

God's Holistic Training in the Life of Theological Education

© Pastor Wang Wei Zhou, Administrative Superintendent at Yanjing Theological Seminary (Teaches Calvin's Theology & the Epistles of Apostle Paul)



Editor's Note: Refer to the issue 291 of this newsletter, we once invited Pastor Wang to share his reflections on theological education. He shared, "...the mission of theological education in China is a long and heavy one, and requires theology learners to work hard unceasingly. This is in order to complete God's calling for us, to train every theology student in the

Chinese churches to be pleasing to God." As a theology educator who constantly accepts training, changing from a teacher back to a student, Pastor Wang has walked down many paths of leadership. His own personal experience has helped him to lead other theology students in a three-dimensional way -- in mind, body and spirit -- so that these students can become spiritual leaders in the churches on the mainland.

In 1993, I started to teach at Yanjing Theological Seminary after graduating with a bachelor's degree from there, and began my ministry in theological education in the mainland. In 1994, I went to continue my studies at Alliance Bible Seminary. In June of 1995 I returned to Yanjing Theological Seminary to teach hermeneutics and the Epistles of Paul. Finally, in September of 2013, I returned to Alliance Bible Seminary to finish my education. In a flash, 25 years had passed.



I arrived at Alliance Bible Seminary to study in 1994.

In the ministry of theological education, I often reflect on my own growth and ministry experience through comparison with Paul's theology of ministry. Paul had a mind of a scholar, the heart of a preacher, the precision of a military commander, a deeply emotional love for people, vision like a prophet, and the passion of a reformer. Though he did not specifically leave behind a systematic theology for the Church, his preaching received the acknowledgement of posterity. Paul's experience in ministry often leads me to inspect my own ministry of training theology students to serve with their lives.

In the Body: Walking on the Path for Equipping

When I first started serving in ministry when I was twenty years old, it was 1984. China had only just opened to the world, everything was in need of renewal. We didn't have a Bible, nor did we have churches, we had only the Bibles that had been copied by hand. That was the Bible in those days. We could only worship at home in those days. My parents built a church in their home. The reason for this was because the church buildings had not been returned yet. At that time, many believers lived like this. I still remember the first sermon was taken from Romans 12:1-2. I remember thinking freely in my heart, "If I could go to a school to learn about the Bible, I would....." Actually, I did not even know what "Seminary" was at that time. Though it was just an expression of my sincere desire to learn the Bible, it was a response to a calling to imitate the life of Paul who, "truly encountered the risen and powerful Lord, who changed his life to one of suffering, sacrifice--a life that emphasized giving, and did not emphasize receiving!" "Newborn calves are not afraid of tigers", and I saw myself to be like the martyrs who would give their all in ministry, and I started on the path of learning and leadership.

God heard my prayer, and I was given the opportunity to go to seminary to be equipped. And it was that decision that sent me on this twenty-year long journey of maturing. I was able to personally experience "a life-time of growth, a life to help one grow!" leadership training course. After completing my bachelor's degree at Yanjing Theological Seminary, I stayed at the school to teach. At the time, the Seminary arranged for me to teach New Testament. Yet, I thought that I had only a bachelor's degree, and I craved further equipping. Praise the Lord for His provisions, I was given financial aid by a doctor couple from a church in Hong Kong. In 1994 I went forth to Alliance Bible Seminary to study the New Testament. After completing my studies, I returned to Yanjing Theological Seminary to teach hermeneutics and the Epistles of Paul.

One after another, Paul's epistles helped me to clearly understand that ministry would be tested, just as life would be tested by experiences of suffering. As I turned forty years old, my life became one of "accepting heavy responsibility, experiencing suffering and victory

through reliance upon the Lord”. I developed my own gifts through strengthening my own ministries. Paul’s theology in his letters started to affect me, “To live is Christ, to die is gain.” Ever since that fateful encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul had begun a new life, thus he could say these words. While we still live, we must cling closely to the Lord Jesus. Death is just another door, and through it, we will instantly be united with the Lord Jesus. He allows us to pursue healthy growth both inwardly and outwardly. These teachings have become an important foundation on which I teach my theology students to accept the Lord’s calling in their lives.

What the Heart Connects: Becoming a Life Mentor to Students

The last decade is probably the start of my golden age in theological ministry. Though I am not in my elderly years, I have seen the importance of ministering to younger people. With the heart of an educator and pastor, I strive to build the faith of my students, to guide them to have a family life worthy of a student of theology, to teach them how to serve within the church, to help them to learn to have

Christ’s own heart as their heart. My heart’s desire is to cultivate more leaders in the churches of the mainland who are pleasing to God, who can pastor their flock faithfully in all circumstances, and who will lead the church to healthy growth!



