gift of God. We insist that grace is not wider than election, not on the mission field, and not in the covenant commu-

nity, but God has grace, effectual, sovereign grace, only for his elect. We insist that God's promise never fails because everything that God promises surely comes to pass. In this sense we have always rejected "conditions:" as any activity of man on which salvation depends or on which it is contingent.

At the same time, we do not deny the clear word of God which teaches that God ordains certain activities of men before he grants certain blessings of salvation. To deny that is to seek to be wiser than God and to deny the explicit teaching of Holy Scripture.

Interviews with CERC's First-Generation Christians – William Ow (Part 1)



William Ow

The interviewee, William Ow, is married to Sally and they have one daughter. He attended First Evangelical Reformed Church before joining CERC about 15 years ago.

The interview was conducted, transcribed and edited by CERC Christian Literature Ministry members.

Interviewer's note: This is the first interview of our brand new series, Interviews with CERC's First-Generation Christians. The oral interview was transcribed and edited for brevity. Still, there was enough content for 2 articles! Enjoy Part 1, with Part 2 to come in the next issue, God willing.

How did you become a Christian?

It all started when I was in Primary school. Then, most families prayed to ancestors and wanted to have their children blessed. Sometimes, they would dedicate their children to their favourite deities. My relative brought me to Waterloo Street temple. She would pray and use divination sticks (Figure 1) that would be shaken out of a container and she would pick one of them and interpret the text on it. When a decision was to be made on a weighty matter, she would shake 2 moon blocks (Figure 2) to ask for confirmation. During my Primary 3 to 5 years, I was especially fervent. If I was sick, that relative would say that I was not faithful enough, and he/she would burn charm paper, and put its ashes into water for me to drink. Despite my feelings of unease, I would still drink it.



Figure 1 Divination Sticks (Kau Chim, n.d.)

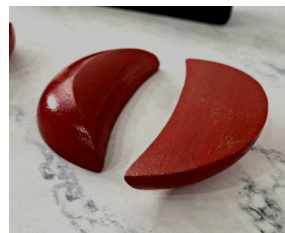


Figure 2 Moon blocks used for divination, also known as Jiaobei (Ying Yang Spiritual Prophecy Divination Jiaobei Fortune Crescent Moon Blocks S, n.d.)

As I failed the Primary 6 examination, I was sent for tuition. My tuition teacher was a Christian, and after class, she would share with me about Christ and teach that praying to idols is wrong. She brought me to attend Bethesda Church in Bras Basah.

At that time, I went to Anglo-Chinese School and attended chapel. My extra-curricular activity was Boys Brigade. Consequently, my bible knowledge became stronger and my faith grew. Sunday School was also compulsory. I believed after reading the book of Revelation about the apostle John in the island of Patmos, and I had a strong belief in Christ as Saviour.

Did you face opposition?

A few years later, I wanted to be baptised. However, my mother was concerned about whether becoming a Christian would mean that I would no longer pray to my late father. When I confirmed her fears, she punished me with kneeling in front of the altar with no lunch for a day. In the evening, she smashed the photo frame on the floor and burned my father's photo, saying that there was no use having a photo since I would not be praying to it. As we stayed in a slum house then, passers-by could hear

my mother's outburst and they chided my mother for withholding food. She told me that if I wanted to be baptised still, I should move out, and she would disown me. She was counselled otherwise by her tailoring instructor (who was a non-Christian)! Eventually, she relented and allowed me to be baptised after I turned 21 years old.

QingMing Festival (Tomb Sweeping Day) was a source of friction as my mother wanted to know what I would do at the cemetery. I did not wish to burn joss sticks (Figure 3), but would stand with my head bowed as a form of respect.



Figure 3 Joss sticks (Flower Incense Sticks – Easykrishi.com, n.d.)

A turning point for my mother was the Billy Graham Rally at the National Stadium. I invited my mother to attend and she asked me what would happen after she passed away – would I pray to her

and how would I treat her funeral? I replied that being a Christian, I would not be able to hold a Taoist ritual to send her off, and what was important was how I treated her when she was alive. I said her that if she could, she should convert to Christianity and we would see each other again in heaven. I also told her that after she died, any displays of filial piety would be less relevant to her as she would not know anything, being dead. Surprisingly she agreed to go to the rally. Translation was provided, and she sat in the Cantonese area. During the altar call, she again surprised me by wanting to respond to it. I cautioned her to think carefully and not feel pressured.

Subsequently, my mother started to attend Living Streams at Blk 123, Toa Payoh Lorong 1. In God's Providence, she met our distant neighbour, a provision shop owner, there. Her son, who had a reputation for being naughty in his childhood, had become the pastor! The seed of the gospel had been sown and the Lord blessed it.

