

# People of God, People in Singapore

(Talk 2)

**Mark L. Y. Chan**

Director, Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia  
Trinity Theological College

## The People Of God, People Of Blessing

When we sketch out the contours of a composite portrait of the people of God from Scripture, we find six aspects to this portrait of the people of God. As we examine each of these, we will attempt to tease out some implications for the people of God in Singapore as they seek to bear witness and engage society today.

### 1. Theologically defined

The people of God are theologically defined. The operative words here are “of God.” Because we belong to God, who we are is inseparably tied to who God is. Our identity as the people of God is irreducibly theological since God is the source of our life and our identity.

(a) *Chosen by God to be holy*—Peter reminds us that we are God’s elect (1 Pet. 1:1), chosen by the Lord of all heaven and earth. Being chosen means being accorded privilege. Our worth and value stems from the fact that we belong to God Almighty. Because we belong to God, we are valuable. We are all familiar with artefacts or articles that have been

auctioned off at a huge amount of money simply because these were once used by some famous personalities. The value of these items is conferred on them by virtue of their owners. That dress isn’t worth a million dollars. It’s only worth a million because someone famous (usually dead) once wore it.

Choice implies deliberation. We are not in the Kingdom of God because of a random spin of the roulette table. There is a sense of premeditation in God’s choosing. And we have been chosen “according to the foreknowledge of God.” We were in God’s thought way back in eternity past. Before we were born, we were already in God’s mind. God noticed us and loved us from way back.

It is tremendously affirming to know that we are known, that we are thought of, that we are not forgotten. Life can be tough. People can be unkind. Circumstances may not be to our liking. And many of us have had it bad. Yet isn’t it reassuring that we are wanted by God? Right after underscoring the fact that Christians are the “elect,” (1 Pet. 1:1), Peter offers a Trinitarian prelude

in verse 2: “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.” He points the reader to the work of God the Father, Son and Spirit. Premised on the death of Christ (“sprinkling with his blood”) and the regenerating work of the Spirit, we’ve been made holy. Divine choice and action in transforming us are one of a piece.

This transformation of life is carried out not in some special zone set aside from ordinary life. For the recipients of Peter’s letter, spiritual transformation took place in the geographical region of Asia Minor, within the realities of Pontus, Galatia, etc. For us, the work of God’s Spirit in applying to us the redemptive benefits of Christ takes place within our crazy, mixed up and busy world, within our media-infested world, and within our sensual world.

By our holiness, we the people of God testify before the people of our nation the transforming reality of Christ. In being a holy people, we have a credible platform from which to proclaim the message of Christ and invite people to experience the forgiveness of sin in him.

(b) *Shaped by the Truth* – To be theologically defined is to be shaped by God’s revealed truth. The people of God are a people committed to the truth of Scripture. This basic commitment to the Word is important because it is only from it that we are given a clear diagnosis of the ways of the world we live in. We live in an age where the very notion of truth is called

into question, an age where everything is presented in at least “fifty shades of grey” rather than in the black and white of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. How do we serve the purposes of God in these our postmodern times if we buy into moral relativism like everyone else?

God’s word is the means by which God accomplishes his will in the world. He spoke the universe into existence and called the church into being. If the people of God were to be a conduit through which God’s word accomplishes God’s purposes in the world, then they must be a community shaped by the truth of God’s Word. This means being saturated with Scripture and letting it shape the way we think. As we saturate our hearts and minds with the truth of God’s Word, we begin to develop God-like instincts that will characterise the way we respond to issues in our world.

(c) *Opposed by the world* – If the world has rejected Christ, God’s chosen and precious “living stone,” can those who are Christ’s “living stones” expect anything else? God’s people can expect to be alienated in the world. When the peoples of the world are running towards the cliff of destruction, to go in the opposite direction – away from death and destruction and toward God and new life – is to face the full force of a world running away from God. In short, to be theologically defined is to be opposed by the world.

