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Tyndale University College & Seminary

Spiritual Formation in a Hong Kong Chinese Context:
A Personal Journey, a Teachable Model Based on 1 John 2:12-14,
and a Research Report

A Research Portfolio
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
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by
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ABSTRACT

In this research portfolio, the author describes Christian spiritual formation as a growth process with common stages and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 while acknowledging the uniqueness of spiritual experience for each individual Christian through spiritual autobiography. The common spiritual growth stages and tasks were developed as a model derived from an exposition with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. The uniqueness of Christian spiritual formation is acknowledged by a spiritual autobiography, which describes the author's experiences with God and spiritual realities throughout his life. The universality of Christian spiritual growth is then suggested and illustrated through a model of spiritual growth from the passage. Lastly, a research project investigates the author's teaching effectiveness in a Personal Growth course with ten students as participants in a Hong Kong (China) seminary using a combination of the two previous sections as teaching components in the journey of Christian spiritual formation. The findings and comments in this report bring to light some valuable teaching advice for Hong Kong seminarians concerning the duality of Christian spiritual formation. This report shows the effectiveness of incorporating the writing of a spiritual autobiography and exploring various learning tasks associated with 1 John 2:12-14, in that these were beneficial to the spiritual growth of Hong Kong seminarians.

DEDICATION

This research portfolio is dedicated to my wife, Priscilla, for her support and love throughout the past four years. Without your understanding and support, I could have finished neither the Spiritual Formation track nor completed this portfolio. You are a great blessing to me.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Before the introduction of this work, I wish to introduce myself in the next paragraph. I will then briefly describe the main elements of this portfolio—my spiritual autobiography, a spiritual growth model whose basis lies in 1 John 2:12–14, and, finally, a field research report, which combines and applies elements and conclusions from the above two components in a seminary course taught in Hong Kong. For the sake of context, I also wish to introduce three key concepts related to this portfolio—Hong Kong Pentecostalism, Confucianism, and spiritual growth—so as to provide a basic framework for the reader.

My story begins in Hong Kong, China. In 2004, my wife and I pioneered a new church, focusing on discipleship and Bible study. Our hope was to bring deeper spiritual knowledge and application to our community. After eight years' labour, however, we harvested less than a handful of committed Christians. It was evident that something wasn't working the way I had intended. In order to gain a clearer understanding of Christian spirituality and growth, I then began my seminary studies in Hong Kong, in 2012. While there, I treasured the promise that spiritual formation would change believers' lives according to the powerful Word of God. I was fervent about this goal, and am to this day, but I found the seminary's approach toward Christian spirituality too academic. I needed to find

something that better equipped me in my application of Christian teachings. Following this need, in 2013, I applied to the Doctor of Ministry Program of Spiritual Formation at Tyndale. During the past four years, I have learned a lot about Christian spirituality as well as spiritual formation. Christian spirituality means subjectively focusing on the “with-God” life in all of its lived dimensions (Howard 2012, 160) within a Christian framework, while spiritual formation emphasizes how the Holy Spirit works in the human spirit (137-138). Thankfully, I have been able to apply myself and my growing knowledge of Christian spirituality due to the Program to grow and enrich the lives of those in Christ around me. Specifically, through the reflection of my spiritual journey, as stated in the following spiritual autobiography, the vision of Christian spiritual growth according to the Bible was confirmed in me. I chose to write one important passage about Christian growth from 1 John 2:12-14, and then developed a teaching model to facilitate Christian, as stated in chapter three. One of the outcomes of the above works was to teach in a Hong Kong seminary in fall 2016, with generally positive feedback from ten seminarians, as stated in chapter four. I pray that I can continue my work for God’s glory.

Portfolio Description

In this research portfolio, my personal spiritual journey is presented as a spiritual autobiography for the first time. This autobiography offers a window into my personal and spiritual growth during key points throughout my life. Next, I present a possible spiritual growth model with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 with

my elaboration. I suggest that these verses could be divided into eight spiritual developmental tasks, or learning tasks, to promote spiritual growth for Christians. Finally, a field research report has been compiled to evaluate my teaching on the spiritual autobiography and the spiritual growth model in a Hong Kong seminary. For this research, the spiritual autobiography is comprised of a student's testimony of conversion, a ministerial calling experience, and an episode of spiritual experience. The autobiography, model essay, and field research report echoed the three main themes of Tyndale's Doctor of Ministry in Spiritual Formation degree: personal growth and practice, the scholarly study of spirituality, and the ministry of spiritual formation (Tyndale Seminary 2016, 43-44). In sum, this portfolio is comprised of my spiritual growth journey in my autobiography, my understanding of the spiritual growth model with reference to 1 John 2:12-14, and an action research project conducted with the students of Ecclesia Theological Seminary in Hong Kong.

My spiritual autobiography, presented in the next chapter, tells the story of my personal spiritual growth. In my early childhood, some stories are spiritual but not Christian because I am the first generation of Christians in my family. I first came to Christ in 1987. I was attracted by Jesus' teaching and miraculous work before my conversion in the mid-1980s. In my family of origin, five out of six are Christians, except my father, as of 2017. Difficulties are not uncommon as I searched for Jesus and for spiritual growth, but God's grace and help are more abundant throughout my life. In Hong Kong, I know some first-generation Christians go through many difficulties similar to mine. Surprisingly, I found that

many episodes in my past life echoed the teaching about spiritual growth by the Apostle John, recorded in 1 John 2:12-14. For example, my experience in spiritual warfare lasted for more than a decade and echoed with the learning task of “victory over the evil one” (1 John 2:13-14). I first encountered an evil spirit in 1990 and practiced casting out demons (58). From 2004 to 2008, I went through some unusual and fierce spiritual battles, and my eyes were opened through those battles in understanding spiritual realms about which God instructed me. Spiritual warfare plays an important role in my spiritual formation because the unseen battles helped me to set my mind on the things above, not on earthly things (Col. 3:2). Through these twists and turns in my life, I see that God’s mighty and gracious hand had been leading me all the way.

The second main section of this portfolio offers a model of spiritual growth derived from 1 John 2:12-14. Found in chapter three, it represents my elaboration of the passage concerning Christian spiritual growth with eight accompanying tasks. I call them learning tasks, which means Christians can learn them and abide by them. For example, a new believer learns a lesson of humility and then dwells in humility afterwards. The eight spiritual learning tasks for Christians are: becoming spiritual children, sins being forgiven for His name’s sake, knowing the Heavenly Father, becoming strong spiritual youth, letting the Word of God abide in us, overcoming the evil one, becoming spiritual parents, and knowing Him who has been from the beginning. I provide concise explanations of these tasks in that chapter. A brief exegesis, exposition, plus my own interpretation of the eight tasks of the passage are presented. My suggestion

of these eight tasks might be regarded as my own understanding of spiritual growth with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. In addition, some other topics relevant to that passage, such as the background, the transitioning of spiritual growth, and spiritual stagnation, will be briefly discussed in the concluding remarks of that chapter.

Chapter four outlines my action research report about teaching a course mainly on the spiritual autobiography and the spiritual growth model at a seminary in Hong Kong. I adopted a brief approach to teaching spiritual autobiography because of the time constraints of that course. Despite these constraints, one of the obvious findings was that my teaching on spiritual autobiography was better than on the spiritual growth model with reference to the passage in 1 John 2:12-14. Nonetheless, I treasured my reflection and reading after teaching the course. In fact, the outcome of my teaching these two components for the first time, as stated in the reports, was not as good compared with my high expectations at the beginning. Therefore, I studied hard after teaching the course to make some concrete changes and improve my teaching in the future. Many issues have been addressed in this chapter including the necessity of my understanding the students' learning needs with reference to generational traits, the Chinese Confucian context related to Hong Kong seminarians, and the different learning approaches of students in higher education.

The above three parts—autobiography, formation model, and research project—are the essence of this portfolio in fulfillment of one of the learning outcomes of the Spiritual Formation track of Tyndale's Doctor of Ministry

program. First, as I wrote my spiritual autobiography, my self-understanding was enhanced through reflection and meditation on my life. I connected some essential but fragmented episodes in my past life and gained more understanding about myself as well as my family of origin. Even more important, I also confirmed God's calling through the writing of my spiritual autobiography. God's work in my life is the primary context for my ministry. As I wrote my spiritual autobiography, my reflection in this context was greatly enriched. I received much understanding and many insights about how God had uniquely molded me throughout my life.

Second, through the writing of the suggested spiritual growth model derived from 1 John 2:12-14, I explored an aspect of an understanding of the academic field of spiritual formation. The application of the Bible, as well as the biblical value of spiritual growth, was emphasized. This is extremely important for Pentecostals in Hong Kong and for most of the Protestants in mainland China. Protestants in Hong Kong as well as in mainland China have been convinced only by arguments from God's Word since the mainland 'Three-Self' Church movement in the 1950s and the Hong Kong evangelical movement in the 1970s.

Third, through the research project, I understood in a concrete way the teaching ministry context of Hong Kong Chinese seminarians. Moreover, a teaching plan for the spiritual autobiography and growth model was created. Eventually, I taught these two components in the Personal Growth course at Ecclesia Theological Seminary in the fall of 2016 to facilitate students' spiritual and community formation. As a result, this portfolio demonstrated how learning

outcomes stated in the *Doctor of Ministry Handbook 2016-2017, Part 1* were fulfilled in my study (Tyndale Seminary 2016, 44).

I have benefited greatly from the courses, the problems encountered, the readings, and the reflections in the program. Following are a few examples. I learned more about humility through some spiritual practices in the Space for God course because spiritual disciplines never guarantee any rewards from God. It is God's grace that surprises those who faithfully practice spiritual disciplines. Next, I experienced God's further healing in the Transformational Prayer course with deeper reflections upon the writing of my spiritual autobiography. Moreover, I learned Ignatian discernment in the Desiring God course and confirmed that people could experience spiritual warfare even before their conversion. From the Engaging the Scriptures course, I learned how God's grace works along with Christian spiritual disciplines through the Scripture. Furthermore, the problems that emerged in research and teaching compelled me to learn more so as to sharpen my teaching and research skills. Therefore, I hope that the following content will benefit not only the academy, but also laity who long for Christian spiritual growth. I understand that my path of spiritual growth, as stated in my spiritual autobiography, in many ways resembles 1 John 2:12-14; however, this may not be the case for individual readers according to their own experience, and this issue will be discussed in the conclusion of this portfolio.

Key Prerequisite Concepts

Pentecostalism in Hong Kong

I believe that the adoption of a Pentecostal perspective can be helpful in understanding my personal experience of spiritual warfare. Pentecostalism was brought to Hong Kong in 1907 from the fire of Azusa Street right after the outbreak of the revival in California, finding its first home in the newly established Hong Kong Pentecostal Holiness Church (HKPHC). To this day, their archive holds various preserved microforms concerning news of the Hong Kong Pentecostal movement at that time (Ng 2013). Following the foundation of HKPHC was the First Assembly of God Church, founded in the late 1920s by a Western missionary. She had come to Hong Kong simply intending to take a vacation from her service in mainland China. However, the need in Hong Kong was undeniable, and she responded to his calling to teach by building a church. This story was shared publicly by a deacon of the First Assembly of God on October 15, 2017, at the seventieth anniversary banquet of Ecclesia Theological Seminary.