While my mother had become receptive to the gospel, I did not get baptised yet as I felt that I was still a sinner. I had also backslided. Being ignorant as a Christian, I participated in some of the seventh month activities at work, like contributing money to buy things to pray to idols. This was to go along with the peers. However, someone told me that my actions were a form of participation in the worship of idols. I realised that I could be giving others a false impression on how a Christian is expected to behave, and I felt hypocritical in my actions.

I conclude that the Christian faith is built slowly. In our earthly pilgrimage and journey, we increase in the knowledge of the Word, and therefore we will be able to adhere to God's instruction.

What convinced you of the reformed faith?

After getting to know Sally (my wife), I attended the First Evangelical Reformed Church (FERC). Initially I told Rev Kortering that the church was like a cult but he laughed and still treated me graciously. I struggled with 3 issues:

- 1) The church preached that God saved a few only. I could not reconcile this with John 3:16.
- 2) I found it offensive that I had to ask permission from the elders to partake in the Lord's Supper though I was already a Christian.
- 3) I disagreed with infant baptism as I felt that my child, if I had any in future, should be allowed to decide for himself/herself at the age of maturity whether or not to believe in God.

After 3 years, with various people explaining to me without pressuring, I gained a deeper knowledge of Scripture and was convicted of the reformed teaching. I also learned that it is possible to view the Bible as a history book or non-fiction, but that the Holy Spirit reveals the word to believers.

- 1) Romans 5 tells us that God is the potter, and we are the clay. God's sovereignty is his pleasure, and it is displayed in salvation, when he elects some and reprobrates others.
- 2) 1 Corinthians 11:28 speaks of a man examining himself before coming to the Lord's Supper. This is a serious matter as otherwise, the Lord's Supper would be damnation (condemnation) to one's self. The elders are also involved in this as overseers of the church.
- 3) Abraham had Isaac circumcised when Isaac was 8 days old. God's covenant is in the line of generations, while my duty as a parent would be to bring up my child with instruction.

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Vesak Day

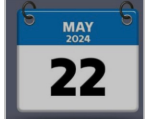


Julia Koh

Member of CERC.

This article has been adapted for young readers. The original article is published in this issue.

What is Vesak Day?



Vesak Day is a festival celebrated by Buddhists, remembering the birth, enlightenment and death of Gautama Buddha.



Did you know? Buddhism is the most common religion in Singapore!



Figure 1 Devotees bathe the Buddha (ST file photo: Seah Kwang Peng)

How is Buddhism different from Christianity in teaching?

What happens during Vesak Day?

Buddhists visit temples to participate in ceremonies like:

- Bathing of Buddha
- Hoisting of the Buddhist flag
- Chanting of religious texts (sutras and mantras)
- Lighting candles and offering flowers at the feet of religious leaders



Figure 2 Offering of joss sticks at the temple (Photo by Nathaniel Hayag)

Did you know? In some countries, Buddhists release animals in captivity, to symbolise freedom from bondage.



	Buddhist teaching	Christian teaching
Role of Good Works	Good works serve to achieve physical, verbal and mental self purity through the earning of 'merit' .	Salvation is by faith alone and good works are evidence of that salvation. "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." (Galatians 2:16)
Views on Suffering	Human suffering results from cravings for things, aversions against things and ignorance towards things. The ultimate spiritual goal of Buddhism, 'Nirvana', is defined by one's eternal escape from suffering.	Human suffering started with sin . As descendants of Adam, we inherit his sin and sorrow, for "...as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so, death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12)
Way out of suffering	The way out of suffering is focused on changing man's actions, thoughts, and desires	The only escape from suffering is through Christ's death on the cross when he gave his life as "a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45).
Hope in Eternity	Aspiration towards 'Nirvana', freedom from suffering. Perception of afterlife is that of reincarnation, and further attempts to escape suffering can be made with future lifetimes.	A definite future where "God shall wipe away all tears... and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." (Revelations 21:1,4)

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Figure 1. Devotees bathe the Buddha after circumambulating the Hougang stadium on May 10, 2014, each holding a lotus-lamp. ST FILE PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG. Retrieved April 25, 2024, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/vesak-day-5-things-you-should-know-about-this-buddhist-celebration-0>

Figure 2. Offerings and good deeds Photo by Nathaniel Hayag Retrieved April 25, 2024, from <https://www.visitsingapore.com/festivals-events-singapore/cultural-festivals/vesak-day/>



Missionary Report from CERC-Kolkata Mission Field



Rev. Emmanuel Singh

CERC's missionary pastor in the CERC-Kolkata Fellowship, India.