(d) *Available to God* – To be theologically defined is to be readily available to go wherever God wants us to go, and do whatever God wants us to do. Ownership entails authority. It means having the right to command our allegiance and to demand our obedience. God is our Creator and our Redeemer. We belong to him twice over: first as creatures from his hand, and second as sinners saved by him. God as such has every right to do with us as he pleases. And we can be assured that what he asks of us is part of a grand design that will be for our own final good. When God asked Abram to leave his home and all that was familiar, he was not only looking after the best interests of Abram but also the best interests of humanity at large. Because our Divine Owner is neither capricious nor despotic, we can trust him to do good by us when we make ourselves available to him. And what does God desire if not for us to perpetuate the ministry of Christ?

## 2. Christologically centred

(a) *The Lordship of Christ* – Jesus began his public ministry by proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God – “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk. 1:14–15). And what did he do immediately after announcing the arrival of the kingdom? He called disciples to himself. “Follow me,” he said to the fishermen Peter and Andrew, James and John. Jesus called to himself twelve apostles in total. We have in the gathering of this community

of obedient followers – twelve apostles, corresponding in some analogous ways to the twelve tribes of Israel – the beginnings of the new covenantal people. And central to this new community is allegiance to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus uttered the words, “Follow me,” and the disciples left their nets and their boats immediately and followed him (Mk. 1:18, 10).

To be theologically defined as the people of God is to be submissive to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. There is really no dichotomy between being theological and being Christological. But what this means, in terms of the mission of God’s people, is a resolute commitment to the centrality of Jesus Christ. Our life together and our work in the world revolve around Christ. We take our bearings from him. We follow his leadings. And we demonstrate his Lordship in our words, in our lives and in our deeds.

(b) *Holistically evangelistic and evangelistically holistic* – Because the very foundation of being part of the people of God is to be related to Jesus Christ, there is no getting around the imperative of evangelism for all who are part of God’s people. The Evangel or the Gospel lies at the very heart of evangelical Christianity.

Biblically understood, the Evangel isn’t just a set of propositions or a neatly packaged presentation kit that we use to get people to sign on the dotted line and join the church. It’s far more profound than that. The Evangel is the comprehensive good news of what God did in history,

what God is doing in the world today, and what God will do in the future. It is God's redemptive work through history – past, present and future.

We noted earlier the correspondence between who Christ is, and who we are to be. Christ is the “living Stone” (4); we are “living stones” (5). Christ is “chosen” of God (1:20; 2:4), we are God’s “chosen” (1:2; 2:9). Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12). But he also says of his disciples: “You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:14, 16).

It is right and proper that evangelical Christianity should broaden its understanding of the Gospel and go beyond an unwitting restriction of Christian mission to evangelistic proclamation. The Gospel must be demonstrated through the good works that God’s people do in the world. The Gospel needs to be visualised, not just verbalised. The Gospel compels the people of God to engage the world at the social, cultural and even political level. We mustn’t shy away from the prophetic challenge that the Gospel makes to what is going on in the public square.

However, one must be careful not to swing to the other extreme of doing ‘holistic ministry’ without ever confronting people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Holistic mission is not holistic enough if it focuses only on challenging injustices and alleviating human needs. Doing good works without sharing the good news of

salvation through Jesus Christ is as much a form of *unholistic* mission as evangelistic proclamation without concern for the social needs of people is a travesty of the Gospel. Our good works in the world must be joined by an equal enthusiasm and commitment to sharing the Gospel and inviting men and women everywhere to put their trust in Christ and follow him in discipleship.

If in fact, the only way to enjoy the fullness of God’s blessings is by submitting to his authority and believing in Jesus Christ, then in wishing to do good in our nation, Christians should not shy away from their evangelistic responsibility. To be sure, we abhor any kind of haughty belligerence and insensitive denigrating of other faiths in our evangelistic proclamation. But we must not allow the demands of modern day political correctness to silence the church’s proclamation of the gospel.

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, reminds us that evangelism is “central to being the people of God.” Because we worship a God revealed in Jesus Christ who was “sent out to sow, to gather, and to draw back in”, as Christians, when we evangelise, we reflect the nature of God. May the FES movement be truly holistic in its commitment to the Evangel, and be unashamedly evangelistic in pursuing holistic mission in the world.

### **3. Contextually rooted**

Being God-defined and Christ-centred does not take God’s people out of this world. On the contrary, they are inescapably grounded

in history. God's people are not of the world because the source of their life and their identity comes from God who stands apart from the world. At the same time, God's people are inextricably embedded in this world. They may not be *of* this world, but they are most certainly *in* this world.