During the first half of the twentieth century, according to Dr. David Wang, Pentecostal churches in Hong Kong attracted only a small portion of the population because of the negativity associated to supernatural practices, including speaking in tongues, as well as their association with to Taoism. This barrier single-handedly drove many Chinese people from Pentecostal churches and Christians, particularly the educated elite. Finally, according to his sharing, in the 1950s and early 1960s, Hong Kong's Pentecostal churches began to flourish

because of the many evangelists and pastors who came from Communist mainland China. Again, superstition caused the growth to slow when Duen-Yee Kong, a famous Hong Kong film actress and Pentecostal preacher died. Many people questioned her faith and her outspoken teachings of salvation by speaking in tongues, as she passed away at 43 from tongue cancer.

The coincidence wasn't lost on the general public at the time, and this fact jeopardized the whole Pentecostal denomination in the late 1960s and afterward. As a result, most of the Chinese Pentecostal churches abandoned the traditional Pentecostal faith in the 1970s, while many of them removed the 'Pentecostal' term from their name. In some cases, as with many superstitious and disastrous stories, the action is well-removed from those who tell their tales and learn their intricacies. In my case, many of these stories are personal and from my own experience. Some churches that I had attended under the Pentecostal name forsook their label and the associated distrust and changed their title to that of an Evangelical church in the early 1980s. These superstitions died hard. Even as far into the 1990s, I can recall a sister in the church who warned me not to pursue the gift of tongues as speaking in tongues would likely cause me to develop tongue cancer.

In the mid-1970s evangelist Dr. Billy Graham (AD 1918–2018) held his first evangelistic rallies in Hong Kong. He spearheaded the evangelical movement that was prevailing during that time, and kept the Bible as the common denominator between the various denominations. In boiling down Christianity to its fundamental Biblical truths and disposing of much of the liturgical confusion

present in Hong Kong at the time, many churches were encouraged to come together despite their differences to host the rallies. As a result, many Pentecostal churches abandoned their mindset for an evangelical one, causing many leaders in churches to leave their denominational beliefs and practices (Wang 1997).

There has been a notable change in Pentecostalism since the mid-1990s because of the ‘Third Wave’ movement, which was led by John Wimber (AD 1934–1997) and Peter Wagner (AD 1930–2016), who had come to Hong Kong around that time. Many evangelical churches in Hong Kong were open to the movement because it emphasized power evangelism and power healing, and this ‘power’ ministry was believed to have a positive impact on evangelism and church growth, despite the movement lack of promotion of speaking in tongues.

At the turn of the millennium, some of the more outspoken local critics of Pentecostalism began to change their opposing position as they witnessed some remarkable growth in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, both in the West and in some Asian countries. As a result, a local non-Pentecostal scholar (Kung) categorized three groups of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in Hong Kong in the early 2000s; namely, traditional Pentecostal churches, Charismatic evangelical churches, and the ‘Third Wave’ evangelical churches. He confirmed that these groups of churches had significant positive impact on Hong Kong society (Kung 2003, 395). In 2010, a scholar (Kay) conducted a survey on 86 ministers in Hong Kong Pentecostal churches and compared their results with those from 125 ministers in Singaporean Pentecostal churches. He found that a higher percentage of Singaporean churches exercised the discernment and

application of spiritual gifts at a congregational level and also experienced higher congregational growth rates than those of churches in Hong Kong (Kay 2012, 138-139). These results may have been influenced by the historical and cultural factors mentioned earlier. Moreover, Natural Church Development (Christian A. Schwarz) shared some informal research conducted by a Hong Kong parachurch organization (Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement Limited., www.hkchurch.org): in recent decades, one common weakness for church development in Hong Kong has been a poor quality of spirituality, including a weak implementation of Pentecostal spirituality in Hong Kong Pentecostal churches. For instance, there were few programs specifically promoting spiritual growth in churches; thus, the Pentecostal church in Hong Kong was regarded as having poor spirituality. All of these studies provide some information about Hong Kong Pentecostalism, but they also point to an overall spiritual deficit present within the churches themselves. In this case, I believe one of the reasons for this to be spiritual warfare directed inside the church.

Spiritual Warfare

There is one significant issue on spiritual warfare that pertains to the Pentecostal perspective, and thus is related to this portfolio. This issue pertains to the power and threat that demons represent to Christians. Some may question demons' ability to completely overcome Christians. I would like to commend chapter two in *Three Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Arnold 1997, 73-142), where the writer discusses this issue from a biblical as well as

theological perspective. He states that any Christian who agrees with the sinful world and the 'flesh' gives a foothold for the devil to oppress their lives. For example, improper anger in Christians, including prolonged anger, will likely incur the work of the devil in our lives (Eph. 4:26–27) (Arnold 1997, Chinese edition 2004, 128–133).

Furthermore, some people may question how to distinguish mental illness or disorder from demonic attacks. The simplest answer involves pious prayer and spiritual discernment, as demons usually react vigorously toward Christian prayers, while mentally ill patients seldom display such a reaction (Bufford 1988, Chinese edition 2006, 162). Moreover, demonized people tend to show indifference toward anything about Jesus Christ, to have blasphemous thoughts and words, and to demonstrate supernatural strength (Lim and Koh 2007, 17–20). More importantly, the role of combating demons in the spiritual formation of the Christian life is certain in the Bible. With obedience toward God and strong faith in resisting demons, a Christian's spiritual growth is assured, as we can see from the example set by Job. His suffering at the devil's hand before God was immense, yet because of his strong faith and perseverance he won God's blessing and favour (Job 23:10; 42:7).

Fiery spiritual battles usually cause a deathly terror in people's minds, conjuring up images of gruesome demons and terror (Job 3:1–22). In contrast, the most difficult spiritual struggles often occur inside the hearts and minds of Christians, the struggle between the old nature of the sinful world and the new nature from Christ (Eph. 4:21–24; Col 3:5–11). Usually these two natures resound

with God's truth and Satan's lies, respectively (Massey 1977, 16–17). When Christians rely on Christ's power and authority, victory may be won not only against our terrors but also against our temptations. Our conscience is continuously tested by many temptations, which serve as the weapons of the devil to tear us down in our efforts to better emulate Christ throughout our lives. However, as Christians emerge victorious over these prolonged struggles against the demons of temptation, our life's spiritual deficiencies would likely be overcome (Brakke 2006, 26, 32, 37, 226). More importantly, Christ is formed in Christian lives when we experience this kind of spiritual warfare. This experience is close to my personal journey through different spiritual battles and is stated in the following chapter. Pentecostalism, and its heightened awareness of spiritual warfare, shapes the landscape of my life as a Hong Kong pastor who came to study spiritual formation at Tyndale.

Spiritual Formation in Light of the Influence of Confucianism

Although some commentators are interested in comparing traditional Confucianism and the recent movement of neo-Confucianism in the 1980s (Chan 2003, 131–164), I have described Confucianism with a static interpretation in this portfolio due to the neo-Confucianism's changes to some peripheral beliefs and practices to accommodate modernized societies. Some of these changes do not necessarily reflect the traditional schools of thought, as demonstrated by the new Confucianism proposed by Zongsan Mou, a famous scholar who came to Hong Kong from the mainland in the 1950s, who integrated some Buddhist paradigms

and Kantian moral terminology in forming his ‘new’ Confucianism (Chan 2003, 146). His proposal was rejected by many traditional Confucian scholars in Hong Kong because Mou’s Confucianism is a syncretic product, but some similar changes have been proposed in new waves of Confucianism. At one point, I myself was deeply steeped in Confucianism, but upon learning that it only promotes self-righteousness, I promptly abandoned its teachings.

In a nutshell, Confucianism demands an inner manifestation of a traditional mindset or philosophy with self-reliance and self-modification, compared with Christianity, which demands a manifestation of divine or spiritual life with God’s help and sovereignty. Confucianism emphasized that its believers needed to attain the full measure of a human or to become a person of ‘humanity’ (*ren*) from the Way of Heaven through learning and self-actualization. Confucius (551–479 BC) defined ‘humanity’ as the integrity of a guileless and open self, with the capacity for sympathetic understanding and empathetic response to others (Lee 2014, 62–63). This is the essence of Confucianism.

In this portfolio, I examine Christian spiritual growth in an individual context in my spiritual autobiography and in a collective context in the proposed model derived from 1 John 2:12–14. The duality of these contexts is essential for two reasons. First is the struggle to communicate the mechanics of individual spiritual growth within the collectivist nature inherent to Confucianism. Culturally, this collectivism manifests as a tendency to undermine individuality (Ho and Ho 2008, 73). The writing of a spiritual autobiography, however, lends itself to an investigation of an individual’s unique personal experience with God. This form

of introspection is countercultural in a Confucian context, in which individual experience is of secondary importance to collective concerns, and thus can bring Chinese Christian seminarians into new spiritual territory.

Confucianism is a highly diffuse cultural legacy with no formal international structure across the countries of its influence, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Singapore, Korea, and even Japan (Berthrong 1988, 340–341). Confucianism advocates the teaching of 'putting the Way into effect,' which means its believers need to put the Confucian way into practice so as to establish a moral society as well as to actualize the fulfillment of each individual's destiny. There is "a blind, impersonal power" in Confucianism that helps people free themselves from external concerns and to facilitate their self-cultivation (Huff 2016, 418).

Meanwhile, this kind of "blind, impersonal power" has been defined and redefined in different ways by various eminent scholars through ancient history until recent years (Lee 2014, 64-66). For thousands of years, controversy has existed concerning how such impersonal power could work effectively within its believers. Therefore, Confucianism is famous for its ambivalence toward the fact that it provides a formal ideal of humanity and society without a workable way or power to actualize the ideal (Berthrong 1988, 340). In other words, one of the major problems in Confucianism for thousands of years has been its attempt to use human effort to attain the Way of Heaven. In addition, Confucian believers tend to talk about the ideal instead of facing and embracing the real. This creates a real challenge in Christian spiritual formation as well as in theological education

because many Christians I have encountered have inherited this hidden cultural ambivalence in their mindsets. For example, a ‘Confucian ghost’ appeared when I encountered problems in my teaching and while doing my research project. Some students tended to present an ideal Christian image instead of talking and facing the real obstacles in their path of spiritual growth in class (Cho 2017, Section 12 on lesson 12, December 8, 2016). I needed to identify the hidden Confucian belief in students’ minds so that I could draw them back to a Christian worldview, which, in contrast to the Confucian worldview, sees the world with deep concern and care—essentially with the love of Christ—and with a profound awareness of its spiritual dimensions within a comprehensive, holistic perspective. At its core, the Christian faith testifies that only God’s Spirit can transform us into authentic, good, kind, and loving people (Gal. 5:6; Col. 3:9, 12).

Herein lies the second key point of this duality—a duality between a faceless power and law, and a loving and personal God. To combat this duality, a spiritual growth model derived from a biblical text is desperately needed, not only in Hong Kong but also in mainland China. Since the 1980s it has become clear that mainland Christians are deeply interested in biblical teachings because of their spiritual emptiness. Due to the Three Self movement in the mainland since the 1950s and the deportation of Western missionaries in the early 1950s, many mainland Chinese churches, both official and unofficial, were quite reluctant to follow denominational teachings. Thus, biblical study and biblical theology are the most widely acceptable foundations for a teaching ministry by a church, both in Hong Kong and in mainland China. Because of this, a Christian spiritual

growth model derived from the Bible fits my cultural and ministerial context precisely.