At that time I was writing a PhD Dissertation, while teaching “Calvin’s Theology” and “the Epistles of Apostle Paul” at Yanjing Theological Seminary.

Being a leader will not stop you from experiences the deprivations of life, and I am no exception. The book of Philippians has given me much help. Paul feels that the greatest power of the Gospel is to allow people to attempt to save and protect others, even in a time of danger and crisis. Thus, Paul not only thinks that Christianity is of spiritual use, but also of great effect in the realm of cultural advancement. The verses of this book have not only accompanied me through my long ministry in theological education, but have been a source of encouragement for my students.

Felt in the Soul: Journeying with Students

In 2013, I returned to Alliance Bible Seminary for a second time to complete my training. By God’s grace, I completed my ethics and theology Master’s degree, and my PhD within five years. Once again, my education was supported financially by the doctor couple. My focus was on Biblical research and related topics in theology, as well as further research

on Christianity and Chinese culture. These topics are difficult to study and research in the mainland, making this a very precious opportunity, and will certainly be a rich source for teaching content for years to come.

Nevertheless, challenges can be found even during a time of study. At my age, I struggled with studying with the challenges of the Cantonese language and life habits. I was often asked in class by other students why I would choose to study in Hong Kong given my age and my inability to understand Cantonese. Yet studying here has confirmed for me that God has increased the length of my theological ministry in China for another twenty years, because I had not only grown in knowledge but also in grown in my vision of training Christian ministers. After teaching the Epistles of Paul for the last twenty years, learning the New Testament has once again deeply inspired me. I also had the opportunity to talk with teachers and classmates about learning, ministry and life. I have also experienced interruption in my studies, but teachers did not count the hardships of coming to Beijing to encourage me as anything, allowing me to continue my studies. I am grateful that God always “gave strength” so that I could complete my study plans for every season, and I could always finish my assignments within the first month so that I could wander the oceans of the library for the remainder. This was God’s grace to me to make up for my failure to understand Cantonese in class! These experiences helped me to understand that being a teacher was not just about “teaching books”, but also “educating people”.



The encouragement of the educator, and the interactions between teachers and students, are an irreplaceable part of education.

Paul’s theology of ministry deeply affected my ministry of theological education, and is an important reflection for my future ministries, and a source of motivation within ministry. “In Paul’s life, ...his spiritual life and journey grew with each passing year, ...we can see that Paul’s spiritual life has reached a highpoint”. In June this year, I finished my PhD and returned to Yanjing Theological Seminary once more. I place my future ministries within God’s hands, and in God’s guidance. I will once again teach theology in the mainland, to equip students in the body, mind and spirit, and to walk with them--teaching them through life changing life. Though this is not easy, it is my vision and desire!

Never Thought of Giving Up

■ Responding to God's Call to Serve the Ethnic Minorities

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In late July, I again went to southwestern China to visit pastors who receive our financial subsidy. One of them, Pastor Li, is from an ethnic minority group (Miao) himself. After graduating from the Bible School, he decided to return to his ethnic minority group to serve. It was no easy task. Most of the believers were in their 50s to 80s and their education levels varied considerably. Their faith was only grounded on the beliefs that they could chase away demons, have their illnesses cured and go to heaven after they died. A pastor in such a setting had to be an all-rounder, taking care of the needs of different gathering points as well as tending to matters, however big or small. He could easily burn out.



As of now, there is still a wide wealth gap between the cities and rural areas, and the difference in people's income can be as much as a threefold. The poor income in the rural areas brings tremendous pressure on pastors dedicated to serve there. However, in the past twenty years, Pastor Li has responded to God's call and stayed committed to his post. For many years, he was not paid at all and made his living by building houses for people. Apart from his own four children, he also had to support his younger brother's daughter left behind by this brother's divorce. His family burden was extremely heavy.

Three years ago, I visited the southwestern region, and asked Pastor Li this question, "In your 19 years' of ministry, have you ever felt frustrated?" He heaved a sigh and replied, "I have certainly felt discouraged before, but have never thought of giving up... we have grain in our house and basic necessities are not a problem. It's just that my eldest daughter has to take the National College Entrance Examination, and my other children have to sit for other exams. Their school fees are my biggest burden!"