(a) *Faith at home in our own skin* – Just as the recipients of Peter's first epistle were simultaneously God's elect and inhabitants of the provinces of Asia Minor (1 Pet. 1:1–2), so God's people today are historically rooted in time and space. They are thus not exempted from the give and take of ordinary historical life. Just as the Israelites lived out their covenantal relationship with God within the geo-political, social and cultural context of the ancient near east, so the new covenantal people of God are to live out their faith and serve the purposes of God within the particularities of our time. There is thus a this-worldly dimension to what it means to be the people of God.

Realities in our context raise questions that very often our western brethren are not able to address adequately. So if our understanding of the Christian faith is dependent *solely* on what the celebrities of western Evangelicalism, then we miss out on having our reflections about faith and mission emerge contextually. We need to work towards a contextualised Christianity that is at home in our own skin.

To be culturally rooted means we need to cultivate confidence in our cultural identity. The Gospel can and must take roots within our Asian cultural context. To be sure, there is

much in our culture that needs redeeming. As Christians living in our Southeast Asian context, we need to bring the biblical gospel to bear on our cultural assumptions and offer critiques of some of our cultural practices. Nevertheless, not everything is demonic and contrary to biblical revelation within our cultures. It is therefore an imperative for God's people in our part of the world to seek expressions of the Christian faith that come out of the soil of our cultural context. Just to mention one example: we need musicians from Southeast Asia to write songs and compose melodies that are contextualised to the diverse cultures of the region. [In this regard, may I commend to you the new Asian hymnal, *Let the Asian Church Rejoice*, published jointly by the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia (CSCA) at Trinity Theological College and the Methodist School of Music.]

We don't have to be poor cousins of our Western brothers and sisters. When we lack confidence in the ability of the Gospel to find expression in and through our cultures, we end up simply aping uncritically western expressions of Christianity, some of which may be more syncretistic than biblical.

(b) *Incarnationally embedded* – God's people are always situated; they are called out by God and set apart in Christ, but they are also called to live out their faith within the particularities of specific contexts. Christians do not inhabit a particular geographical zone on earth. They are scattered everywhere on the globe. If we may paraphrase 1 Peter 1:1: "God's elect,

scattered throughout the continents, in Brazil, in Germany, in Turkey, in Korea, in England, in Senegal, in Saudi Arabia”; or closer home, “in Chinatown, in Ang Mo Kio, in Woodlands, in River Valley, in Loyang”.

We need to learn how to express what it means to be the people of God within the realities of our situatedness. It is a dereliction of duty to be so heavenly minded that we have no concern for what is tangibly before us. We are to be God’s elect in specific situations. We are God’s tangible presence in the world. We are God’s permanent ambassadors in this world.

Not only are we situated, we are also *strangers* in the world. The two words, “strangers” and “scattered,” would immediately ring a bell in the minds of the Jewish Christians who received this letter. Perhaps Peter was thinking of Abraham whom we read about in Hebrews 11:9 as one who “by faith ... made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.” It is the recognition that life is a pilgrimage, a journey through a land that is not our home, not our final resting place. Or perhaps Peter was thinking here of the words of Paul in Philippians 3:20, “but our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.” What Peter says here is evident in the *Letter to Diognetus*, an early Christian document dating probably from the second century. It describes what Christians were like then:

Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar lifestyle. (5.1-2)

They live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food and the other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate to us the wonderful and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship. (5.4)

They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens, they share all things with others; but like aliens suffer all things. Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country. (5.5)

They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens, and are persecuted by Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility. (5.15-16)

To put it simply—the soul is to the body as Christians are to the world. The soul is spread through all parts of the body and Christians through all the cities of the world. The soul is in the body but is not of the body; Christians are in the world but not of the world. (6.1-3)<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 1994), 26-27.

There is a sense in which those who live by the Gospel are *misfits* in the world system. There must be at heart a fundamental incompatibility between what we stand for as Christians and the system of this world of which we are a part. In their book, *Resident Aliens*, William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas remind us that if the church is faithful to its charter of being the people of God, then there will be a certain “oddness” about Christians. In fact, one of the section titles of their book is called: “People Who Follow a God Who Is Odd”! They speak of the Church of Christ as a *colony* on earth and Christians as *resident aliens*.