These concepts, that of Confucianism and Pentecostalism in Hong Kong, and the ideas of spiritual formation and warfare, have coloured my life since the beginning. It is through God's grace that I can reflect on my life, following God's guidance throughout my early life of Confucian beliefs, as well as reliving the spiritual battles that ensued during my years of spiritual formation. I praise God for the clarity that he has provided in recalling the related various episodes of my life.

**CHAPTER TWO: MY SPIRITUAL
AUTOBIOGRAPHY—SURPRISED BY THE
VOICE OF GOD**

Introduction to My Spiritual Autobiography

In most cases, I have described my life story according to a natural timeline. However, since some episodes are interrelated, I have chosen to combine some stories that are similar and others that are contradictory so the reader may have a better understanding of some of the issues I have faced and the trials that I have overcome. Moreover, I have offered some interpretations alongside my story so that people from different cultures may understand the meaning of my Chinese Hong Kong context.

The first several sections describe my life before conversion, when I was four to fifteen years old. The subsequent section describes my siblings and intersects my life both before and after my conversion. Then, several sections describe the days of my youth, when I was sixteen to twenty-one years old. These sections, the middle of this autobiography portray my growth in Christ, including my time in Bible college and the span between my twenty-second and twenty-sixth years. Those sections of my teenage years and young adulthood are story-based and record the turbulence of my youth. After that, a few sections describe

the early days of my full-time ministry, with a section detailing my learning in marriage and the time when I was twenty-seven to thirty-one years old. The last part of this autobiography records my last ten years until 2015, including three important revelations or insights from God that I wish to share.

My First Memory: Honest and Beloved

The integrity of the upright shall guide them.

—Prov. 11:3a AV

For some Chinese, details are not important. Different things are not necessarily distinguished from one another. People sometimes like to paint with the same brush when they describe different things related to the same issue. One merit they have is that they are competent to syncretize or generalize. I am familiar with this mentality because it was ingrained in me since my childhood. Because of this, the reader may find that some episodes in this autobiography are not clearly explained from a Western perspective. My writing here is in English, but with a Hong Kong Chinese mindset.

I came into the world on September 1, 1972, the common first day of school. My mother told me that bringing me into the world was the most painful delivery experience of her five pregnancies. I am the youngest among my five brothers and sisters. Once I asked my mother whether the sterilization operation or my childbirth caused her the most pain. She told me that, although she could not remember the details, it was an undisputable fact that my birth was the most painful experience during her childbearing years.

I was my mother's long-awaited second baby boy. To have a baby boy was important for her at that time. She had the traditional Chinese mindset about sons, that they would give her security when she was old. And one son was not enough, for she was not sure whether he would grow into adulthood or not. Thus, she had a sort of 'insurance' for herself by having two sons.

My name is Cho, Hung-Fai Daniel. Cho is the name of an ancient tribe in China's Shandong Province which is commonly believed to be the name of a royal family two thousand and seven hundred years ago. Cho in ancient Chinese characters means "the place where the sun rises in the east." Hung, which means great or large, is the middle name of my generation. Dozens of people in my father's hometown have the name Cho Hung. The oldest one was more than eighty years old in 2010. I am the youngest of my generation. Fai is my first name and means brightness or sparkling. It was given to me by my father. Fai is a common word in Hong Kong. So Hung-fai, my middle name and my first name, mean 'great brightness.' My Christian name, Daniel, was added onto my identity card when I was eighteen years old, and it means 'God is my judge.' I do want God's judgment to bring great brightness into my entire life.

My father came from northern China, and my mother came from southern China (Guangdong, where Hong Kong adjoins). Guangdong people are usually called Cantonese, which is an ancient language with its own unique pronunciation system that is entirely different from Mandarin (e.g., Matthews and Yip 1994). Cantonese is commonly recognized as dialectic, one of the major spoken Chinese

languages. In fact, Cantonese is an ancient Chinese language which has been around for at least eight hundred years (Leung 1990).

My father believed that ‘A man dies the way a lamp goes out.’ He thinks that man is a being without any spirit. Since my father could not speak Cantonese particularly well, and as we were raised in Hong Kong, where Cantonese was the prevalent language, my siblings and I were strongly affected by my mother. On the contrary, my mother believed that heaven creates a soul for a baby in its first year, and that the soul would then go into a mother’s womb for another year. So my mother believed that a baby is two years old at birth. Chinese people have different views about the human soul. Some Chinese people believe that the Heaven is the supreme God and has many other gods under him.

I have no memory about my first three years. My first recollection is from the first day of my schooling, September 1, 1976. After my first day in kindergarten, I remember that my mother asked me how I was doing in class. I kept silent and did not answer her. I hated her in my heart because she always lied—at least that was my impression as a toddler. Because of my distrust, I did not want to answer her. This was my first clear memory. Maybe I had been hurt by people who lied to me, or maybe I had felt cheated by my mother or others during my early years when I knew that they spoke lies. My father did not object to the telling of ‘white’ lies, and he sometimes even encouraged us to do so. Honesty is not a virtue that is highly regarded in my Hong Kong Chinese community, and it was not heavily valued in our family. I do not know why, but I hated lies all my life.

I remember an incident when I was six. My older brother was twelve at that time. He, together with my two older sisters, plotted to steal some money from my parents' drawer. He invited me to steal, but I refused. They did not steal a large sum of money, but only a small amount in order to avoid being discovered by my parents. Eventually, I told my mother about their evil act, but she did not punish them. At that time, money was not an attraction to me at all. My primary school did not have a refreshment kiosk or a vending machine. So I likely felt that money was useless then. But I found honesty to be very important all through my life.

This incident also coloured my understanding of conflict, specifically the fact that it didn't scare me in the least. Ever since I was young, I have dared to act alone and was not afraid of being boycotted by my older siblings or others. Why was I so brave? Perhaps it was because of the deep love of my mother since my birth. Once my mother shared her belief before the whole family that it is appropriate to protect and love the smallest child in the family, for he is the weakest. Accordingly, I sensed that she loved me unconditionally for the first several years of my life.

When I was about seven years old, I was burned by a hot metal joss stick that was used to burn joss papers. Burning joss papers is the custom when worshiping gods and ancestors in southern Chinese folk religion; they are used to appease or aid the dead depending on the context. The red-hot metal stick was held by my older sister and unfortunately touched the skin on the side of my left foot. My skin turned red, then black, and then white, without bleeding. I thought

the hot stick consumed some skin and muscle on my foot because I could see the flesh under my skin and a little hole on my foot. Immediately I felt great pain, but this was not the most impressive thing to me once I saw the terrified pallor on my older sister's face. She told me I should never tell my mother about the accident. She made me promise not to tell ... and I did. As I could guess from the terrified look on my sister's face, she was afraid of punishment from my mother because I was so loved by her.

Prolonged Illness and Taoist Divination

For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD
made the heavens.

—Psalm 96:5 NASB

When I was five years old, my family moved from a government-subsidized apartment to an old private Chinese building. Soon after the move, our regular meals were lard, cracklings, and cheap Chinese rice with soy sauce. My mother said that these foods were delicious and good for us, but sometimes I found sand and small stones in the rice. This lasted for about a year. Many years later, I understood that my parents needed to pay a private loan for buying the apartment and to buy another flat in Shenzhen, which is why we ate in such a way. This diet with lard caused malnutrition and damaged my health, according to a Chinese medical student that examined me far later, in 2012. Shenzhen is in mainland China and is the city nearest to Hong Kong.

When I was around six, I developed a serious cough that lasted for approximately three months. I have no idea whether it was pertussis or not. I

remember clearly one day in June 1978, when I was at school with a serious paroxysmal cough. Tears flowed from my eyes due to the severity of the cough. The classmate sitting next to me raised his hand and said, “Teacher, Cho Hung-fai is weeping.”

At that time, I was so ill that I could only wave my hand to the teacher signifying that I was okay and appealing for some time to calm myself down. How should I handle the queries and concerns from my classmate and the teacher? I just wanted them to leave me alone so I could catch my breath. Because of my struggles at a young age, I count the ability to breathe smoothly as a grace from God. My illness pulled me into silence, for I easily coughed when I talked a lot.

After June, there was a long summer holiday. I remember that my mother took me to see a dozen doctors on Nathan Road in Kowloon, from Tsim Sha Tsui to Prince Edward. Hong Kong has three main districts: Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories. My family and I lived in the New Territories, and it took an hour to commute from my home to Kowloon. At that time, one of urban areas was the western part of Kowloon, and that was from Tsim Sha Tsui to Prince Edward. Its length is only about nine kilometers. Since it was an urban area, many medical clinics were there.

After the turmoil of traveling, medications, and injections, my sickness was not cured. My mother thought that the last resort was to consult a Taoist medium. At that time, some Hong Kong Chinese believed that ‘Heaven’ stood in the highest domain of power. As it was the highest god or the highest divine power, the heaven sometimes intervened in human affairs. They felt, however,

that this was extremely rare. Below the heaven there are many gods in Taoism. It was believed that those pious enough could ascend to godhood after their death. On the contrary, sinful people would become ghosts after they passed away. Because this was the prevailing cultural belief, my mother sought these supernatural forces to cure my sickness.

One day during that hot summer, I felt very ill because of my infirmity. My mother and I went up some stairs to see a Taoist medium in an old Chinese building. When I went into the building, it was so dim that it felt like night during the middle of the day in summer. Small light bulbs on the ceiling of the stairwell gave just enough light for us to walk up the stairs. I remember that the medium was called Left-handed Kulapati, a secular Taoist devotee who could ask for help from the gods. He probably had family members who lived with him. I was in front of the middle-aged diviner and was terrified when I saw his hands: his right hand had three fingers, and his left had four. He wrote with his left hand, and that was how he got his name. In the middle of a little table was a small tortoise shell for divination. Inside the shell were some coins. I felt a bit frightened when I saw the medium's face, but I did not know why. However, I felt reassured that my mother stayed with me.

My mother asked him how my illness could be healed. After some handling of a tortoise shell that was on hand, he told my mother that she had two choices: either I make a contract with a customary god or with a human medium. With the help of a god or a medium, the sickness in my body could be healed. In a religion with many gods, I'm sure someone has many options. Looking back, I

suppose the reason why the medium offered my mother those two choices is that he lacked the confidence that he could cure my disease as a result of his divination.

My mother replied that it was better to make a contract with a god rather than a man, according to my mother's belief that one would be far more powerful than a man. Then the medium suggested that my mother offer a contract between a god named Wong Tai Sin and me so that my illness could be healed by accepting his ownership over me. He said we should do this as soon as possible. Wong Tai Sin, 'Tai Sin' meaning big god; and 'Wong,' his human surname, is a famous Taoist god in southern China who was originally said to be a man, according to a legend. Because of his piety, however, he performed a miracle while he was alive, then became a god after his ascension. Originally, Wong Tai Sin Temple was in Guangdong, the northern part of Hong Kong. In the 1920s, Wong Tai Sin planted another branch temple in Kowloon.

