Feature

Forgive the Unforgivable

Without forgiveness, there is no hope and no future for humanity. Without forgiveness, there can be no peace nor reconciliation and no communities can live in harmony.

Forgiveness, however, is easier said than done. Human forgiveness is always limited. We may forgive some but not others. Unintentional offenses are forgivable, deliberate ones are not. Minor offenses can be forgiven, grave ones are not. One-time wrongdoers are forgivable, repeated offenders not. Friends and relatives can be forgiven, strangers not. We all have moments when we find ourselves screaming, “But this I can never forgive!”

Human forgiveness has its limits. It excludes the unforgivable. But if forgiveness stops short at the unforgivable, is there true forgiveness? Will we find forgiveness at places where it is needed most? On the worst and most undescending occasions, can there be true peace and reconciliation?

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida reminds us that the very concept of forgiveness “must begin from the fact that there is the unforgivable”. This as he rightly points out, is “in truth, the only thing to forgive ... the only thing that calls for forgiveness”. “One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable.”

Human forgiveness understandably has its limits. What about God? Is there a limit to God’s forgiveness? The real theological question here has to do with divine mercy. Is there a limit to God’s mercy? If yes, we would then have to admit that at the core of God’s being there is only justice and no mercy. This would be to contradict not only the act of God on the cross, but also God’s self-revelation as a merciful God. “... [T]he Lord your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you.” (Deuteronomy 4:31)

Some wrongs are perhaps too horrendous that even the wrongdoer is too ashamed of himself to apprehend the message of forgiveness. He sees his action as the final verdict on his life, by which the story of his life is written, as though his fate is sealed and what he did is unforgivable even by God. However paradoxical it might seem, this can be an assertion of his own strength. For, however “small” he makes himself in his desperation, his message remains: “I am capable of doing something so terrible that nobody can take it away. I can do something that nobody can forgive. In other words, what I have done is so evil and final. Nobody can overcome what I have done, not even God!” While self-reproach may be helpful, it often drives people to despair. “There is now no turning back for me. I cannot and will not ask for forgiveness. Any attempt to do so will only lead to self-humiliation, as if I am not fully aware of the unbearable gravity of my wrongs.”

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked if Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus was in hell, and Barth answered wisely, “I don’t know if Judas is in hell. I know however I would still be in hell if not because of the grace of Jesus Christ.”

In fact, all sins are unforgivable if not for Jesus Christ. We are saved by grace not because we are not as unforgivable as Judas. We all stand unforgivable as sinners before God. Just as C.S. Lewis said, “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”

The forgiveness in Jesus Christ is the “forgiveness of the unforgivable”. It is the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is the refusal to let a person’s identity be defined by what he has done or his destiny be sealed by it. It is the unconditional forgiveness that Jesus Christ brings to the unforgivable. Although human forgiveness has its limits, the forgiveness of God on the cross does not. Betrayal or brutality may seem unforgivable in a victim-oriented soteriology. But in a grace-oriented soteriology, the unforgivable has already been forgiven.

“Forgiving the unforgivable” may appear to be inconceivable, if not a contradiction in terms. Evil is indeed inconceivable, but we have to think in Jesus Christ in terms of the inconceivable forgiveness of the cross.

The real theological question here, together with the real challenge for the Church, is not whether Judas Iscariot is in heaven, but whether this amazing gospel of “forgiving the unforgivable” will be truthfully proclaimed to every Judas and every unforgivable prodigal son. “Judas, come home! Yes, all is forgiven by Jesus Christ on the cross!”

Clouds of exemplars that surround us

This early spring in March while it might turn cold again, I visited six North American cities of Vancouver, Seattle, San Francisco, San Jose, Los Angeles and Houston. On behalf of CGST staff and students, I sincerely thanked brothers and sisters there, including many spiritual elders, for their loving care for the School.

Rev. Dr. King Sing-yui is the first Chairman for both CGST Hong Kong Board of Directors in the 1970s and Canadian Board in the 1980s. Last August Rev. King sent us a love gift in support of CGST’s next decade of ministries as specified by the President Office. The donation encouraged us to launch our research project on the history of CGST.