From a Christian point of view, the world needs the church, not to help the world run more smoothly or to make the world a better and safer place for Christians to live. Rather, the world needs the church because, without the church, the world does not know who it is. The only way for the world to know that it is being redeemed is for the church to point to the Redeemer by being a redeemed people. The way for the world to know that it needs redeeming, that it is broken and fallen, is for the church to enable the world to strike hard against something which is an alternative to what the world offers.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, it is absolutely necessary that Christians stand out from the world if there is to be hope for the world. It is

part of the Good News of God for the world that we should be different. There are evangelistic and missional implications of not being sucked into the system of this world. This does not mean that we should be deliberately offensive, or eccentric, or unkind in the way we relate to people in the world. We must remember that it must be the Gospel that creates offense. Those who present the Gospel cannot be offensive.

Some Christians may be so comfortable with life in this world that they forget that their true citizenship does not lie in this world. In a deep sense, we don't belong here. We belong to a heavenly kingdom. Understandably, it is easy to forget our true home, for the world we live in now is very tangible; and its attractions are very real. Our heavenly home however is in the realm of the invisible and intangible. It's just not so immediate. And if our spiritual senses are dull and our hearts not responsive to the promptings and the movements of the Spirit of God, we might just let slip from our consciousness this awareness of our true citizenship.

But it is not enough to recognize the fact that we are *resident aliens*, we are also called to be *responsible aliens*. We have a responsibility to live as God's foreigners. As much as we emphasise where we are different from our environment, we must at the same time affirm that we are Christ's “ambassadors.”

The Asia Minor Christians were also said to be “scattered,” the word from which

---

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony Expanded 25th Anniversary Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 94.

we get “diaspora.” The word was used to describe the experience of the Jewish people when they were dispersed or scattered to Assyria and Babylon. It conjures up the image of the people of Israel in exile, languishing in distant lands and under foreign rule. In the context of the New Testament, the early Christians were dispersed across the empire. Some of them were Jewish converts who were forced through persecution to flee Palestine. Yet through that very scattering, the Gospel was disseminated. We have been scattered and planted in the world for a purpose: to follow Christ in fulfilling God’s salvation plan. It is precisely because the Christians were scattered that the Church could act as salt and light in the world.

(c) *Global interconnectivity and awareness* – While God is highly invested in the life of his people, his love extends to the world as a whole. To reiterate, we need to keep in mind the tension created by the simultaneous particularity of God’s covenantal relationship with his people and the universality of God’s love for the world.

We need therefore to guard against an insular Christianity that just wants to focus on what happens within the four walls of the church and not pay any attention to what is going on in the larger world. In a way, we can’t really stick our heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich because it is patently clear that we’re plugged into a global economic system. What happens in financial offices thousands of kilometres from our shores can have profound impact on the lives of our

citizens. What happens in the Middle East invariably has an impact on life in our nation. We need windows into our world. We need to be mindful of the influential forces that are coming from outside Singapore to shape the hearts and minds of our people. Are we aware?

The world today is engulfed in unprecedented changes. From the new economic realities brought on by globalisation to the increasing cyberisation of human communication, from stunning breakthroughs in biological research to monumental upheavals in philosophical thinking, change is the essence of our times. As Christians seeking to follow Christ in such a world, we can ill afford to not be kept abreast of what is going on in our world. Part of being contextually rooted is to be plugged into global trends and developments. We can’t pretend that the changes out there do not affect us.

Membership in God’s family is not a license to a form of self-centred spirituality that is concerned only about what God can do for us, with hardly a consideration for the world outside of ourselves. Rather, to be the people of God is to be inducted into God’s redemptive work within history, to be the means by which the nations of the earth will be blessed. Our orientation is therefore fundamentally outward looking. For built-into our very identity as the people of God is an overarching concern to see God’s will done in the world at large.

#### 4. (New) Creationally engaged

Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright reminds us in his book, *The Mission of God's People*: “The Bible begins and ends with creation. It opens with the words, ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’ (Gen. 1:1), and its final great vision opens with the words, ‘Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth’” (Rev. 21:1).<sup>3</sup>

(a) *Creation care* – The people of God are called not only to share Christ and make disciples, but also to exercise stewardship over the created order. God's concern extends beyond saving people from sin and judgment. Sin and evil have ravaged the universe, and God is committed not only to reconcile sinners, but also to restore fallen creation. The Lord's redemptive plan includes the renovation of nature, of the earth (see Col. 1:15–23; Rom. 8:19–23; 2 Pet. 3:13).