To:

The Foreign Mission Committee/ Council
Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church
Singapore

Dated 25th Jan 2024

Dear FMC/ Council

We wish you a Blessed New Year 2024 in the name of Our Redeemer and Lord Jesus Christ. We are thankful for God's faithfulness and steadfast love for His Church here in Kolkata and in Singapore. We are very much thankful to you and God for continuing to sacrificially support the mission work in Kolkata. I was not well and I am still under medication.

On 22nd December I had a motor bike accident, and had a little bleeding and pain on my left side. The accident happened near a police station, and Arun was with me. Two policemen came and gave us first aid in their room. Thank God that we both are safe.

Very recently Sumit Pramanik also was very sick and was hospitalised. When he was released from hospital he was very weak due to not drinking water and eating food properly. Thank God he is now doing well.

There is another brother, Aniketh Singh, who is 20 years old and has a neurological disorder. He is a regular attendee in our fellowship but recently he went missing. We were about to approach the police for help, but thank God he went home at midnight.

Thank God for everything that he has done last year and we could begin 2024 with the great blessing and hope to see the true Gospel being proclaimed through the witness of CERC Kolkata. In the last two months I was able to meet a lot of local Christian leaders and they are very interested to learn the reformed faith. I intend to call them to study with us in our Bible study of the reformed doctrines.

Now let me share the missionary report to you with a few pictures attached.

Sharing Reformed faith to the women On 8th December, a few sisters from the Assembly of God church visited us. We had a whole day's sharing of our reformed basic faith with them, and they are quite interested to learn the reformed faith. We are planning to set a day for them to study with us. Continue to pray for this group. My wife Sonali is in contact with them. Their pastor is also interested to learn the reformed faith. Our future step is to help them to join us in our fellowship.



Mumbai Trip 16th to 20th December Mumbai trip was very profitable during my third visit to them. Thank God for the zeal they have for the reformed faith. This group is now meeting at Hilltop recording studio for time being, and they are looking for a permanent place for a larger gathering. During this trip I have preached on the Incarnation of Christ, the regulative principle of worship and Sola Christus. We had very a warm and vibrant fellowship with saints at Mumbai.



Cottage Prayer Meeting Mr Ardhendu Singh and Mrs, Anjana Singh have been worshipping with us for the past six months. Very recently they invited us to their home to have a cottage prayer meeting, and they invited their friends and other siblings to attend the meeting to hear the Gospel. Anubrata Mondal led the prayer meeting and I shared the Gospel to them and closing prayer was done by Arun. This year 2024 onward we will have cottage prayer meeting going house to house, so that we can reach friends and family members of saints at their loca-



tion. This is a good initiative to reach the lost souls with the Gospel.



Sunday Worship Service and Preaching on Lord's Day: We begin with Sunday Devotion at 10 am and worship at 5 pm on the Lord's Day . In the evening we have full attendance but less than 20 saints come in the morning. We have completed preaching from the Heidelberg catechism, so this year we have started preaching from the Belgic confession again. For the last three weeks, I have preached from the first article of the Belgic confession.

Church Order Class and Bible Study: We have started our Church Order Class for the members including the office bearers. This year we have started our Bible study on Reformed



Translation Work: The Church Order is in the process of translation., Very recently, I invited a few Christian music composers and poets to my home and discussed with them about the psalter. They had never heard what is psalter, and never thought that psalms can be sung with melody and notes. Some of them said that they will help us to translate the psalter into Bengali.



Prayer request:

1. Pray for the Kolkata Fellowship to be instituted as a local church
2. Pray for the building and land
3. Pray for the sick people in our church specially Aniketh Singh, Tanda Sarkar, and Pastor Singh
4. Pray for Sudip Halder for his wife. She has returned to the Hindu faith and now worships at a Hindu temple.
5. Pray for the upcoming Church camp

With much gratitude and thankfulness I submit this report to the council of FMC/Council of CERC Singapore.

In Christ's Vineyard,
Your Missionary Pastor
Rev. Emmanuel Singh

COVENANT LIFE IN PICTURES: KOLKATA SPECIAL

Snippets from our recent delegation to Kolkata
and the church camp that was held there



COVENANT LIFE IN PICTURES



During the Chinese New Year, we gathered in various homes for a time of fellowship.



We were blessed to have our old members, the Lehnert family in Singapore for several weeks!



The preschool to primary school aged children had their annual Sunday School outing in March.



At the recent Family Support Ministry workshop, we discussed various issues pertaining to the life of the church and how to abound in love towards one another.



Each small group got to vote which topics it felt were most significant, after which the groups brainstormed suggestions and solutions.

