

Christian Faith and Conduct

By Fr. Archer Torrey

Korean version published in the series, "Letters from a Mountain Valley" *Shinangye* magazine, January 1990.

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Dear Father Dae:

Thank you for your recent letter. It was a pleasure to meet you in Beijing last year, and I do hope that you may be able to attend the conference on Christianity and Culture that we are projecting next year. I am happy to report that I have been elected the president of the newly-founded Society for the Study of Christian Culture, which consists of the pick of Chinese scholars studying Christianity as a discipline... The Society is non-governmental and receives no subsidies from the authorities.

I do hope that we can keep in touch.

Sincerely yours,
Tang Yi

Dear Dr. Tang,

It was such a pleasure to receive your letter and the enclosed papers on Christian Culture, especially the excellent summary of the history of Christianity in China, going back to the Tang Dynasty. I must confess that the only item in the whole story that gave me any comfort was your reference to the mission that refused to accept the Boxer Indemnity Fund benefits. You said, "Some of them tried to live up to the ideal of Christian love. James Hudson Taylor and those like him served the spiritually hungry without demanding the Western Government's protection, nor did they claim retribution when their missions were maimed by the riots. Other missionaries either tampered with the treaties, or demanded retribution, or did both to see the white man's justice done in a country not ruled by the white man's law. Such behavior roused xenophobic sentiments and left a chronic trauma in the Chinese mentality."

Dr. Tang, I weep as I read your words, knowing how true they are. I feel a deep sense of shame. Earlier, you quoted the Confucianist teaching, "You should watch a person's behavior in understanding his words," commenting that "the test of the Christian faith lies first of all in the conduct of the missionaries. In name, the missionaries were the emissaries of Christ; in fact, they were human, with all the human weakness to sin and err."

It is most gracious of you to excuse us as "human," but in doing so, you are saying that the Christian claim that a man can be "born again" must be ignored. In your entire paper you make no reference to this claim.

You are familiar, of course, with Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, the scholar of the Old Testament, who recognized that Jesus had "come from God," but to whom Jesus replied, "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

If the missionaries, as you graciously say, were only human, then they must not have been "born again." And if the missionaries were not "born again," the entire concept must be imaginary, and the New Testament cannot be true.

As I read the Bible, it becomes a unity and makes sense, and does not have to be constantly corrected – but only if the factor of being "born again" is present. This is my background, the position from which I come in saying what I am about to say about "Christian Culture."

Dr. Tang, I am going to say that I do not believe there is such a thing as Christian Culture – that the very word is a contradiction in terms! I do not believe there can be such a thing as Christian Culture. What, then, are you studying and to what have you devoted your life to studying? What is this thing all scholars agree to refer to as "Christian Culture?" I am afraid it is nothing more than Western Culture hiding behind a facade of words borrowed from the Bible – a pretense! What breaks my heart is that so many people have been fooled and are still being fooled. They are accepting a disease that masquerades as a blessing – in fact, for death disguised as life. As Jesus wept over Jerusalem, I weep over "Christendom."

For nearly three hundred years, the question of a Christian Culture hardly entered the minds of Christians. (I need to do much more research in what we call the "Pre-Nicene Fathers" to be sure of this.) As I understand the Bible, the word "cosmos" or "order", which is nearly always translated "world," is the equivalent of what you and I mean by "culture." A culture is an ordered system of thought, art, and customs belonging to a group of people who are able to dominate a given nation or area. We do use the word "sub-culture" for such a system of thought and customs not accepted by the majority, but characterizing a significant number of people in a given area.

I think it is clear that a Christian sub-culture was developing in the Roman world at the time of Constantine. For obvious political reasons, Constantine decided to make Christianity the culture of the late Roman Empire. The fact that he was able to do so practically overnight makes me wonder whether the sub-culture itself had already become so "worldly" that it had ceased to be Christian.

We must ask ourselves why Jesus was crucified by the leaders of the Jewish culture of his day. Were they not basing themselves squarely on the Old Testament, and did not Jesus believe and teach the Old Testament? Why was Jesus such a threat to them? I think it was precisely because he said, "You must be born again," and quietly refused to back down on that point. They could not prove him to be a heretic or a violator of the law. Yet they felt compelled to destroy him. The same thing applies to the Apostle Paul and the other New Testament writers. They did not reject the Jewish Bible, but the Jews – that is, the leaders of the Jewish culture – hated them passionately. Jesus referred to this culture as "the world." So did the Apostle Paul.