Very soon afterwards, my mother took me to this temple and placed me in front of another medium. I was very weak at that time, and cannot recall the visit. One thing I know for sure: I was not cured after forming this contract and engaging in ritual and worship. I retained the cough and was sometimes severely ill in the days to come. I was cured by a medicine called Flumucil several months later, from what I can remember. However, my health problems did not end there.

When I was seven years old, shortly after the previous incident, I was hospitalized. At that time, I was vomiting and had serious diarrhea so that I could not eat. I was too weak to even walk down the stairs of our apartment building

onto the street. My family lived on the seventh floor in an old building without a lift or elevator. My father, concerned that I had developed cholera, carried me down to the street and hired a taxi to rush me to the Princess Margaret Hospital, one of the biggest hospitals in Hong Kong at that time.

I spent two days there, eating ground beef congee in the morning and having milk in the evening before bed, with good rice, meat, and vegetables at lunch. I had never had such good meals in my childhood. In the afternoons, nurses would distribute candies to the patients who were children, except for those with special illness. We were all excited to hear them visit. After two days of hospitalization, I was discharged. I remember that some of my bedmates marveled that I could leave so soon, as few patients checked in and out within days. I do not know what caused my sickness then. Nevertheless, many years later, I think I was hospitalized mainly due to malnutrition, as my spleen and digestive system were apparently seriously harmed by lard, which resulted in my sickness.

At that time, mainland China adopted a new economic policy of ‘Reform and Opening-up’ early in 1980. When I was eight, one year after my hospitalization, my parents bought a second apartment in Shenzhen as an investment property. I had guessed that they had managed to save up the money to purchase that apartment in part by feeding us so poorly.

My mother accompanied me during my hospital discharge. I remember seeing the old Hong Kong Kai Tak Airport runway when I walked down the hillside from the hospital to a bus stop nearby. The sun was bright and warm, and the air was fresh. In this way, I began the next stage of my life.

My Parents Disappointed Me

Children will blame an ungodly father, for they suffer disgrace because of him.

—Sirach 41:7 NRSV

After my hospitalization, I experienced some peaceful and calm days. However, my nights were plagued with a recurring nightmare: I was being chased or pursued by something or someone. In my dream, all I could do was running or hiding because of the stress and terror of being caught. I remember that the colour of these dreams was only black and white, with very similar scenarios and feelings. Many people interpret these types of dreams as someone being under different kinds of fear or pressure. If you had asked me what stress I experienced at that time, I would tell you it was all because of constantly trying to attain high academic achievement.

I was born on the first of September, so the general rule of the Hong Kong Education Department would have placed me in a class where I was the oldest; it was expected that pupil reach the age of six before commencing Primary 1. I, however, was the exception to the rule: I was the youngest in my class. I found it difficult to keep pace with those in my grade. In addition, because of my sickness in Grades 1 and 2, which set me back, I struggled to find motivation to study, and thus my academic scores often fell short of my parents' expectations.

During the second term of Primary 5, after my father had read my academic report, he took the initiative to ask my schoolteacher to enroll me in the English remedial class. He said to me, "You got a C in your English Language. This is unacceptable. I need to see your class teacher to talk about this." Knowing

that I had no choice, I offered no response. Actually, from A to E were all passing grades, but only an F was a fail in my primary school grading. My father made arrangements to take a special leave from his work before lunchtime. Before we spoke to my class teacher, he said to me, “You are troublesome. Your older brother and sisters never needed me to tackle their academic stuff, but you are the only one who troubles me.” “It is really you who are troublesome, not me,” I retorted inwardly, “The school did not ask to see you. You who called the teacher and requested to meet with both of us.” I dared not say this to him at that time. In fact, my English has not been good enough up to this very day. My father was at least right about that.

After the interview, I was enrolled to attend the remedial English class, which started earlier than the formal schooling time. However, I was only allowed to join for one season, which totalled about three months. In the remedial class, I was puzzled by my peers; there were so many pupils whose English was far worse than mine. I was also skeptical about the reason for my admission into the class, thinking it was mainly due to my father’s request, instead of my poor English.

Once during that season of remedial class, my parents told me, “If you do not work hard and get a good English mark, we will abandon you. You are such a useless person.” I was shocked to hear their words. In my heart, I heard my response, “Okay, then, if I am a useless person, I will kill myself.” It was the first time I ever had a suicidal thought, and I considered it seriously. Even so, I trembled at the thought; I had seen a few people commit suicide around my apartment, and the memories sent chills down my spine. People jumped from the

roofs of the old building where we lived. Their bodies smashed into pieces stained with blood. It was terrifying. I started to question my life's purpose. I could not believe my parents seemed to value my academic results more than my life. I was heartbroken. I felt their rejection strongly; I saw that, in their eyes, without good academic results, I was nothing.

This realization marked the start of an erosion in my trust. I no longer entrust myself into my parents' hands as I had before. After much thinking and reflection, I believed they were wrong; my life had to be worth far more than any academic achievement. Turning my sadness into anger, I cursed my father in my heart. I thought if anyone should be killed in my family, it should not be me, but my father.

I remember many times at night, when my father came home from work, he passed through the place where I slept. When I lay down in my bed but hadn't yet fallen asleep, I could see him coming. I closed my eyes and cursed him in my heart. I was overwhelmed by my hatred. Years later, I came to see my cursing as a plea for justice rather than simple malice. Coincidentally, during that time, my father developed a serious nasal allergy and always had a runny nose, both summer and winter. This may not have been a direct result of my cursing, but it felt like some form of justice, in a way. My father explained that his allergy, even up to the time of my writing, was caused by over a month's exposure to cloudy, rain-filled days and the constantly polluted environment in the factory where he worked that affected his nose and respiratory system.

Years later, after reflection, I strongly felt that my parents wanted me to improve my competence in English. They really pushed me for my own good. I talked with them about the issue a decade later. My mother told me that she really wanted to learn English when she was young, but that she did not have the chance to do so. My father, on the other hand, told me that he did not want to learn English; he thought it was good enough for him to know Chinese.

When I was thirty-five years old, I felt an urgent prompt from God to forgive my father. This act of forgiveness released me from years of bitterness, but unfortunately my father did not admit to remembering details or fault in any of the facts that I recollected and told him. Furthermore, he suspected that I had false memories against him. In our Hong Kong Chinese culture, it is difficult for older generations to admit their faults to their children. This concept is so engrained in our culture there exists a proverb, “There is no wrong parent under heaven.” This saying is categorically wrong.

Coincidentally, my father’s nasal allergy was cured around that time. But my father explained that his recovery was due to living in his new home—the driest place in Hong Kong. However, two years later, in 2010, his nasal allergy returned. Two Chinese medical practitioners explained that his allergy returned because he wrongly took a Chinese herbal medicine for more than two years without consultation. Did my curse affect my father’s health? I do not know, but I think it is a curious coincidence at the very least.

When I was young, my father evaluated his children mainly on the basis of their academic achievements. Since my marks were often unsatisfactory, I felt ill-

treated by my father. Once, when I was in junior secondary, I asked my father to give me some money, maybe around forty U.S. dollars, to pay for a school camping trip. He said to me, “I need to save my money for my retirement, so I will not give you this amount of money.” Later, when I grew up and pursued my career, my father asked me to give him money after his retirement. I gave him some money before I went to Bible college.

After my conversion, I found it easy to relate to Lazarus, who sat before a rich man’s house. In my perception, my father was that ‘rich man’ (Luke 16:20). I was ill and ate the scraps that were thrown away from my father’s table. To make things even worse, my parents constantly reassured me and my siblings that they cared for us and did good for us. I believed their words until after my late thirties.

However, I found comfort in the promise of God: “For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me up” (Ps. 27:10 NASB). My parents nurtured my love toward my heavenly Father by their treatment. Thanks be to God.

Life Is Meaningless and Other Seductions

I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.

—Eccles. 1:14 NASB

My maternal grandfather died when I was eight. I had not met any of my grandparents besides him because they had all died, either before my birth or in mainland China during the Cultural Revolution, which rendered travel to China impossible for Hong Kong citizens at the time. I felt no sorrow over his death; I

hardly knew him, only seldom speaking with while he was alive. Because of my weak respiratory system, and his constant smoking, I think that I had only seen him about a dozen times in my lifetime. Beyond the memory that I have, that of not being able to connect to his passing, I also remember that I had no strong feelings about death in general, either. As it was, I hardly had strong feelings of life; I felt helpless about it because it was so unpredictable.

Suffering and unhappiness in my late childhood drove me to think about my life, the world, and the universe. This might sound precocious, but I thought my reflection natural, that pain and suffering cause people to reflect deeply. When I was eleven, I asked my older brother about the origin of the universe. He was in his matriculation at that time and replied, “All things happen coincidentally, including our universe. We live on earth because of probability and The Big Bang, which happened a long time ago. We are going toward destruction—the whole world, the whole universe. Our lives are ruled by chance.”

His words affected me deeply; I wondered why, if we’re all headed toward some impending doom, should I study hard. It would follow that it would be ridiculous to pursue anything; good over evil, life over death. In my heart, I rejected his view, but I had no better answer about the origin of the universe or the purpose of life to sustain my intuition.

At that time, I was studying at a Catholic primary school. When I was eleven, I sometimes went to the chapel during recess time. In addition, I prayed the Lord’s Prayer with my older sister some nights before bedtime. I preferred to believe in a god, and to hope that he would hear me.

As my studies progressed, I was inundated with Biblical content, from stories to songs and prayers. I took Bible lessons, learning stories from many of the comics in my textbooks drawn to illustrate the Catholic faith. I thought the world of the Bible sounded like fantasy, and I let my imagination dictate the imagery as I imagined angels as gazing upon the world, tall as the old Chinese buildings I had been to—four stories or more. I also liked to sing the Catholic songs we were taught. When I was in Primary 6, some nuns took turns leading us in singing Catholic hymns and choruses. Even now I can still remember these songs, including a Chinese Cantonese version of the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. To this day, I love Christian music.

I came face to face with various moral challenges at the end of Primary 6. One of my male classmates, whom I would call “W.,” was an instigator for many of these events. A class prefect during that school year, my parents judged him as a good role model, as I. We spent a fair amount of time together because of this, and the fact that our apartments were close to each other, so we became relatively close. Once, when I had nothing to do after our current year’s final examination, I joined him for entertainment. He invited me out with two other classmates, and we went into a grocery store. Even if we couldn’t buy anything, the store could be fun. When we came across the junk food section, he asked us to find our favourite snacks. As I picked out a package of potato chips, he cried out loudly, “Run, now!”

Surprised, I asked, “What about my potato chips?”

“Keep them and run with me. Now!”

Holding the bag of potato chips, I ran with him to a park nearby as the others followed. Once we arrived, the question burned on my mind. “What now?”

“We will eat what we chose, of course,” W. stated, emphatically, “each of us has his favorite now. Is it good? Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

“But haven’t I stolen this?” I asked him naïvely.

“Yes, of course. But so what? We haven’t been caught. If we see someone, we can just throw all our plunder onto the ground and run away in different directions. Understand?”

“Wow, this does not feel good.” While I was fearfully enjoying my package of potato chips, my conscience rang loudly in my heart.

Several days later, W. asked me to meet him at an amusement game center nearby. He gave me some coins to play games. He explained to me, “My father is a sailor. He has given me lots of coins from different countries. You can use them to play the games, but be careful not to let the staff know that you are using foreign coins. That’s illegal.”