Three years have passed and I met Pastor Li again. His daughter was now in university. He shared why he had not given up full-time ministry even in the most difficult of

circumstances, “Every time I feel frustrated, I would recall what the Lord has done for me in the past. Before 1999, I was an arrogant youngster in the best physical shape which was a result of my constant exercising. At school they taught the theory of evolution, and I didn’t believe in God at all. Against this background, I fell very sick twice. At one time, I suffered from a stomach ulcer, whereby I almost lost my eyesight. During this period, I started thinking about religion. When I got better, my dad-in-law encouraged me to dedicate myself for use by the Lord. I enrolled in a seminary when I was still suffering from the stomach problem. I thank God that in the two years of my seminary study, I was not only equipped with Biblical knowledge, but my stomach ailment was also cured. I felt being born again. Upon graduation, although some city churches asked me to join them, I felt obliged to return to my homeland because God had called upon me to serve ethnic minorities. Here, I would like to say thanks to the teachers of my alma mater and CCL colleagues. Your encouragement and help have made me believe that I am not alone in my path to serve God, and I will not give up easily!”



Despite being busy at work, Pastor Li has always been concerned about young people who went from their hometown to study in the counties. As there was strict restriction on religious activities in schools in the counties, Pastor Li organized a Bible conference in his church for the 40 young people who returned to their home village for the summer vacation. Pastor Li was least concerned about his pay, and he did not mind working industriously day and night. He just wanted to spend more time to serve in the Lord’s house.



Post-script: After travelling through a winding and bumpy mountain road, we finally met Pastor Li after our last encounter from three years ago. We were extremely grateful that his enthusiasm to serve had not waned. It is not an easy decision for pastors to stay in rural churches to serve. Hence, we had increased our subsidy to workers in rural churches. Given the rigorous enforcement of the latest religious policies in cities, Pastor Li was given the rare chance to serve university students in the rural regions. Everything is in God’s hands, and this is an unexpected outcome of our support to the church workers in rural villages.

Please support the living subsidy for mainland pastors

In 2018 (3/2018 – 2/2019), CCL will render financial support to 15 pastors in cities and rural villages based on their actual needs and the living standards in their respective regions. Our fundraising target is US\$102,500. Apart from subsidies in their subsistence, their children’s university education and their participation in training programmes in Hong Kong, we are also supporting our colleagues to visit pastors in different areas whom we are assisting. As of the end of September, US\$52,600 has been raised, and the shortfall is US\$50,000. If you are touched, please act immediately to support us. Thank you!



Prayers

1 Applied teaching

The better-educated, younger generation of teachers at theological seminaries (aged 30-50) show a higher level of rational thinking and theological knowledge in their teaching. But at the same time, due to a lack of personal experience, their teaching may expose a gap between theory and practice. It is important for Christian teachings in a country undergoing rapid economic development like China to be relevant to the real contexts.



May the Lord broaden the young teachers' horizons, help them understand more about what is happening outside, reflect on their faith and be able to lead their students to the relevance of religious belief to culture, economics, politics and the society, and guide them to be light and salt in real life situations.

2 Preachers' meagre salaries



As the income level in rural areas is three times lower than that in urban areas, church donations in remote areas inhabited by mostly the elderly are not enough to cover usual church expenses and preachers' salaries. Preachers' families are only scraping by, but what worries them most is their children's tuition fees, including university fees. Some rural preachers have turned down job offers in large cities, so as to make extra money to pay for their children's tuition by doing chores such as planting fields, building houses for others, etc. Thanks to the Lord for their commitment to ministry.

May the Lord keep the preachers from being exhausted, move young believers working in the cities to donate one-tenth of their income to their home churches which can then pay preachers a reasonable salary.

3 Say No to substandard vaccines

Drug maker Changchun Changsheng Bio-technology Company's manufacturing of ineffective and substandard vaccines to maximise profit disregarding children's safety has triggered widespread concern and anger. State leaders have ordered an official investigation, but mainland parents have already lost confidence in mainland healthcare products, amid public concern about corruption, loopholes in vaccine inspection, etc.



Please pray for strengthened inspection of healthcare products by the authorities, preventing unscrupulous merchants from taking advantage of loopholes for profit and putting public health at risk.

May the Lord also pour mercy on affected families and protect the children whom were given the problem vaccines. May churches show concern for public issues, speak out against injustice and pray for the spiritual needs of affected families.

4 Caring for Left Behind Children



A spate of accidents involving children has occurred since summer. Each year, about 50,000 mainland children die from accidents, among whom 60 percent are drowned, often during the summer and mostly children left behind by their parents working in the cities. In Guangxi, dozens of children died from drowning this summer. Before the summer break, schools had had to remind carers about keeping children safe. In villages, children tend to go to streams and fields for fun, as there are no playgrounds around.

May the Lord move urban and rural churches to impart safety knowledge, e.g. in avoiding drowning and lightning attack, and increase villagers' awareness of self-protection.

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