Accompanied by Mr. Albert Wong of Development Liaison and Mr. Victor Lee, Chairman of the Canadian Board, I visited a retired couple, friends of President Emeritus Rev. Dr. & Mrs. Wilson Chow. The couple were interested in CGST’s latest development and generously responded to the School’s appeal on setting up endowed professorships. The Faculty expresses to them our gratitude and blessings.

We met Mrs. Freda K. Cheung at the pastoral gathering at First Evangelical Church of San Gabriel Valley. The late Rev. Fred T. Cheung came back to Hong Kong on his own to be CGST Vice President (1975-86) and Professor of Practical Studies (1999-2002). He had contributed much towards nurturing the students of those days in hermeneutic preaching. We are not only grateful for Rev. Cheung’s ministry, but also we have the highest respect for Mrs. Cheung’s commitment and selfless giving.

Looking well, Rev. Paul Yung joined the pastoral luncheon in San Jose with his wife and son. Dedicated to literature and Bible translation his whole life, Rev. Yung is also a long-term supporter and good friend of CGST. As we charted, Rev. Yung asked directly if the School’s expenses are covered. His closing prayer further touched my heart: at the same time with a feeling of unworthiness, I saw clearly Father God’s faithfulness and loving-kindness.

At the Revival Seminar in San Francisco Bay Area we were thrilled to see Mrs. Brenda Poon whom we haven’t met up with for twenty years. Brenda is a member of the USA Board and her house’s basement had been CGST’s Development Office for North America for many years. We agreed that we would not wait another twenty years for the next reunion. We look forward to her celebrating CGST’s 40th anniversary with us next year and together testify to God’s amazing grace.

There were others: Rev. Brainerd Shiu, CGST’s lecturer back in early years, whom we met in Seattle, a sister-in-Christ in Houston, who has prepared for over twenty years of CGST; as well as our alumni, regional council members and Word of Life Bible Study Series volunteers, who all have been serving faithfully. It was truly my blessing to have the opportunity to meet each one of them face-to-face.

Thank you, may the Lord Himself reward you.

Presidential Trip

Albert Wong Development Liaison

Early March, Dr. Stephen Lee embarked on his first overseas trip as CGST President. The writer accompanied Dr. Lee as he travelled six North American cities and visited CGST Regional Councils and alumni, as well as local Chinese churches and pastors. During the eighteen-day trip, Dr. Lee led thirteen revival seminars and pastoral sharing meetings, also preached in three cities.

As soon as we arrived at the first stop Vancouver, President Lee visited Rev. Dr. S. Y. King, who is 84 year old but strong both physically and spiritually. Rev. King is the first Chairman of the CGST Board of Directors and also the first Chairman of the CGST Canadian Board. President Lee conveyed his grateful appreciation for Rev. King, for the significant contributions Rev. King and Rev. Philip Tang had extended towards gaining the trust and support of local
Chinese churches when CGST first started. Rev. King was keen to hear about
the latest update on CGST and expressed high hopes for President Lee.

In Vancouver, President Lee also met with Dr. Rod Wilson, President of
Regent College, with which CGST had collaborated numerous times. In the third
stop, Los Angeles. President Lee met with Dr. Mark Labberton, President of
Fuller Theological Seminary. The two presidents had a good time of fellowship.
Dr. Labberton told President Lee that Fuller is undergoing curriculum reform to
cater for churches having to face a rapidly changing world.

"Already from day one, CGST was linked with the university graduates'
dedication movement," said President Lee at the Vision Sharing Meetings in
North America. He also quoted what Rev. Philip Teng said at the first CGST
Commencement Services, "We offer our faithfulness for the theological
education of churches in China." Rev. Teng went to be with the Lord last
December. To show our respect for this well loved and great contributor of
CGST’s first President, a special feature, ‘Thanksgiving Service in Loving Memory
of President Philip Teng’, was shown at various meetings during the trip.

President Lee led the Revival Seminar entitled, "A Double Portion of
Your Spirit": The Vision of CGST after 50 Years and shared the message in
Seattle, Los Angeles and San Francisco, giving an account of how CGST came
about, the never-ending grace of God, and how successors must be actively
sought because in the coming decade half of the faculty members will retire.
President Lee said solemnly, "May the Spirit that moved Rev. Teng be
doubled upon us today." President Lee’s sharing deepened overseas Chinese
believers’ understanding about CGST.