Once again, I felt the pang of my conscience. I felt like a thief but still decided to play some games. I wasn’t good at them, however, and we left shortly after I finished a few rounds. Afterwards, I was invited to visit his apartment nearby. When I arrived at his home, I found that W. was the only child in his family. After chatting with him, I could not remember what we were talking about except for one thing. After W.’s mother gave me a cup of tea, she left us alone. W. asked me, “Did you see my mother’s nipples?” For she wore only thin white pajamas at home. I was astounded at his question and did not know how to reply.

At that time, I would never have thought of looking at a woman lustfully. After that, I went home to have my dinner.

Soon I received a card from W. in which he wrote, “I am a bad person. Leave me alone, and don’t contact me anymore. Your classmate, W.” Following his instructions, I did not contact him after that. Maybe I needed to obey him, just as in all of the previous incidents. I wondered if maybe bad guys do not like good guys to be their companions. I told myself that I did not enjoy doing bad things and that I was not a bad guy, which made me feel better about the whole situation.

In addition, I once watched an anime television show called *Dr. Slump*, which was produced by the Japanese. I remember in one episode a scene when the character insulted a Chinese person. I could not remember the details of the story, but I felt insulted too. I found that I had a strong Chinese identity. My father was a Chinese patriot when I was young. I remember my father’s Second World War survival story of how he witnessed the war between the Japanese and the Chinese. However, in the mid-1980s, when the British government decided to hand Hong Kong over to Communist China, my father turned to fight for democracy in Hong Kong. He changed his beliefs to localism rather than patriotism. He had been a volunteer in a pro-democratic electioneering group several times, and so had I.

Later, I found significant cultural differences between the mainland Chinese and the Hong Kong Chinese. All of these experiences increased my pride in ancient Chinese culture, especially the Hong Kong Chinese culture.

My Siblings, and Dear Eldest Sister

But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

—Prov. 18:24b NASB

Typically, juniors are to be subordinate to their seniors in Chinese families. They quickly learn to sacrifice their own personal will, even distorting their original intention, to match the needs of the whole. Usually, those with greater power or seniority determined what the corporate needs really were. Drawing lots to make a corporate decision was quite uncommon. Even though I was the youngest member of my family, I seldom felt that I was subordinate. In those days, we were peers. I remember one incident that happened when we were playing a game. When I was seven, my siblings played a game which could be played either in groups or alone. My brother and sisters asked me, “Do you want to play in groups or as individuals?”

I answered, “As individuals.” At that time, I had no idea how to function in a group. I did not even know how to write the Chinese word ‘group’. I knew the characters for individual, because of its simplicity, far simpler than the word group in Chinese.

My brother suggested, “Okay, then, let’s write down our preference, group or individual, on small pieces of paper. We will have a draw to choose. If we draw Hung-fai’s suggestion, we will follow by playing as individuals. However, the chance of drawing ‘individual’ is just one in four. If we draw any of the ‘group’ preferences, we are going to play in groups. Is that okay?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied; it was fair, after all. After we had all written down our preferences, my older brother drew one slip of paper from the bag. By chance, my slip was drawn.

“Oh, amazing!” I exclaimed in my heart. Instead of addressing my naïveté wondering how my lot was chosen, I simply attributed to my own will to win. I was struck with wonder as I saw that I could influence my siblings, even in ignorance. Despite being an ill-informed sentiment, this stayed in my heart for a long time. This sense that I acted as an individual provided me with a sense of importance, and remains with me to this day. I was also struck with the realization that my unintentional acts could harm others as well as myself. After that, I reminded myself never to say or do anything against my will. I needed to voice my needs, my fears, and my preferences whenever necessary.

I came to Christ in 1987; my older sister in 1989; my youngest sister in 1991; and my older brother in 1995. From 1989 to 2003, we held monthly family cell gatherings that included firstly my older sisters, and then my older brother. We shared and prayed together, especially for the salvation of our parents. However, it was not easy to keep meeting once the babies started coming, in addition to managing the heavy workload in our jobs. I enjoyed the times when we honestly shared our burdens and delights with a devoted heart to the Lord.

From 1987 to 1994, I read the whole Bible every year. Whenever I came upon the story of Joseph (Gen. 45:1-15), I was called by God to remember my eldest sister, Yi-San Cho, who passed away at six months due to a serious fever. I wept several times whenever I read the passage in which Joseph was reunited

with his older brothers in Egypt. At first, I did not know why I wept reading these passages. Finally, and after much time and many prayers, I felt God speak to me in 1994: “You have a sister in heaven. Your spirit longs to see her, and you will meet her in heaven in the end, but your mind cannot understand it now.”

I did not understand the depth to which my spirit missed my oldest sister, whom I had never seen. I understand now that my spirit is waiting to embrace my oldest sister in heaven, just as Joseph missed his older brothers and wanted to see them. Once I told my mother about this and said that I am going to see my oldest sister in heaven, according to the Bible. Then I asked my mother to share some details concerning this sister. My mother was glad to tell me the story of her brief time on earth. For a long time, my mother missed her and kept her maternal longing secret. I encouraged her to believe in Jesus Christ so that she would meet her oldest daughter in heaven again. Eventually, she prayed the sinner’s prayer in 2008.

Once, my father told me that in his hometown many people died when they were babies or children. Because of this, it was a natural thing for him to have a baby die at home. My father was an atheist, and found it natural to forget the dead, but I know my mother thought about death differently. She loved her oldest daughter very much as she was her firstborn, and also felt deep guilt and powerlessness because of her death.

God forged a bond of love between my oldest sister and me. God makes me miss her deep in my heart. Her life is linked with mine since we have the same heavenly Father and the same earthly parents. However, I know that she now lives

happily in heaven. In recent years, I remember her every December in my heart. Upon my realization, I wanted to memorialize her with some ritual or ceremony, as many Chinese tend to do. It is important in my culture to show respect to deceased family members with some rituals on their birthday or day of death. I sensed, however, that the Lord would not allow me to do it. He said to me, “She is now happy in heaven. What would a ritual or ceremony mean to her?” So I remember her in silence and wait to see her face to face. God created a bond of spiritual love between me and my oldest sister. I feel this kind of love is even closer than brotherly love (Prov. 18:24), a divine love, not of earth.

The Belief My Brother Abandoned

So death works in us, but life in you.

—2 Corinthians 4:12 NASB

My first year in secondary school, which was taught mainly in English, was difficult because my primary school was a Chinese one. I was ranked only 98 out of 160 students in Form One, or Grade 7. Fortunately, the school had a ‘Big Brother’ tutelage scheme that offered help to students who struggled academically. I joined this program in Grade 8 and studied with one of the big brothers, whom I would call ‘H.’ H, a Protestant Christian in our Catholic secondary school, helped me a lot, not only with my academic studies but also with my independent religious growth. Initially, he constantly invited me to join the school’s Christian fellowship, begging me throughout my full Grade 8 term. Finally, he chipped away at my defenses, and I thought it was impolite to refuse him after all his hard work. I joined the Christian fellowship in May 1986.

The Protestant Christian fellowship in a Catholic secondary school was amazing. Established in the 1970s, the fellowship stood according to our school's principal's wishes. A Catholic monk, he encouraged a liberal approach toward religious studies and matters under his leadership. I came to respect and appreciate the tolerance that sprung from his generous heart.

Coincidentally, that same summer between Grades 8 and 9, my older brother gave me a Chinese Bible and a Today's Chinese Version of the New Testament. He had been invited by some friends to a gospel camp and a series of evangelistic meetings, but his heart was closed to Jesus at that time. He felt that, as the Bibles were useless to him, at least he could give them to me. These Bibles became a point of fascination for me during those summer months. I became engrossed in various Chinese legends and fairy tales, and the Bibles seemed like a grand addition to my growing collection of epics.

When I read Matthew's Gospel in the Today's Chinese Version of the New Testament, I was deeply attracted by Jesus. I had read Matthew about eight to ten times, but no other books in the New Testament. I did not understand many of Jesus' sayings, but I sensed that He was calling me. Matthew stood out amongst the other stories I had read as something different entirely; definitely not a fiction or leisure read. Jesus was a distinct person, and his words had life far greater than the lifelikeness of a character in an animation or comic. I was deeply attracted by what he had done too. I even felt God speaks to me through the Bible and call me to follow him.

In the fall of 1986, I began to seriously consider the differences between Catholics and Protestants. I read a Catholic book written by a Hong Kong priest, and he stated that Catholicism believes in a Universalist belief, and that human beings will be saved not only by Jesus Christ, but also by human good works or by other good religions. With this distinction in mind, I began to believe that Protestant beliefs were closer to Biblical doctrine, stating that only through Jesus are we saved (Acts 4:12), for example.

Meanwhile, I was invited to a teenage fellowship at an independent local Chinese evangelical church. This fellowship was in decline during that time. When I began to join their meetings, they had five counselors and fewer than ten teenagers. About three months later, three counselors left the fellowship. The remaining two counselors divided us into two groups and encouraged us to read the Bible in its entirety within a year. This was my kind of challenge, one I accepted enthusiastically. Among the people gathered there, I think I benefited the most from that Bible reading campaign; many of my peers preferred other activities to reading and found the whole exercise stale or unrewarding. I read the whole Bible as my catechism that year.

During that time, it was not easy for me to save money to buy reference books, which my instructors had recommended so as to gain better contextual and theological understanding of the Bible. In order to save money for traveling to and from the church and to pay some other expenses, I seldom bought snacks during recess time, a normal activity practiced by my peers, even when I was hungry. In addition, I bought my lunch in an industrial area to save money. My thoughts

remained fixed on my goal, the purchase, and I focused on the image of Lazarus sitting before the door of the rich man. In this case, however, that rich man was my father.

When my father found that I took my tithe offering out of my pocket money, he was furious. To him, pocket money was only meant to cover my travel to school and my lunches. He ordered me not to give a single cent to the church. It extremely difficult to admit it, but I had to cede authority to my father; he had the right to decide how his children could use their pocket money. There is a saying in Chinese, “When a man is poor, his aspiration is not far-reaching.” Nonetheless, I decided to live for God all the rest of my life, and in him my aspiration was far-reaching indeed.

H., my senior from the Big Brother Scheme, coached me to read the Bible during the entire time I was in Grade 9. Before school, he usually led an opening prayer with me in a park beside the school and then left me alone for about ten to fifteen minutes for private devotions. At the end, he would let me share what I was thinking.

At a very early stage in my faith, he asked me, “How many Magi were searching for baby Jesus in Matthew, chapter two?”

“Three. Am I right?” I asked.

“Really? What is the number of Magi described in your Bible?”

“Ah. A few or several Magi. I am so sorry for this mistake,” I said, embarrassed.

“Beware of the dangers of inserting your own thoughts or words into the Bible. It’s no good,” he warned me. His lesson taught me to be cautious in reading the Bible, fostering the desire to know its real message with a humble heart. Moreover, I learned to develop a deferential attitude toward God. (In 2012, I met H. again at Hong Kong Lutheran Theological Seminary. H. was a professor at the seminary and taught the New Testament. I was so glad to meet him and become his student again, but I did not have the same feeling of being a novice as before.)

