

1 August 2010

Dr Aw wrote the letter below as a commentary on a sermon heard on a Sunday in July. 'Dorothy' is not her real name and a number of other names and that of the organisation referred to as YIA have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

Published with permission from Dr Aw:

Dear Dorothy,

This is a note to follow through our conversation on Sunday after the Bible Class. Joseph preached a helpful sermon for those who have not understood, still less appreciated, the world view of their teenage children. Our Western Christian brethren have long struggled and prayed over this problem, as their many books clearly show. Alas, it has come to the shores of the East. Witness the dire effect the Internet has had on the youth culture of mainland China which their leadership bemoans and has taken steps to counter.

The main issues brought out in the sermon are clear. There is today among the young:

- loss of respect for authority ('Why should I listen to you, Dad ?),
- moral relativism and
- a yen for the experiential (not necessarily for the truth, I am afraid).

The work of the Youth in Action (YIA) is therefore valuable because it can capture the attention of the unchurched youth over a wide age range with the possibility of influencing them for good.

The sermon highlights the fact that the young think of the world as a place where there are no absolutes. Consequently they find no interest in theology and philosophy with their firm/absolutist views. This is not unique to the young. It is a phenomenon that is prevalent across society and, tragically, in today's Christian culture. It is common among worshippers and churchgoers of all ages.

Therefore, it is all the more crucial for the Church of Christ, as ' the pillar and ground of the truth' (1 Timothy 3 : 15), not to abandon its primary task of reaching and teaching, both young and old, the sound, timeless truths of the Word. The modern multitudes are in need of the same saving grace of the Gospel just as did those in the days of Jesus. The need of fallen human nature for truth and the Saviour remain urgent.

Here, then, is a primary concern, in the context of our outreach. Happiness is a desirable 'commodity', especially to experience-seeking youth.

'Come to Jesus,' we say, 'and you will find real joy ' or 'You have a God-shaped vacuum in your heart which only Jesus can satisfy.'

This is one popular, friendly, noncombative approach.

But, as the sermon correctly pointed out, the children of today have everything provided for them by their parents. They are not in need nor are they unhappy. What is the relevance of the saving grace of God for such as they? More joy? Why not?

'Sure, I accept Jesus as my personal Saviour.'

Where is the place for the Scriptural emphasis on conversion based on a sense of sin, repentance and faith? Where there is no sense of sin, there is no repentance. Where there is no repentance there is no faith to trust. It is little wonder that the fall-out from 'decisions for Christ' is high when disillusionment begins to set in.

Secondly, helping youth to visualise Christian truth is more than having a prayer request immediately answered. Not having our prayers answered is far more common, as our personal experience and that of any church worker will attest. Are our youth prepared for that? But, you see, that is going back to a study of the theology of unanswered prayer as part of the rigours of discipleship. This is an exercise which, we are told, today's youth find hard to visualise and will not accept. Should we pander to this?

Thirdly, it is as important for today's youth to understand and honour their parents as it is for their parents to understand them. No less than from the lips of our Lord Jesus came these words to the Pharisees and scribes : " For God commanded, 'Honour your father and mother,' and 'Whoever reviles father and mother must surely die.'" Matthew 15 : 4 (ESV)

Throwing tantrums, reviling and resenting parents for not understanding them must be dealt with wisdom, based on the Bible, not on the youth worker's authority. Honoring one's parents is not just a nice thing to do.

Fourthly, I am so glad that Bernard, who gave the account of the ministry of YIA, called on parents to play their part in helping their young. Parents who flaunt their wealth and position do not help in the visualisation of Biblical truths, which Joseph challenged the church to do. Again we have to return to a study of the theology of how Christians should view their possessions, together with those other virtues of humility and generosity which the Spirit endows. Home is the ideal place for visualisation of Christian truths.

Please do not take this note as mere criticism but as my own attempt to make practical sense of what was said that Sunday. I thought Joseph's homily was timely and the delivery of the same was 'atas' - a word, doubtless borrowed from the Malay, which I learned from my teenage granddaughter, and which means ' top-notch '.

Please feel free to share what I have written if that is likely to be helpful.

May God continue His blessing and protection of His people in today's troubled world,
Swee Eng.