There are those who operate with the misguided eschatological idea that when Christ returns, the earth will be consumed in a bonfire of eschatological destruction. If this were true, why waste time caring for creation and be ecologically responsible? After all, everything will be burnt at the end of time. The truth is that in the eschatological vision of Scripture, we look forward in hope to the renewing and transformation of the physical creation, not its annihilation. All our God-honouring efforts at looking after the earth will be taken up in the new heavens and the new earth in the future.

Discussions about human being's relation to the earth often revolve around the idea of subduing the earth (*dominium terrae*) in Genesis 1:26–28. The text however makes it clear that in subduing or exercising dominion over the earth, we have a two-fold responsibility: (i) Humans are to subdue the earth as creatures made in the *image of God*, i.e., they function as God's stewards responsible to rule the earth in the way that God rules over his world. Just as God sustains and cares for the earth (Ps. 104) and does not ravish it violently, so humans must care for the earth. (ii) Humans were created in the image of God as a community of men and women, and not as isolated individuals. In exercising dominion over the earth, we must be responsible to look after the interests of the whole human community, and not just for now but also for all in subsequent generations. Christians are therefore pro-life (in the broadest sense) and pro-earth. If we devastate the earth at work, then we are being irresponsible about the earth. As people of God who are also people of Singapore, we need to be mindful that we have a Christian responsibility – a biblically mandated responsibility – to exercise stewardship and care for the physical environment that is our city.

(b) *Working for the common good in the public square* – Considering how much of the time is devoted to life in the working world, it is important for the people to God to understand how their daily work relates

---

<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 48.

to their mission in the world. Five things we may say with regards to work:

(i) We need to *rethink the significance of our everyday work*. For too long, the focus of Christian thinking on work tends to be on one of two things: how do we bear witness to Christ in the workplace; and how to act ethically in the decisions we make at work. This latter is in a sense related to the former, for if we're not exemplary in our conduct, how are we going to commend the Gospel? While both of these are necessary, to reduce work to these considerations alone is to operate with too narrow an understanding of the significance of our work. We need to go on to develop a comprehensive theology of work that takes into account the outworking of the Gospel in the world.

The Biblical witness does not just instruct us on how we should or should not work, but it offers light on the ultimate meaning of human work. Work is looked at not only from the standpoint of sanctification, i.e., the difference being a Christian makes to what we do at work, but also from the standpoint of God's overall purposes for creation. Human work effects changes, not only in the workers themselves but also in the social and natural environment. Human work has a shaping effect on history, and as such it comes within the ambit of God's intention for creation and for all of life.

(ii) *Human work is ordained by the Divine Creator/Worker*. Right at the very beginning of the Bible, God is presented as a worker. He created the universe and he formed things (including Adam) with his hands.

The picture of God here is that of a blue-collar worker – one who works with his hands! As Tom Nelson puts it in his book, *Work Matters*, “From the very beginning of Scripture we see that the one true God is not a couch potato God, nor did he create a couch potato world.”<sup>4</sup>

And right after God brought Adam and Eve into being, he put them to work – to tend the garden and exercise dominion over creation. Notice that work was already there in Eden prior to the Fall. Work is not the result of sin. Humans created in the image of God are to reflect who God is in the world. If God is a worker, and he has made us in his image, then we are to image God by being a worker like him. There is a stewardship dimension to who we are as human beings.

The entrance of sin may have distorted human work, but it does not change the fact that human work is part and parcel of God's design for human life. In fact, precisely because of the ravages of sin on human work, we need a theology of human work that is rooted in the redemptive work of Christ.

(iii) *Work is a continuation of the creative work of God in the world*. In the creation account, we are told that God, after bringing forth the different components of the universe, named each of them – “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night” (Gen. 1:5); “And God called the expanse Heaven” (8); etc. Interestingly,

---

<sup>4</sup> Tom Nelson, *Work Matters* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 20.

the Creator God then entrusted to Adam the responsibility of naming the animals (Gen. 2:19–20) as well as the woman (2:23). The divine act of naming is followed by the human act of naming. The latter flows from the former.