When I was a novice, my peers rarely focused their faith on the Bible, instead opting to focus on the various aspects of Christian fellowship. On the contrary, I was attracted to Jesus through the Bible, not by activities, programs, or friendships within the Christian fellowship. I regularly attended different church meetings and gatherings from 1986 to 1987. Many Christians asked me whether I had made the decision to believe in Jesus Christ. After dozens of questions, I claimed to be a Christian, for I believed that Jesus Christ was a historical figure as well as a real person who was really faithful and reliable. However, my belief in Jesus at the time was little more than recognition of His existence.

When people asked me why I believed in Jesus Christ, I would answer that I wanted to be reunited with my heavenly Father. The heavenly Father loves me more than my earthly father does, without a doubt. My earthly situation reminded me of the prodigal son living amongst the pigs, and I yearned to return to my Father’s home and into His bosom.

Meanwhile, I experienced the Holy Spirit working on my conscience. For example, I went to school by bus in 1987. Sometimes I would drop less than the

fare by ten to forty cents in the cash box when I boarded the bus. Frankly, I wanted to save some money by cheating the bus drivers. Most of the time, the bus drivers did not notice my small trick. Nevertheless, I felt God was working on my conscience and told me that I was wrong to do this. Very soon I stopped cheating in that small way. Later, God called me in an even more obvious way.

God Spoke to Me, and I Was Moved

[Jesus said,] Truly, truly, I say to you ... and those who hear will live.

—John 5:25 NASB

In mid-August 1987, I went to a camp that was held by the church and spent several days on an outlying island of Hong Kong. After some meetings about prayer and silence, one afternoon we practiced solitude and tried to hear the voice of God. I went to the top of the three-story Catholic retreat building. I prayed to God about my concerns and simply asked him to speak to me. Then I was silent and waited for His voice.

After a while, I sensed God speaking to me in my mind. When I became still, and attentive to him, He spoke to me in the form of an inner voice. I could feel and sense His voice. This became His pattern in my life afterwards. He told me, “You are my beloved one, and I know everything about you.” But I could not remember any other details. God truly spoke to me. That was momentous, and I was shaken by it. I felt that God was so near to me. I was convinced that He is real. I felt that my previous Bible readings and obedient actions might have made a path for God’s voice in my heart. His Word cleansed my heart and prepared me

to hear His voice. The hosts of the summer camp marveled at how God worked among us too. Some of them wept and knelt down in prayer at the end of camp.

However, many of my fellow campers did not experience God's voice. When some of them told me dirty adult jokes during free time at camp, I was embarrassed. I hated those evil things.

On September 9, I attended a Sunday service as usual at the church. The speaker made an altar call to the audience, calling full-time ministers. I wasn't thinking of that calling, but I heard him addressing those who wanted to dedicate themselves wholly to the Lord. I thought I needed to dedicate myself to God for the rest of my life. So I stood up and prayed his prayer, phrase by phrase and clause by clause. I eventually responded rightly to God, I thought. But at that time, I had no idea about entering full-time ministry. Nevertheless, after the dedication, no one, including pastors or the counselors from my teenage fellowship, approached me. I had no idea what I should do next.

In the church, Christians seldom listened to God's voice. After the camp and altar call, no one taught me to practice the habit of listening to God. However, after my conviction, one incident impressed me. Once I was in conflict with my older brother. While foul language was almost rushing out of my mouth, I sensed the Holy Spirit calling me to be quiet and speak no offensive words. I strongly felt that God forbade me to speak any bad words. Before that, I sometimes swore if I was irritated. It was because I was influenced by my secondary schoolmates; they often spoke foul language. After the incident, I learned to obey the Holy Spirit's promptings.

Though church members did not encourage me, I attended nearly every meeting at the church for several months, except those for children, women, and the elderly. I was zealous to learn and experience God's transforming truth. During that period of time, I took some good Sunday school courses. They deepened my understanding of the Bible, but that remained mainly at an intellectual level.

After a while, I was disappointed with my spiritual growth in the church. I felt overall that spiritual life in the church was lukewarm. I even felt some emptiness in the spiritual lives of others as well as in my own. Sometimes I felt their meetings shared ignorance, and even unbelief, among those who gathered. Most of them did not think the Bible was applicable to their daily lives. One of their hot topics was how to relate their religion to their daily lives. Obviously, their daily living was in danger of departing from the Christian faith.

Meanwhile, I was serious about following the teachings of Jesus. On July 31, 1988, when I was walking along on a small beach in Hong Kong alone at night, I told God how disappointed I was that I could not obey His words. It was too difficult for me to obey His teachings. I wondered how I could continue to be a devoted Christian. After a long time of prayer and silence, God said to me softly, "Hung-fai, what I want from you is an obedient heart. You don't need to follow My words literally."

"But I am not even sure that I will always obey You, Lord," I answered.

“Yes, you are right. You are not certain about having an obedient heart toward Me. But you could ask Me to help you obey.” I heard God’s reply softly in my heart.

“Oh, really, God? Then I ask for Your help to obey You all the rest of my life. Will You help me?” I asked.

“Look at the sky. What do you see?”

“I see some stars and a bright full moon.”

God said, “As long as you see the moon, remember that you have asked Me to help you be obedient. And I will not fail.” My heart was deeply moved after I shared my weakness with God. He did not abandon me but promised to help me walk in the way of obedience. That night, I vowed to obey God. I asked God to help me to obey him, no matter what I would encounter thereafter. I knew I trusted in him fully.

In 1988, Pastor K. of the church invited me and two other novices to join the evangelistic ministry several times. In that lukewarm church, the pastor only chose novices to be evangelizing partners. Once, when I shared ‘The Four Spiritual Laws’ with a teenager, he committed himself to the Lord. I could hardly believe this, for I did not fully understand the deep meaning of the ‘laws,’ but God is greater than I. In addition, I preached to some of my classmates, and some of them came to Christ. Lastly, I joined the voluntary service in our school’s Christian fellowship. Two decades later, a junior schoolmate told me that he was impressed when I interpreted the gospel and the law from Paul’s letter to the Romans in the early 1990s.

Another big change after my dedication to God was that I studied harder. I was ranked 48 out of 160 students in Grade 9 in 1987, and then I was third out of 80 in Grade 10. Because of this I received a certificate of outstanding achievement in my school examinations in 1988. Then I also received a service award, an alumni award, a certificate of outstanding achievement in school examination, and the Blessed Marcellin Champagnat Bicentenary Scholarship in 1989. There were a dozen students receiving the scholarship that year, and I was glad to be one of them. In 1990, I received a service award due to my service in the school library.

I loved reading the Bible very much. In 1989, I took the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). HKCEE was a citywide examination at that time. The only subject I took for self-study was the Bible, and the scope of the Bible examination was only half of the New Testament. It was easy for me. I got an A in that subject, while I received four Cs, four Ds and one E in the other nine subjects. All my marks in school for subjects other than the Bible were poorer than I had expected. I pondered what God meant by giving me an A in Bible.

In the meantime, I was gradually assimilated into the lukewarm spirituality at the church. Most of the Christians in the church believed that God is good but should seldom interrupt our lives. Most of them believed that if they needed to pass their public examinations, they had better take a study leave from church life. This is why I stopped going to church during HKCEE. I think this might be the reason for my poor results in that citywide examination.

On the contrary, I put God first in an exam I wrote two years later, the Advanced Level Examination (A-level exam). The top thirty percent in the HKCEE could further their matriculation course and prepare for the A-level exam. Those who got good results in the A-level exam could have a place in a university. In 1991, I had my devotional time before I studied, and I kept going to church. I even prayed, asking God which books I should read to prepare for my exam. And God often answered me. My results were good, and all of the universities offered me a place to study. I eventually chose the Hong Kong Polytechnic (renamed the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 1996).

Soon after my conversion, I sensed that God had set a moral and spiritual standard for me, but the standard rose higher and higher as I grew older. When I saw my peers playing different games, singing karaoke, watching movies, rolling bowling balls, etc., I could not even enjoy watching. Meanwhile, I sensed that I could sing only Christian songs or popular songs by God's prompting during the 1990s. I chose the Christian ones, of course. I felt that God strongly encouraged me to grow into holiness and gave me a stricter and more sensitive conscience than other people, so I drifted apart from my peers at church.

One of the greatest benefits to my spiritual growth has come from spiritual reading. I read the whole Bible more than seven times within my first seven years of believing. In addition, in 1989, I spent half of my salary from my first summer job to purchase Christian books. I read five books that summer, and I learned something about the non-Charismatic side from the evangelical heritage. The books that impressed me the most were the Chinese versions of *Understanding*

the Bible (Stott 1982), *Basic Christianity* (Stott 1971), and *Know What and Why You Believe* (Little and Little 1980). I felt they were somewhat informative and helpful, although they were dry in spirit.

In 1991, a book that benefited me greatly was *How Should We Then Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Schaeffer 1983, Chinese version). This book equipped me well to resist the overwhelming flood of the humanistic trend of thoughts and the secularism at Polytechnic while keeping my Christian faith in God from 1991 to 1994. Following the same line, the course that held the most interest for me at Polytechnic was *The Art of Reasoning*, which included the history of the philosophy of natural science and social science. Most of my classmates could not understand the relationship between those philosophical controversies and the Christian faith, but I enjoyed learning reasoning and logic. I witnessed the hearts of many of my Christian classmates becoming cool to the Lord while I walked a lonelier spiritual path.

A Wrong Decision in Dating

With him is strength and wisdom; the deceived and the deceiver are his.

—Job 12:16 AV

In the fall of 1988, I started to talk with Sister C., a lovely sister in the youth fellowship at the church. She was clever, thoughtful, and considerate. She understood my struggles in church as well as in school. Later, in January 1989, I began a dating relationship with her. I admit that the lustful temptation on the bodily side for me was real, for I felt very lonely and wanted to have intimacy

with another person. I thank God that she and I did not do anything wrong sexually.

Nonetheless, pornography was a serious temptation for me. Before my adolescence, I was once walking with my father when he talked about a Chinese dictionary among many pornography magazines. I was embarrassed. When I was in secondary school, I learned about sex education through newspapers, but some of my classmates were addicted to pornography. Worst of all, I found *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines in my home during my adolescence. I had no idea whether it was my father or my older brother who had bought these magazines. But I discovered how great the seduction of pornography was. Once I knelt down before the Lord to ask for victory over this temptation. God answered my prayer and taught me that sexual desire is an instrument from God to multiply human beings according to His will (Gen. 1:28), and human sexual desire sometimes echoes the deep desire for an intimate relationship with him.

Sister C. was two years older than me. She acted like an older sister and taught me a lot. She shared her stories with me, broadened my horizons about family, and deepened my self-understanding. She was born into a family that was filled with love and care. Her parents were supportive and generous compared with the harshness and meanness of my parents. My parents preferred to invest their money in property rather than in my siblings and me. Sister C. ate her lunch in cafés and restaurants when she and her family members were living in an apartment that was rented from the government, while I had my lunch in an industrial area when we lived in a private apartment that we owned.

During that period of time, she encouraged me to advance in the academy. One remarkable contribution to my life was her help with the Chinese translation of ‘How to have a meaningful quiet time’ in the appendix of a book entitled *Twelve Dynamic Bible Study Methods* (Warren 1981). Several pages of teaching about a quiet time or a time of devotion helped many new believers to have a meaningful quiet time with God. I am still using this to help the novices who are around me at the time of my writing.

