

## ARE YOU A MISSIONARY OR A MERCENARY?

**Today's Text:** 1 Thess.2: 1-19

### **Extracts:**

**For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict. For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit. But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. ... For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe [1 Thess. 2: 1-7, 13]**

*City Harvest Church (CHC) was founded in Singapore in 1989 by Hong Hee, a charismatic pastor, and his pastor-turned pop singer wife, Sun Ho.<sup>1</sup> With an estimated membership of 30,000 (out of the city-state's population of almost 5.4 million), it conducts 15 services every week and has 48 affiliates in several countries in Asia and Australia. In 2002, Ms. Ho launched her music career "as a way of reaching out to non-Christians." She made several albums in Mandarin and she is known in China and Taiwan. She has also worked with US music industry figures such as songwriter Diane Warren and rapper Wyclef Jean, who produced her English album. But in a recent court ruling, a Singapore judge found Pastor Hong Hee and five other leaders of that church guilty of funnelling the equivalent of US\$35 million from a building fund into a fake investment scheme used to fund the Pastor's wife's failed music career. The offence could carry life jail sentences.*

*CHC's problem is neither new nor unique to the Christian community. Increasingly, church leaders in virtually every Christian denomination are facing issues of integrity and transparency. Are they still **living for** the gospel of Christ (as missionaries) or **living on** it (as mercenaries)? In today's Bible verses, Paul has answered that question with respect to the Thessalonian church. There is much that we can learn from it to guide our callings as missionaries rather than our greed as mercenaries. Read on!*

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<sup>1</sup> Story is based on the following sources: "Singapore City Harvest megachurch leaders guilty of fraud," *BBC News*, 21 October 2015; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34589867> , and "Population of Singapore," <https://www.google.com.ng/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=population%20of%20singapore>

## 1. Background: Paul's conduct among the Thessalonians

On the day that Jesus ascended to Heaven, He commissioned His disciples to “make disciples of all the nations... teaching them to observe all things” that He had commanded them. He would be with them always even to the end of the age [Matt. 28: 19-20]. But much earlier, during His Sermon on the Mount, He had warned [Matt. 7: 15-16, 221-23]:

*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. **You will know them by their fruits.** Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' and then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness!'*

There is a role for every believer in the great commission. For example, all of us are called for one or more of the following ministries: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers [Eph. 4: 11]. God can endow whomever He chooses with any or all of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit –wisdom, knowledge, faith, healings, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues or their interpretation [1 Cor. 12: 8-10]. Yet, we shall be known by our fruits not by our gifts [Gal. 5: 22-23]! That is because *fruits are organically linked to the roots whereas gifts, like those on a Christmas tree, are a mere decoration!* As aptly put by somebody recently, “The fruit of the Spirit grows in the soil of obedience.”<sup>2</sup> So what fruits do others see in you?

The word of God says, “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And *walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied*” [Acts 9: 31]. Is that what we see in our places of worship *today*? I doubt! Instead, *we see people rushing to join popular churches where emphasis is not primarily on repentance or salvation but on prosperity.* The end-times are here and we are not growing younger. Therefore, we need to sit up and ask ourselves probing questions. For example, as a church leader, *where am I leading my flock? Am I a missionary (praying/working for my flock's salvation) or a mere mercenary (preying on my members)?*

Paul's letter to the Thessalonian church, in the second chapter, helps us to answer those probing questions. What can we learn from Paul's work as a missionary among believers there that can help us to walk the thin line between being a missionary and a mercenary? Let us pay attention to the following points:

a) *What he preached*

Paul wrote [1 Thess. 2: 2-6]:

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<sup>2</sup> *Our Daily Bread*, Sunday, October 11, 2015; 2015 Annual Gift Edition, p. 293; [www.rbc.org](http://www.rbc.org)

*We were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict. For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit. But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. For neither at any time did we use flattering words ... nor a cloak for covetousness... Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.*

Examine the underlined words. Paul was not looking for popularity but to win souls for Christ. He did not mince words but spoke the truth of God. He needed the people but not their material offerings. Paul made that point more strongly elsewhere when he wrote, “***I do not seek yours but you.*** For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children” [2 Cor. 12: 14]. In answer to his own question, “What is my reward then?” Paul said elsewhere, “That when I preach the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel” [1 Cor. 9: 18]. Therefore, ***he preached the gospel of Christ as he was commanded by the Lord.***

b) *What he did*

Paul did not merely preach the gospel to the Thessalonians. He and his missionary team were gentle among them “just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.” The people had become as dear to Paul and his team “as our own lives.” They toiled night and day with the locals “that we might not be a burden to any of you.” The missionaries behaved themselves among the local believers devoutly, gently, justly and blamelessly. They exhorted, comforted and charged every one of them “as a father does his own children” so as to empower the locals to walk worthy of God who had called them to His own kingdom and glory [1 Thess. 2: 7-12]. ***Thus, Paul walked by example, not by mere precepts.*** He was among them more as a servant than as a master, just as the Lord Himself was among His disciples [Lk 22: 24-27]. ***He was accessible to his congregation and empathized with them. How many of our church leaders can you see today- even with an appointment?***

c) *What results he obtained among the people*

***The people received the word of God that they had heard from Paul “not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in (those) who believe” [1 Thess. 2: 13]. They became “our glory and joy” on the road to appearing “in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming” [vv. 19-20].***

The end of our faith is the salvation of our souls [1 Pet. 1: 9]. Therefore, we can conclude that *Paul served as a missionary among believers in the Thessalonian church. He preached the gospel of salvation; he lived by it and his audience bought it and also lived by it. Christ's mission for them was accomplished.* Can we say the same of your calling/ministry?