Paul's words in I Corinthians 1, where he is addressing himself to those who are part of the Greek culture, the Greek "world," make this point clear. He says that the essence of

Christianity is not a culture or philosophy, but the cross of Christ. He says, "The word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

Dr. Tang, what is called "Christian culture" interests itself in the power of education, or the power of some philosophy, then refers to it as the "power of God." The cross is used as a mere symbol. Paul's words are being twisted to make them fit our culture, a culture that already has rejected the cross.

Those missionaries who accepted the Boxer Indemnity Fund, what did that have to do with the cross or with Paul's words, "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?" To continue with Paul's words: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness... God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the strong."

Dr. Tang, I read the same message in all of the New Testament writers, and I do not see that any culture, just by adopting the name "Christian", ceases being what Paul calls "the world." There were many good things in Jewish culture. There were many good things in Greek culture and Roman culture. There are many good things in modern Western culture. I hasten to say, they are no better than the many good things in Confucianist culture. But Jesus and Paul and the other voices we hear in the Bible are saying, "You cannot please God by being a man of culture, you must be born again, through the cross. Not through education, not through psychology, not through philosophy, only through the cross." If that is not true, it is stupid, it is foolishness. If it is true, then there is no such thing as a Christian culture.

Let me say something about Confucianism and Confucianist culture. I believe that Confucianism is both honest and realistic. Confucianism says, in essence, "Nobody can be born again, therefore we must make rules that can be kept by human beings as they are." Because of this, Confucianism has [text damaged, unknown]. God's revelation up to that time. You are, doubtless, familiar with the book, "The Discovery of Genesis," which shows how some 40 basic Chinese characters preserve the memory of the first 10 chapters of Genesis in the Bible.

No, I cannot see a superiority of "Christian Culture" over Confucianism. In fact, I believe that what we have come to call "Christian Culture" is dishonest, and therefore dangerously inferior to Confucianism. Jesus said, "The truth will make you free." (John 8:32) How can a lie do anything but enslave people? All our learned scholars who do research in "Christianity," yet treat it as just another philosophy – not as the one and only supernatural life-changing force in the world – may meet something that is a part of a so-called "Christian Culture." Unfortunately, it will also be a part of that same culture, that same "world" that nailed Jesus to the cross, cut off the disciple's head, and fiercely persecuted the Christians of the first three centuries.

What I am saying, Dr. Tang, is that I welcome your interest and your research into what the academic world has a perfect right to call Christian Culture. But what I also want to say, my dear friend, is that I am not a part of it. I appreciate what you said about the missionaries in

China. You extended a gracious, Confucianist, realistic excuse for our moral failures and our refusal to follow the instructions of our apostle Paul. But I cannot accept such excuses. We were human. We should have been superhuman. We should have been born again, and we should have taught and walked the way of the cross. Instead, we were representatives of a Christian Culture which was, and is, in fact, what Jesus called "the world," and which did, in fact, nail him to the cross. When we accepted the Boxer Indemnity Fund (or any other such thing) we nailed Jesus to the cross again. The New Testament (Hebrews 6:6) says of those who have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the powers of the age to come, and then fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put him to open shame. God have mercy upon us; this is what we did.

One question remains: Is there a sub-culture or counter-culture within the so-called "Christian Culture," that is basically the same as what is described in the Bible – not at all concerned with being anachronistic or even antithetical to the existing Christian Culture? If there is, do their words and their deeds go together?

It is not just the Chinese who say "You should watch a man's deeds in understanding his words." The Bible says, (I John 3:18) "Let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." The "love" of which Jesus and his disciples speak is something supernatural and only possible if there is such a thing as being born again. If it is manifested in deeds, in actions, then we can go one step beyond both Christian culture and Confucianist culture. We can say that Christ is alive today, giving his disciples power to live by the cross, not the culture. The Bible says that God's "Holy Spirit" was sent to Jesus' disciples, to make them different, to make them supernatural, and to make them able to pass this on to others. From a personal, rather than from an academic point of view, this is the most important area of research. Is there any evidence of such a phenomenon?

If you find such evidence, let me know. I believe I have found it. I have staked my life and my work on it. I am anxious to know whether you find it or not. And to those who cannot seem to find it elsewhere, we at Jesus Abbey invite you, as the Bible does in John 1:46, "Come and see."

Sincerely yours,
Dae Chon-dok