According to Martin Luther, God continues his creative activity in the world through human hands. In our ordinary work, we serve God by serving the neighbour and looking after the neighbourhood. We participate in God's providential care of the world through the work of our hands. In Reformed Theology, the Christian faith is a world-formative religion, i.e., it is neither isolationist nor anti-world. And the primary agents for social transformation of the world are not the clergy alone, but all of God's people scattered across all arenas of life. The work that we do on a daily basis thus becomes theologically significant.

(iv) *Work is renewed and sanctified in Christ.* The redemptive effects of what God has done in Christ include the possibility now of sanctifying our work. In the coming of Christ, we have the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in history. The age to come has invaded this age. Christ's coming is, in a profound sense, an eschatological work in history. In him, the distortive effects of sin on work can be reversed. Our theological understanding of work must take into account this new creation perspective of Christ's redemptive work.

"Human work," theologian Miroslav Volf says in his book, *Work in the Spirit*, "properly understood theologically, is related

to the goal of all history, which will bring God, human beings, and the nonhuman creation into 'shalomic' harmony."<sup>5</sup> Only this vision of the ultimate destiny of the world can serve as a criterion for meaning in work.

There is much that we can say about this, but suffice for now to note that work, from both a creational as well as a new creational (redemptive) perspective has integrity as a meaningful part of what God wants for his people.

In appreciating the integrity of work, bear in mind that Jesus himself worked as a carpenter before he embarked on his public ministry. Instead of being born into a priestly family, or given formative training as a Pharisee, Jesus was born into an ordinary working class family. He lived most of his life far away from Jerusalem Temple. He worked for the most part of his life as a tradesman, a carpenter. The word usually translated as "carpenter" (*tektōn*) in Matthew 13:55 (cf. Mk. 6:3) could just as well be rendered "mason" or "smith." It is not inconceivable that Joseph and Jesus were builders, able to work with wood and mason. We might say that Jesus spent most of his life as a contractor, in what we might call 'secular' work. Tradition has it that Joseph died a few years before Jesus began his public ministry. It is likely that Jesus, being the eldest son, would have been solely responsible for the family business.

If human work is part and parcel of

---

<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene: WIPF and Stock Publishers, 2001), 85.

God's design for human life, then there can be no dichotomy between so-called spiritual/sacred and God-pleasing work, and the work we do at the office, in the factory, at the university, at home, etc. Unfortunately, God's people are not often equipped to live missionally through their vocation. Part of this comes out from an unhealthy dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. What we need is a greater appreciation of God's call in vocation.

(v) We need to exercise *vocational stewardship as an important means of working for the common good*. Christians in society are called to contribute to the common good through their work. This expands the arena of our Christian service. We need to differentiate between church work and the work of the church. Much of the work of the church is in the world, outside the precinct of the church.

Jeremiah, speaking to the exiled people of God in Babylon, urged them to “build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters ...” and “to seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile” (Jer. 29:4–7). The same perspective is found in the New Testament. Galatians 6:10 states for instance, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” The Galatians were urged to do good to “everyone” (cf. 1 Thess. 5:15; Tit. 3:2; Col. 4:1). Martin Luther said, “God doesn't need your good works, but your neighbour does.”

We need to find meaning and significance to our daily work. And it begins with paying attention to God's calling on our lives. In discerning God's calling, we need to differentiate between the *primary* call to discipleship – where we are called to faith in Christ and into the Body of Christ – and the *secondary* call to vocation. While the primary call is the same for all believers, the call to vocation differs from person to person. There is one single primary call to God but there are many secondary callings.

The Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin characterised work in terms of vocation. Calvin, for instance, writes:

[T]he Lord bids each one of us in all life's actions to look to his calling ....[H]e has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, he has named these various kinds of living “callings.” Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life ... From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), I: 724.

The Reformers' idea of vocation (particularly in Luther) departs from previous formulations in the following ways:

- Against the monastic reduction of *vocatio* only to a particular kind of religious life or work, Luther argues that all Christians (not just monks) have a vocation.
- Every type of work (not just religious work) done by Christians can be a vocation. This invests human work with greater value than before.
- The medieval hierarchy of *vita contemplativa* over *vita activa* is overcome. Now both are of equal value before God.