## 2. Implications for your ministry

On the basis of our attitude to our calling in the Lord's vineyard, the following tendencies are quite discernible:

### a) *Some of us might actually be mere hustlers!*

Some people may be *driven by necessity (e.g., unemployment or economic hardship or lust of the flesh)* to do anything to survive. Religions happens to be an attractive business for such people. They may not have the calling but *setting up a church or place of worship or even a fellowship is quite attractive* to such people who are merely hustlers. *With a brief case and an ability to mesmerize, the field is quite fertile for quick results.*

The church in Thyatira was one of the seven churches to which Jesus sent messages in the book of Revelation. On the surface, the church showed love, service, faith and patience. But it was a corrupt church because they allowed "that woman, Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce [His] servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols" [Rev. 2: 18-20]. Was that a brothel or a church?

Perhaps out of deference to cultural values or the respect for democratic freedom, or to protect the public image of the church, we condone or cover up conduct that compromises the gospel of Christ. It took Paul, for example, to cry out against sexual immorality in the Corinthian church, "such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles" and nothing was being done by the local church leaders to stop it [1 Cor. 5: 1-2, 9-13]. It took Jesus Himself to drive away traders and money changers from the temple in Jerusalem. The scribes and chief priests whose duty it was to prevent the Lord's house from being turned into a den of thieves were unhappy with Jesus for kicking against such excesses [Mk 11: 15-18]! The word of God says, "To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" [Jam. 4; 17].

### b) *Or entrepreneurs!*

Some of us may actually be called but, in actualising it, we may wind up *setting up a family business*. The enterprise is registered, such that management and financial control may never leave the family. The pastor

is the general overseer; his wife is the co-pastor and treasurer. Their children are in line to take over the ministry when their parents are dead.

Yet, with respect to the call of Abraham, God said to His descendants, “Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for ***I called him alone***, and blessed him and increased him” [Is. 51: 2]. In other words, ***God calls us as individuals, not as a family***. Who was the successor to John the Baptist? How many of the brothers of Jesus were among the 12 apostles [Matt. 10: 1-4]? Who chose Elisha for Elijah [1 Kg. 19: 16]? Judas Iscariot was Jesus’ treasurer and he was a thief [Jn 12: 6]! But Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, Susanna, and many others who provided for Jesus did so “from their substance” [Lk 8: 2-3], not from the “church” fund with Judas Iscariot. When Jesus was required to pay the temple tax at Capernaum, He sent Peter to catch a fish and retrieve a piece of money from its mouth to pay the required taxes for Himself and Peter [Matt. 17: 24-27].

Therefore, we have to be careful not to allow the cares of this world to detract us from the work of God. That was why Paul warned his protégé, Timothy, that “those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition.” Many have strayed away from the faith in their greediness [1 Tim. 6: 9-10]. So, ***if we learn to trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding but in all our ways acknowledge Him, He will direct our paths*** [Prov. 3: 5-6].

c) *But some are indeed true missionaries*

Some disciples of Jesus are ***silent workers- unheralded, unnoticed and unknown (especially to the media)***. They are known by their fruits. For example, after Jesus had died on the cross that first Good Friday, He could ordinarily have been taken down by the Roman soldiers to bury Him in an unmarked grave like the two robbers on His right and left. But Joseph of Arimathea, “a disciple of Jesus but secretly for fear of the Jews,” and Nicodemus “who at first came to Jesus by night,” went boldly to Pontius Pilate to ask for the body of Christ [Jn 19: 38-42]. Today, we know the very spot where Jesus was buried. Thanks to those true missionaries. They never wrote any epistles. They never set up major ministries to tell the world of their prominence in Christ’s earthly ministry. They were true missionaries. Can you do likewise?

What does the foregoing mean for us? It is that ***we are accountable to Jesus Christ for the mission He has sent us***. He will show us what to do [Acts 9: 6, 10-16], how to do it [Acts 18: 9-11; 22: 21; 23: 11] and how to end it [Jn 21: 18-19]. In his letter to the believers in the church in Thessalonica, Paul said, “What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our

Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy” [1 Thess. 2: 19-20]. Elsewhere, in the evening of his earthly ministry, Paul wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and *not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing*” [2 Tim. 4: 7-8]. Therefore, *while the mercenary is an intrapreneur (an entrepreneur in paid employment), using the Lord’s vineyard to promote his/her own or family business interests, the missionary is doing the Lord’s duty as and how He wants it done until s(he) is called home to heaven by death or rapture, whichever comes first. The choice is ours because God does not force us to do His will. That is Paul’s message for us all today.*

### 3. Conclusion: But Christ is watching you!

The signs of Christ’s return are everywhere. We do not know the day or the hour but the signs are pointing to the time, and the lights are already blinking [Matt. 24: 36-44]. That is why Jesus has warned (through the angel sent to John on the island of Patmos) [Rev. 21: 7, 10, 11-12]:

*Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book ... for the time is at hand. He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still.... Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.*

The missionaries will be those who have done the will of the Lord and they will have the right to the tree of life. The mercenaries, “dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral, and murderers and idolaters, and *whoever loves and practises a lie*” will be left outside and denied access [vv. 14-15]. On the surface, it is a very thin line between the missionary and the mercenary! But Christ is watching you as you do His work on earth. Are you aware of that? Are you paying attention? Only the ostrich buries its head in the sands and beats its chest saying, “Nobody can see me now!” Those around you may not tell you the truth, for one reason or the other, but Christ is watching you and you cannot deceive Him.

Be a missionary, not a mercenary.