In Vancouver, Los Angeles, Houston and San Jose, President Lee
encouraged the local brothers and sisters on edifying message such as

"Success? Significant? and Sanctification: Earthen Vessels unto Honor?" and
"In Spirit and Truth": Biblical-Theological Reflections on Worship." Further,
President Lee met with pastors and church leaders in Vancouver, Houston
and San Jose, sharing on the topics ‘Pastoral Ministry and its Promises’ and
‘Biblical Authority in Pastoral Ministries’ many pastors asked about CGST’s
development and its involvement in the theological education for Chinese
churches.

In San Francisco, President Lee preached live at one of the "Word of Life
Bible Study Series" classes on the Book of Numbers. He succinctly
expounded on the story of Balaam, pointing out that the Bible shouldn’t be
read by just looking at the story but to understand what we believe through
bible events and people. Balaam reminds us that God will shield His
children from the enemies’ plots and attacks, but we cannot complain that
God does not stop our intentional sins. Otherwise we will just be reading the
Word of life in vain.

We thank the Lord for His presence! President Lee shared with various
regional councils the news of CGST, discussed CGST’s ministries in North
America and listened to views that they might have. Each exchange with
pastors was appreciated and respected. The relationship between CGST and
overseas Chinese churches is strengthened. President Lee was also
delighted to see our alumni who reside overseas!
A sojourner hears the Word and speaks

Interviewed and written by Mimi Tang, MDiv 1999

Some say that the most interesting things to see during travelling are the diversity. Views come before our eyes and as we journey, stories of fellow travelers inspire us. The travelling story of Joyce Sun, Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies (DipCS 2003, MDiv 2006), began when she was nine years old.

Encountering the true Way

That year Joyce started going to church and faith had become the axis, if not all, of her life. She attended Sunday school and later became a leader of the youth fellowship. She has been serving continually regardless of the post. Then Joyce received theological education, became a pastor and teaches at CGST. The chain of development looks so logical, but there had been time when she ran off and avoided. “If you ask whether God had called me, I... think... so!” During my high school years, I attended every day of the annual Hong Kong Bible Conference except the evening revival meetings, fearing that I might be ‘picked’! Perhaps I wasn’t willing then? I had planned to go to university and never considered becoming a pastor.”

Born to an ordinary home and grew up in a public housing estate, Joyce knew that working extremely hard was vital if she were to continue studying and climb the ladder of life, “When I was young university was good, becoming a lawyer was good, and I was full of ambitions. In our days pastors did not need a university degree. I wanted to be outstanding and I wanted to attend the best institution. Hence I went to the University of Hong Kong (HKU), and to CGST? Hah!”

Previous years of serving in the Church nurtured a helping heart in Joyce. Since social work, teaching and law were three popular subjects and careers that help people to solve problems in the 1980s, they also became Joyce’s choices when applying for the university. She was accepted by the Faculty of Law at HKU as a result.

Here to listen

Worked hard, graduated and qualified, Joyce became a partner when she was still 30 – she describes herself as a yuppie who embraced the ‘Central Value’ – Joyce believed that endeavors could change one’s fate. She was willing to help people but just did not have the necessary sense of empathy to comprehend the reality of oppression. Nonetheless, Joyce never forgot her Christian identity. Her principal in the legal profession was a leader in the Lawyers Christian Fellowship, “I didn’t just want to be a lawyer – I wanted to learn from a Christian as how to be a lawyer.” Fifteen years in the legal profession and learning from her principal in a working environment where “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” taught Joyce how to keep her faith at work.

Despite receiving much praise and appreciation, Joyce had never imagined staying in the legal profession for life. “One night on my way home, panic struck me – I was only 25 and it was impossible that I would continue this way of life till 40! At that time, I still had to pay the mortgage. After a lot of thinking and counting, I lost even the courage to change job.” At a subsequent social gathering, however, Joyce learned about a friend’s plan to study theology. “Suddenly a light bulb goes off in my head: why couldn’t this be me?” To pursue theological education before turning 40 became her conclusion.

Joyce still recalls and teases herself for the last-minute application for the CGST Diploma program which she thinks was ‘causing havoc’ in the Dean’s office. She also remembers on the orientation day, Rev. Philip Yeung talked about “scaring in the Word of God” which moved her heart. “I really wanted to know what that world of theology was like. I wanted to listen and know about it! I found my life here, as if God created me to study theology – I was able to comprehend all that I heard and all that I saw.”