From 1988 until 1994, I kept journals during my quiet time. I wrote down prayers as well as thoughts during my quiet time, but I did not record my spiritual journey. I threw out all of the journals after decades had passed when I discovered that the metal rings of those books had become rusty. The only thing I remember was the statement on the book cover—‘*Slow and Steady Wins the Race.*’ This is true in all spiritual disciplines.

Less than half a year after our dating relationship started, I had a severe struggle with Sister C. I was not sure if it was an alarm prompted by God. I wanted to sever our relationship, but I found no excuse to terminate it except our different levels of commitment to the Lord. She dreamed of having a middle-class style of life after her graduation from university, while I dreamed of being a missionary or a full-time minister at some point in the future. She ate well and wanted to follow the path of many lay leaders in the church: to have a pleasant home, a car, and a comfortable life. I strongly disagreed with her about this.

During the summer when the June 4 Tiananmen Square Massacre in Beijing happened, I was working as a waiter in a Hong Kong Chinese restaurant.

Sister C. began to have contact with a brother who eventually became her husband. However, after that summer, we met often. (I had read a Chinese translation of *Animal Farm* [Orwell 1972] before the massacre, so I was not surprised by the bloodthirsty actions of the Chinese Communist Party. At that time, I felt I was far away from the evil acts of the party. But this was another story in Hong Kong after 2010.)

Two incidents really struck me. First, Sister C. and I were robbed one evening while we were sitting in a park near her home after we had dated for only a short time. That was the first and only occasion when a knife was placed at my neck and I lost all my money. For me, it was a strong signal from God that our relationship could cause me loss. It was also the first time I rode in a police van or went into a police station to report the crime. The police did not arrest anybody.

Another incident was like the reverse of the above story. In 1991, after my registration as a student at Polytechnic, I walked back with Sister C. to the Mass Transit Railway station. We heard a man running on the opposite side of the road shouting “Shoplifter. Shoplifter.” A student who wore a uniform was running in front of him.

I asked Sister C., “Should I chase after the thief?”

“Yes, you should,” she replied.

Then I left my bag with her and chased after the student along with the man who had shouted. After running for several hundred meters, we caught the student. Then I spent a couple of hours in a police station.

The man who had been chasing after the student was the boss in a boutique. At the police station he told me, “I used to be a teacher, but then I started a business. I know that the goods I sell may lead many young people astray because they promote vainglory. It is vanity. I really feel sorry about this student.” I listened to him with awe and did not know how to respond to him. One thing I knew for sure was that I should not chase after vainglory all the rest of my life, for this would surely lead to much regret. I thought this was a strong message from God and a warning against pursuing vainglory. In addition, I received a certificate of appreciation from the Good Citizen Award Scheme 1992, which was sponsored by the Royal Hong Kong Police Force.

In general, my relationship with Sister C. was painful to both of us. I was in a big dilemma. I felt that staying with her did not please God, but she was so good to me and she trusted me. In 1992, I showed apathy to her and hoped that she would raise the issue of ending our dating relationship. Finally, I suggested the idea in 1993. Eventually she said to me, “Okay, then, I’ll wait and see whether you will be a missionary or not. I don’t believe that will happen.” I interpreted her words as an encouragement to serve the Lord in the future. From that experience, I learned a good lesson: I must be cautious before starting an intimate relationship or building any close friendship, and I need to pray and follow God’s guidance when making major life decisions. Actually, I seriously considered celibacy. I thought if I was not led by God to enter into marriage, I would rather remain single all my life. I agree with Paul that singleness allows us to serve the Lord better with sole attentiveness of mind and heart (1 Cor. 7:32).

From this experience, I gained two more insights. First, I realized that fashion does not suit me. Sister C. understood the current fashion trends for clothing, glasses, etc., and she dressed me in the most fashionable way during the years we were together. But I discovered that I am not a fashionable kind of guy. Pursuing no vainglory, I remembered the words of the boutique boss.

Second, I found that I do not really like a busy social life. Sister C. put on the most bustling and surprising birthday party for me once. But I found this too tiring for me, as an introvert, to celebrate many birthdays with different people all year round. I prefer quiet birthdays so I may reflect on my days and pray to God for guidance. I always want to find and hear God in silence.

God's Grace Upon Me and My Search for Truth

Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.

—Rom. 5:20b NASB

During the four and a half years with my first girlfriend, God's grace abounded to me. In 1989 I began to listen to almost all the Christian songs in the Maranatha Praise series, including a song-like Centering Prayer named "Jesus" (*Praise Six* 1983), "Spirit Song" (by John Wimber), and "Give Thanks" (by Don Moen). Then I discovered Integrity Music from the United States. I enjoyed Christian songs, and they always resounded in my heart and mind. My heart was filled with songs of praise to God. But I was disappointed that I could share only a few songs with the Christians around me because most of them were not used to singing English Christian songs.

With ‘help’ from Sister C. and other seductions, I arrived at a deeper understanding of my incompetence and weaknesses in facing sins and temptations. One day in 1989, when I sang the song “Give Thanks” alone at home, I felt the touch of the Holy Spirit. I wept joyfully, for I sensed that God was speaking to me, telling me I was forgiven and fully accepted. God’s forgiveness was upon me; that was the first time I had ever experienced His forgiveness and affirmation. The crucified Christ Jesus was clearly in my inner sight, and I strongly felt that He had paid for all my debts and sins. I could now start my new life. I have come to understand that suffering is one way to grow spiritually.

This experience wiped away most of my psychological guilt. In Chinese culture, many parents felt that praise and appreciation would spoil children. As a result, many children, including me, were used to living in a world of criticism, blame, and other negative comments. This caused me not only to have low self-esteem, but many feelings of false guilt. God’s absolution enabled me to rebuild my emotional health and self-esteem. Consequently, my love for God was growing day by day. From 1989 to 1992, I entered service as a voluntary leader, both in the school fellowship and the church youth fellowship. I have learned many things by participating in Christian service.

One day in October 1990, Brother Y. from the Christian fellowship at my secondary school told me that he was attacked by a demon because his mother was a devoted idol worshiper. Whenever Y. went into a church, the demon would make him sleepy. I wondered how the demon worked in that way, and I had no idea how I might drive it out.

The day before I prayed for Y.'s deliverance, I read the Gospel passage where Jesus called His twelve disciples and gave them authority to heal and cast out demons (Matt. 10:1). I asked God to give me the same authority to cast out the demon the next day. Eventually, I drove out the demon in Y. in the name of Jesus Christ. He received Jesus' deliverance, and his zealous heart toward God was restored. That day was November 1, 1990. I did not know how to encourage Y. to grow in Christ and serve him, as no one had encouraged me to grow in Christ. I did, however, encourage him to read the Bible daily.

In the autumn of 1990, I read an English book called *Healing Grace* (Seamands 1988). This book told me that God's grace is unconditional. I could not believe this at first. However, when the writer depicted the parental 'dys-grace' compared with God's grace, I admitted to God that my parents were somewhat graceless to me, and I yearned to be graced by him. The eyes of my heart were opened, and I knew that I need not gain His love by good works anymore.

During the first two years when I was a novice, I thought I was a good person. Three or four years after my conversion, by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, I realized that I was a sinner and full of sins. According to *Healing Grace*, it is necessary for us to know how sinful we really are deep inside, and then God's grace works in us to transform us. I asked God to show His grace as being mightier and more powerful than all of my sins, and He did. I could not stand in a position to fight my sins alone; I needed to ask God's grace to come upon me to overcome my sins.

One of my parental ‘dysgraces’, to use Seamands’ term, was selfishness. So I learned to be generous and helpful to others. When I was taking my matriculation course, I shared my locker with my classmates and stored dozens of their textbooks. I tried to be nice to all of my classmates, including the smokers and the gamblers in class. But it was hard for me to help my classmates with their studies; I was very selfish about sharing any good learning materials with them. I was still strongly influenced by our Chinese culture of competition. I am ashamed when I remember that. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ gave me purpose for my life and changed me in the following decades.

At the end of 1990, I was baptized into the name of the Triune God after my eighteenth birthday. My father respected my freedom in religion and permitted me to be baptized after I reached the age of eighteen. Though my mother objected to my baptism, I was baptized into Jesus Christ. She objected because she thought I was no longer a worshiper of our ancestors and would not follow the way of filial piety after the baptism.

Before my baptism, I attended a special class. I learned that baptism was a symbol of being a Christian and a public witness. Yet I remember the boredom I felt in the class, and I let my opinion be known to the instructor, a female pastor. She suggested that I needed to be more humble. I think she was right. I am an innate challenger because God has given me a clear conscience since my childhood, and Christian faith has energized me to challenge unreasonable and unrighteous traditions since my adolescence, but I need to remind myself to be humble always.

My father challenged me about the social contribution of Christianity because he thought all religions were ‘opium’ for human beings. In fact, my father believed in Marxism and Communism for decades. I thought about this for months. Eventually, I told him that the most successful drug rehabilitation program in Hong Kong was the gospel. He then admitted that those evildoers should convert to Christianity, but that there was no need for him to do so. He then no longer opposed my Christian faith but sometimes jeered at me because of my devotion and enthusiasm. I thanked God for my father’s challenges because he polished my critical thinking and deepened my conviction during the time of suffering.

Back to 1990, a female counselor at the church youth fellowship introduced me to some Catholic spiritual disciplines from a writer named Henri J. M. Nouwen (AD 1932–1996). She was kind and good-tempered, which matched the disciplines she was telling me about. I really enjoyed the experiential teachings in spirituality, but this was not the case for the peers in my fellowship. Consequently, she stopped this teaching after several months.

I was eager to learn more about Catholic spirituality, so I bought several English books on this topic. After reading some of them, however, I found they were too difficult for me to understand. One of the reasons was that the English in those books was challenging for me; to make things worse, the Chinese Catholic translations are weird compared to the Protestant Christian books I used to read. But I was able to understand the books written by Nouwen in English, though I

found that his teaching was often not deep and difficult to live out. Eventually, I told myself that Catholic spirituality was not a good fit for me.

Nonetheless, I was affected by the Chinese translations of *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Nouwen 1986) and *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (Foster 1988). I learned from these books and have been practicing solitude, meditation, silent prayer, fasting, private worship, and serving since that time. In a summer camp sponsored by the church in 1991, I led a session on meditation for all participants and impressed some brothers and sisters in the camp.

In late 1989, I was invited to a Charismatic Sunday church service that was held by ‘the P Church’. The service was surprising. At first, I was shaken by their loud praises and by their band. In the end, I was amazed by the spiritual gifts being exercised in the assembly. The church leaders gave words of knowledge; people spoke in tongues and gave interpretations; there were miraculous healings, and so on. I was afraid of the demonstrated power, for I was not sure whether the power was coming from God or not.

After visiting that church, I spent three years in Bible study to find out which church was more biblical—the previous church or the P Church. After much reading, prayer and thought, I concluded that the P Church was more biblical than the previous church. For example, there was obvious work of the Holy Spirit in the services at the P Church, including prophesying, sharing special revelation, speaking in tongues and interpretation (1 Cor. 14:24, 26). Moreover, the elders of the P Church practiced praying for the sick (James 5:14-15). I

witnessed people being healed instantly as they gave their testimonies near the end of the service.