In contrast to the prevailing tendency in monastic spirituality to withdraw from the world – a calling *out of* the world into the desert of monasticism – the Reformers Calvin and Luther regarded vocation as a calling *into* the everyday world. We need, in short, to exercise “vocational stewardship.” Amy Sherman, in her book, *Kingdom Calling*, defines vocational stewardship this way: it is “the intentional and strategic deployment of our vocational power – knowledge, platform, networks, position, influences, skills and reputation – to advance foretastes of God’s kingdom.”<sup>7</sup>

As we come to know what God has called us to do in the world, and as we give ourselves to do what God has made us to do, we contribute to the common good of our

society. This is how the people of God in Singapore, a people scattered across every strata of society and embedded in every nook and corner of our nation, can play a part in blessing our nation.

To reiterate a point made earlier, there is no Christian caste system. The clergy are not hierarchically above the so-called laity. Many of the heroes of faith in the Bible were not “full time Christian workers” as such. Most of them were in so-called ‘secular’ work:

- Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were farmers;
- Joseph and Daniel were civil servants;
- Esther was a beauty queen and a member of the king’s harem;
- David was a professional soldier most of his life before he became king;
- Nehemiah was a project manager – if he were alive today, he’d have a hard hat on with architectural construction plans under his arms;
- Paul was a tentmaker while being the most effective missionary of his day.

There is thus integrity in the work we do from Monday to Friday. Discovering how our everyday work can contribute not only to sustaining life, but also enhancing it. We need Christians in all walks of life to do their bit in working for the common good. We need Christians in education, in engineering, in law, in scientific research, in medicine, in social work, in academia, in the military, in law enforcement, in politics, and yes, in full time vocational Christian ministry.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downer’s Grove: IVP 2011), 20.

(c) *Shalom in interreligious relations* – Recognising that there is intrinsic integrity to the work we do in the world enables us to see that contributing to the common good isn't just something confined to Christians. Non-Christians can, through their good works, contribute to the common good as well. It is therefore conceivable that the people of God, without compromising their Christian commitments, can work alongside non-Christians – whether religious or non-religious – to pursue goals that are for the good of society.

Revelation 21:24, 26 speak of the kings and nations of the earth bringing their splendour, glory, and honour into the New Jerusalem. The pure and noble achievements of non-Christians can be transformed, taken up and incorporated into the new creation. If Christ is Lord not just of the church but of all humanity, and if Christ works today through his Spirit, and if it is the one and the same Spirit who is active both in the Church and in the world, then there is a sense in which the Spirit is present in and through the work even of those who do not know Christ. That work may not be salvific in the sense of leading to reconciliation with God, but it is no less inspired by God's Spirit and in accordance with God's design for life.

While we are committed to the centrality and particularity of Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life, we live in a world where there are many different religious faiths and religious adherents. Part of our commitment to the common good is

to work towards having harmonious relationship with people of different faiths. Interreligious harmony is a key pillar in the social compact in Singapore. I agree with Professor Tommy Koh when he wrote recently in a commentary in *The Straits Times* ("Miracle on Waterloo Street," Saturday 21 February 2015) that Singapore's religious harmony is one of the most precious achievements of the past 50 years.

And the people of God ought not to take this for granted. To do this, we need to exercise responsibility in the way we speak of people from other faith traditions. The Singapore Constitution (Article 15) guarantees the freedom of religion and the right to propagate one's religion. But the propagating of our faith does not mean denigrating other faiths. And freedom of speech is not absolute. Christians shouldn't need the Penal Code or the Sedition Act before they exercise responsibility in speech. We shouldn't need the government to tell us that it's wrong to denigrate other religions. Thanks to the policies, laws and institutions that our government have put in place, "Singaporeans have developed," what Tommy Koh describes as "the cultural DNA to respect one another's faiths." [*The Straits Times*, Saturday 21 February 2015.]

## 5. Ethically shaped

As we've seen in our study of the covenantal promises to Abraham (Gen.

12:1–3), Abraham was called to educate his descendants to walk in the way of the Lord, namely the way of righteousness and justice (Gen. 18:19). The people of God, Christopher Wright tells us, are “people who walk in God’s way.”