On the road

The year of 2003 was a time when SARS was rampant. Fearful eyes in the streets in Central made Joyce realize that only the gospel could bring true peace. She thus enrolled in the MDiv program and began full-time ministry.

The three years of study was the most ‘stiming’ time of her life. Sitting side-by-side in class and eating at the canteen may seem easy and normal but Joyce found it hard to cope with. Joyce laughs now at ‘how queer and uneasy’ she was, “I had been used to having my own office and keeping spatial distance from the others. I felt uneasy to have people sitting next to me! I also wanted to hide my past and did not want to mention that I was a lawyer before. But the more I did so, the more alien I became. That was part of me and if I kept it in, there is no way people can get to know me.”

The smooth and easy learning led to numerous awards but also added to the baggage of people’s expectations. The burden was especially heavy in the third year, “I kept praying, and at last I accepted that it was ok that someone was better than me, it’s ok not to be the first.” Interactions within a group helped Joyce see what it meant to “let go”, “be natural” and “just be yourself.” She became the real person with flesh and blood, tears and emotions.

to be continued on next page...
Is God using me to serve the deaf again?

Wong Ho-iyan MDiv

Before coming to CGST, I worked in a Christian organization serving high school students, but it was another group of people that led me to CGST.

One night, I was watching the live broadcast of the HKSAR Chief Executive election debate and noticed that the sign language interpreter was doing a bad job (I have known sign language since birth as my parents are deaf). Then I thought, even if there is universal suffrage in 2017, the deaf would not have much information as voting reference. That night, I prayed that God would raise up more professional sign language interpreters. Suddenly an idea popped up. "If I regard political or entertainment news as important, how much more the Word of God! Doesn't the truth of God need to be heard clearly even more so by the deaf?" There was an immediate realization and a burden to respond.

The following day, I met someone with whom I used to serve the deaf unexpectedly, and he invited me to be the interpreter at the worship service again at my mother's church (Church of Christ in China Cheung Shu Wan Kiu To Church). Before I got involved in church-planning, I served the deaf congregation there.

When I was in high school, I followed my classmate to church and was surprised to see deaf people there... Naturally I became interpreter at services and was the group leader at the fellowship for the deaf. Looking back, I realize that God used what I was ashamed to serve them and through which my parents and relatives had the opportunity to believe in God and go to church. That was the turning point in my life and there was abundant grace.

However, after graduation, God did not take me to serve the deaf full-time but rather He led me to serve students: first teaching in a high school and then joining Fellowship of Evangelical Students in Hong Kong. I am grateful for taking part in student evangelism. For over a decade, God let me see the value of the work. I thought I would receive theological education on a part-time basis while continuing with the mission of student evangelism, but God told me to "stop". At first I did not realize how to "stop", so I shared with my co-workers. With prayers, the path became clearer over a period of nearly one year. Last year when I took the course on Biblical Theology - New Testament at CGST as a special student, I was deeply moved by the lectures and yearned to understand more. Afterwards at CGST, I came across a pamphlet on "sign-language interpretation of the Bible" - that led me to leave my familiar milieu and respond by studying full-time at CGST.

In this society, life for the deaf is very difficult and the gospel is very precious to them. Being born to a deaf family, I understand the hardship involved and this was also the reason for my reluctance to serve the deaf in the past. But God continues to let me experience His presence. He tells me not to be afraid. Life transformation is God's work and I am only there to respond and take part.

It was not for me to choose which family to be born into. I was passive even in choosing which church to attend or which ministry to engage in. After journeying in a full circle, God calls again and prepares my heart, teaching me to obey willingly. Now I am receiving theological training and I surely know my limitations (especially now that I am pregnant again), but I believe strongly that He will be gracious to me and watches over me.

The sojourner abroad observed Hong Kong from afar and noticed the numerous disagreements and arguments taking place everyday. Now back and witnessing oppressions first hand, Joyce understands why the anger is there. In a tumultuous time, it is natural to feel apprehensive, but what made Joyce sorrowful was that in a lot of discussions Christians have forgotten the Bible and neglected to engage in serious study; all that was left were loose pieces of memorized verses: "The Bible is still relevant to our lives today. We need to read it properly and let it enlighten us. A course of the Extension programs on the Book of Revelation can encompass discussions on economic critique. Another course on 'Sojourner – Citizen' can also look at 'Occupy Central' movement from the perspectives of the Book of Hebrews and the First Epistle of Peter. Don't believe that the Bible is outdated or no longer relevant. Often the question is whether we are willing to read and follow it. After all, we need to respect and surrender to God's Words."

Sojourners on a pilgrimage, wherever we are, let us not forget Joyce's earnest reminder.
Board Meeting
- The 2014 AGM was held on June 28 to adopt the auditor report, appoint new auditor and elect Board members. Before and after the AGM, there were meetings of the current and new Board respectively.

Faculty Movements
- March 7 – 16: Vice President Dr. Kang Phee Seng went to New York, Philadelphia and Chicago to attend meetings as well as to visit Princeton Theological Seminary.
- March 3 – 4: President Emeritus Dr. Carver Yu and Dr. Marina Wang, Assistant Researcher of the Chinese Culture Research Center, accepted the invitation to attend the theological symposium and public meeting co-organized by The Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China and Divinity School of Chung Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong. The event with the theme “From Baeyun Mountain to Lion Rock – Theological Exploration of the Church of Christ in China” commemorated the 150th anniversary (1864-2014) of theological education development of Presbyterian Church in China. Dr. Yu and Dr. Wang presented papers on the subjects of “The Hong Kong Context and the Relevance of Reformed Theology.” and “Cheng Jingru and the Church of Christ in China” respectively.
- April 7 – 9: Dean Dr. Ka Leung Wong and Associate Dean Dr. Jean Lee attended the Symposium on Theological Education Curriculum organized by Overseas Council International (OCI) at Holy Light Theological Seminary in Kaohsiung, Taiwan.
- April 15 – 16: Dr. Carver Yu, President Dr. Stephen Lee and Dr. Kang Phee Seng visited Nanjing Union Theological Seminary in Nanjing.
- April 21 – 25: Dr. Yu and Mrs. Wance Chan, Assistant Professor of Practical Studies, attended the Forum entitled “The Christian Forum for Reconciliation in northeast Asia” in Korea.
- June 1 – 6: President Lee went to Sao Paulo, Brazil, to attend the Lausanne Movement Conference on “Consultation on Global Theological Education.”

Development Trips
- May 7 – 31: President Lee went to Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Rhode Island and Chicago, and accompanied by Mr. Albert Wong they together visited Montreal, Washington DC, Philadelphia, New York and Boston to conduct Revival Seminars, to preach at Sunday services, along with visiting Regional Councils, alumni and friends.
- March 26 – April 4: Mr. Kwok-kuen Leung, Director of Word of Life Ministry, led meetings and promoted the ‘Word of Life’ Bible study ministry in Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra and Melbourne. Mr. Leung also visited Seattle, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver to conduct meetings and promote ‘Word of Life’ Bible Study Ministry from May 29 to June 11.

Graduation Exercises and Dinner
- The Thirty-seventh Graduation Exercises is scheduled to be held at the Wing Kwong Pentecostal Holiness Church at 3:00pm on June 28, Saturday. Mrs. Poon Yu Miu-wan, General Secretary of The Industrial Evangelistic Fellowship and our alumnus, is the guest speaker. Graduation Dinner is to be held at Heichinou Restaurant in Kwun Tong that evening.

Financial Report

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Outstanding mortgage loan as at April, 2014: US$ 3,762,782

Prayer Requests

1. Pray for the students who are graduating in June, that God will grant those who are entering full time ministry a humble heart to serve in faithfulness wherever God places them. Pray also for those who have completed the evening part time programs. May God use them to integrate what they have learnt in their workplace and to witness Christ in their professions.

2. Pray for the applicants who are being considered for the new school year. May God direct the selection process and give wisdom to the Admission Committee members.

3. Pray for President Stephen Lee, Mr. Albert Wong and Mr. Kwok-kuen Leung for their visitations to overseas between May and June. May God give them strength and keep them; May God use the meetings to bless and edify brothers and sisters.

Response

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☐ I would like to donate to CGST $ ___________ (specify currency)

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☐ Campus Redevelopment Fund
☐ China Theological Education Development Fund
☐ Student Scholarships
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Check No. __________________________ Bank: __________________________

Please make cheque payable to:
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