(a) *Ecclesial Christlikeness* – Not only do we need to demonstrate that we’re a people living according to the ethical standards of God in the way we engage with the peoples of the world, we need to reflect Christlikeness within the community of faith as well. In fact, only when the church community itself mirrors the priorities and concerns of God would we be credible witnesses to ethical standards in the world. If we do not practice what we preach, it’s difficult to see how the world would be interested to hear what we have to say.

(b) *Towards Economic Shalom* – As we’ve seen earlier, the stipulations of the Mosaic Law pertaining to economics have a theological and ethical orientation at heart. The Mosaic stipulations pertaining to the Jubilee, with its declaration of liberty, cancellation of debts, and restoration of land point to God’s concern for economic practices in his world. Economic policies are not simply the result of pragmatic or utilitarian considerations. They are always oriented towards God’s revealed design for optimum human flourishing. Economics and God’s Shalom must not be kept apart in airtight compartments. Christian ethicists and economists need to come together to translate the commitment to justice and

the commitment to the well-being of humankind into policies and practices in the economic realm that lead to economic shalom.

## **6. Corporately inclusive**

Being in Christ is to be a member of the Body of Christ. There is a corporate dimension to the Christian faith that accentuates the importance of being in relationship within community. Two arenas and concerns come to mind:

(a) *Demonstrative love in Christian community* – The people of God is a corporate body. While the individual is recognised and held accountable, there is a sense in which God’s people are always regarded as a corporate entity. This goes against the individualistic tendencies of our age. This necessitates that we think not only in terms of what happens to us as individuals, but also collectively in terms of what happens to us as the corporate people of God. All who are in Christ are part of the people of God, regardless of their ethnicity or nationality. People from every tribe, nation, people and language (Rev. 7:9–10) will form the whole of God’s redeemed humanity. All that divides us today are subsumed under the overarching rubric of relationship with Christ. This means that the people of God must be marked by a love that includes rather than alienates on the basis of race, gender or social standing.

(b) *Extending hospitality* – If the aim of God’s calling of a people to himself is that the nations might be blessed, God’s people have a golden opportunity in Singapore because the nations of the world are at our doorsteps. Yes, we will continue to send missionaries to the nations of the world as a church. But we mustn’t miss out on the opportunity to bless the many from around the world who are here in our city. Extend hospitality to such by showing generosity, not just with our substance but also with our attitude and our time. This too is the way the people of God reflect the caring and welcoming attitude of God.

—

In conclusion, let me reiterate: who we are tells us what we are to do in the world; and the nature of what we do in society is rooted in who we are. Identity and mission go hand in hand. We act out of who we are, and who we are, i.e., our identity as God’s people must govern our engagement in the public square.

Coming from within the Christian tradition, what do we wish to see our nation become as it celebrates its 50th birthday? Here are some wishes that the people of God in Singapore can give themselves to help fulfil:

*We wish ... we’d be a grateful nation* that is mindful that many have sacrificed to make us what we are today. God’s providential blessings should not only elicit thanksgiving but also call forth from us a commitment to be a blessing ourselves.

*We wish ... we’d be a responsible and responsive nation* that is mindful of its place

in the global community, i.e., moving beyond parochialism to seeing ourselves as a responsible nation alongside other nations. Global connectivity means we can never be shielded from developments in the larger world, and we should be responsive to needs and challenges on the global stage.

*We wish ... we’d be a life-giving nation* that extends hospitality to those coming to our shores. Shouldn’t it be our desire to see these guests find hope and a better life as they contribute to making our life better here?

*We wish ... we’d be a caring and generous nation* where care and opportunities are given to the poor and the vulnerable, a nation where people are generous in both spirit and in action.

*We wish ... we’d be a discerning nation* where the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, is maintained, a nation where efforts at fostering the good are encouraged and efforts at thwarting wickedness are endorsed.

*We wish ... we’d be a harmonious nation* where people of different faiths and beliefs live peacefully together, where differences are harnessed for the sake of the common good.

In all of these wishes, the people of God are invited to play their part. May God help us!

(The above was the second talk presented by Rev. Dr Mark Chan at the FES National Conference on 7 March 2015.)