On the contrary, I felt that in some aspect the worship service at the previous church at that time was like a kind of washing. After certain standard procedures, the audience was cleansed. I do not think that any New Testament worship should be like this; rather, it should be moved by the Holy Spirit with songs, prophecy, instruction, and words in tongues or an interpretation (1 Cor. 14:26). The latter were demonstrated in the services at the P Church.

Near the end of 1992, during my second year at Polytechnic, I met some Charismatic Christians. They shared with me how God always spoke to them with words, visions, and dreams, and I was amazed. I recalled that I had not heard God's voice clearly since 1987. Even during the time I was a novice, God spoke to me only a few times; however, He rarely spoke to me in my daily life. I really admired the spiritual life of these Charismatic Christians. So I followed them and attended some Charismatic gatherings and meetings to seek a breakthrough in my life.

In 1993, I went to some worship and praise services which were held by a Korean missionary. I remember the first meeting I attended. Next to me was a Western Christian. He sang the Mandarin version of "Spirit Song" (by John Wimber), while I knew only the original English version at that time. Imagine this: I, as a Chinese man, sang the English version, while a Westerner beside me sang the Mandarin version at the same time. It was awesome. The worship (singing and prayers) in the service usually lasted for an hour or more. I enjoyed this very

much, and I often felt the touch of God during the meetings. I sensed that God had loosened some inner bondage in my life through those meetings, but my mind did not know exactly what they were.

One night after a worship service with the Korean minister, I went back home with a brother from the church. On the way, we talked about God and spiritual warfare on the platform of one of the railway stations. The brother stared at me, telling me that he saw an armed demon standing behind me with an ax placed on my neck. How terrible. But I thank God for His protection—my neck is still here, safe and sound. Since then, I sometimes felt that a demon followed me. I rebuked it in the name of Jesus many times and sought the presence of Jesus upon me. I wondered if the ax was an echo of the thief's knife when I was with Sister C. Therefore, in the name of Jesus Christ, I bound the power of the evil spirit of theft and commanded it to return everything that had been stolen from me. The most important thing I asked God for was that a sense of divine security due to His protection might be placed in my heart again.

In some ways, I found myself drifting and becoming tired on my restless and unsettled spiritual journey. I wandered to different churches: evangelical, Catholic, and Charismatic. It was hard for me to find the right way to the truth and difficult to find a spiritual home. Later, I thanked God for what I had gone through because I came across different ways of finding and experiencing God. This made it possible for me to compare the weaknesses and strengths of different spiritualities as well.

I met a Jehovah's Witness on several occasions. The most impressive incident was in 1993. A brother in the Polytechnic Christian Fellowship invited me to have a debate with a Jehovah's Witness preacher who was also a professor at the City University of Hong Kong. We held approximately eight rounds of debates. Though we could not convince him, we had a clearer understanding of the erroneous logic and interpretations that led the Jehovah's Witnesses into heresy. The brother who was with me on the debate team became the president of the Polytechnic Christian Fellowship and is now a pastor.

I tried my best not to be influenced or moulded by secularism and humanism when I was undergoing my social work training at Hong Kong Polytechnic. I read several books on Christian counseling. One that impressed me was *The Transformation of the Inner Man* (Sandford and Sandford 1982). I finished the book in 1994 and prayed for my inner healing afterwards. In 1996, after prayer, I coughed out a piece of grey phlegm without having suffered any preceding illness. I felt God had healed something inside me, but I had no idea exactly what it was. Maybe God healed my hidden illness in some way. I dreamed that one day I could engage in Christian counseling with spiritual gifts as described in the book. This is much needed in today's churches.

Jesus' Sheep Hear His Voice

Your ears will hear a word behind you, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left.

—Isa. 30:21 NASB

During the summer of 1993, I fasted for ten days alone on an outlying island of Hong Kong. This was not easy for me because of my weak digestive system. However, I enjoyed my time of solitude, prayer, and reading. I sensed the Holy Spirit giving me divine compassion when I watched a piece of tragic news on TV. I found I was drawn closer to God through that fast.

From 1993 to 1994, I read several books about hearing God, including the Chinese translations of *How to Listen to God* (Stanley 1985) and *The Hearing Ear: Learning to Listen to God* (Lea 1990). I learned the very important truth that Jesus said: “My sheep hear my voice” (John 10:27a, AV). I had wondered for many years if I was a lost sheep, for I did not often hear His voice. I decided to listen to Jesus’ voice for the rest of my life.

In January 1994, I knelt down before the Lord every day and asked him to speak to me directly. According to these two books, I needed to pray about an important issue and wait for God’s answer over a long period of time. I started to think about what I should pray for. Finally I felt I should pray for my wife-in-waiting, if God would arrange one for me in the future.

I prayed, “Lord, if You plan to give me a wife in future and I know her now, could You tell me her name?” Soon after the prayer, a fierce struggle arose in my heart. “What if God gives me an ugly wife?” “What if God gives me an older woman, say ten years older than me?” “What if God gives me a handicapped woman?” “What if ...? What if ...? What if ...?” I struggled between my will and God’s will for several months. Finally I surrendered to God

and asked that not my will, but only His, be done in my life. I told God that I would accept whomever He might arrange as my wife-in-waiting.

In May of the same year, I received a name, “Priscilla.” I asked God again to give me a confirmation about the accuracy of the name, and He did. I was very glad to have that name, for Priscilla is beautiful and is younger than me. She was a fellow volunteer in the Polytechnic Christian Fellowship from 1992 to 1993.

She was devoted to the Lord and to her ministry too. In the fall of 1993, we left the fellowship after our voluntary service, so we seldom met. She went to Campus Crusade at Polytechnic, and I retreated to Charismatic teachings with many prayers. I prayed for more than a month about whether I should contact her or not after God spoke to me. Eventually, in June 1994, I felt a nudge from the Lord that I needed to speak with her honestly. We met, and I shared the story of how I prayed and listened to God. She felt odd and was abrupt after she heard my story. My spiritual experience seemed very strange to her.

During that summer, I did not contact her much; for one thing, I did not have extra money to date her. Starting in September 1994, I was busy with my teaching job. I had studied the Chinese language only up to Grade 13, but I needed to teach up to Grade 11. In October, I received a letter from Priscilla, in which she told me that she wanted to terminate our relationship because of the incompatibility of temperament and character between us. At that time I was depressed, and I prayed before God humbly, “Lord, if it is Your will, let it be done; but if not, please change her mind.” I felt sorrow because of her rejection. According to *The Transformation of the Inner Man*, it is not joyfulness that

confirms a courtship, but a sense of sorrow during separation (Sandford and Sandford 1982, Chinese edition 2004, 215).

At Christmas I braced myself and said to God, “Lord, I will contact her and see if her mind has changed after these two months.” I contacted Priscilla and invited her to Ocean Park, a park which is situated at the south point of Hong Kong Island and located on a hill with many sea animals. Surprisingly, she said yes to my invitation. When we reached the top of Marine World, we saw the Pacific Ocean. I sensed the words of God come upon me: “I am calling you two together to minister for Me in the future.” God’s words were both awesome and burdensome. My first understanding of the task was that it would not be easy. It would require both of us to shoulder it and complete it. My first reaction was to escape from the call like Jonah. I knew my natural life did not like God’s call.

In January 1995, I invited Priscilla to share a teatime buffet with me, and then I asked about her decision regarding our courtship. Surprisingly, she said yes to me. *Wow. I made it*, I thought. She said she was afraid that she might miss the will of God if she said no to me. She also wanted to try to go into another phase of life in a new relationship with me.

Nevertheless, the following six months were a time of struggle for me even though Priscilla had promised to be my girlfriend. During those six months, I contacted her once a month on average. I had never told her about my “Jonah” struggle, but I prayed a lot, asking God to give me courage to brave my future—or I should say *our* future?

After praying for half a year, I decided to move our relationship forward. On June 22, 1995, I suggested to Priscilla that we could enter into a courtship, but without any romantic feelings. This was partly my submissive response to God, and partly an invitation to Priscilla to share my life, vision, and mission. I loved her as my treasured lifelong partner. She accepted my proposal skeptically and with her own high expectations.

Soon after our courtship began, I shared with Priscilla what I had learned on my spiritual path. I told her about my experience in reading a Chinese edition of *The Transformation of the Inner Man*, which was of great benefit to me. She told me that it was too strange and that she did not want to listen to my story anymore. She was an evangelical from a conservative Presbyterian background, so I understood why she responded that way. But I felt very sad as I saw the gate of spiritual sharing close.

In 1998, I remember she once phoned me when I was at home. When the phone rang, I heard an inner voice telling me, “Answer the phone. The one you love is calling you.”

I answered the inner voice, “Oh, really? But I do not have any feeling toward the one I love. I do not feel like loving her.” Then I picked up the phone, and it was indeed Priscilla. In spite of my feelings, I sensed that God was encouraging us to stay together and sometimes cheered us up. Once, in the late 1990s, when we were walking around on an outlying island named Ma Wan, we saw a man catching a fish that was more than a meter long on the shore. I had never seen such a big fish in Hong Kong as overfishing was a reality there for

decades. Another time, as we walked on a hill, we saw a big moth as large as two hands with beautiful colors. I had never before seen such a beautiful moth in my life. I felt God's blessing when we stayed together. Largely because of the leading of God, we stayed together in our relationship.

Last but not least, one day in 1998, the year after Hong Kong's handover to mainland China, when we were riding on a bus to her home, I heard God tell me that He had entrusted Priscilla to me. Suddenly, I felt an overwhelming burden from God settle upon me again. I was just a human being, and God was entrusting me with another human being. I felt called to a holy mission. After our marriage in 2000, I told her about this experience, and she confirmed that God had also told her the very same thing. She felt happy when I was with her.

“Quench Not the Holy Spirit ...”

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.

—Eph. 4:30a NASB

In the early summer of 1993, the Social Work faculty at Polytechnic gave students more than twenty days of holiday for study before the final examination. I spent my afternoons for two weeks auditing a course named Introduction to Pentecostal Theology and Practice, which was held at (Hong Kong) Ecclesia Bible College. This college was the only Pentecostal institute in Hong Kong at that time. The course was instructed by Robert Menzies, a famous scholar. The course equipped me well with knowledge of the Holy Spirit. Though I used this time of study leave to attend a theological course, I graduated with second-class

honors, division one, for my Bachelor of Social Work, which meant I was among the top one-third in my class. Thanks to God.

For a few days during the 1993 summer holiday, I, along with several peers from the church's youth fellowship, attended a Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship Asian convention in Hong Kong. We were all ignited with passion for God; some of us were filled with the Holy Spirit and received the gift of tongues. We remained there in worship and prayer even when everyone else left the church, and we felt like we were in heaven. Sometimes we heard soft voices singing praises and regarded these sounds as angelic.

One evening we helped a good brother from the church fellowship who had not attended the convention meetings. He wanted to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. We placed our hands on his head and prayed, but he fell down on the ground and foamed at his mouth. His face was distorted by pain. Clearly, he was demon possessed. We had tried all kinds of prayers to command the evil spirits to come out of him, but they resisted coming out. Eventually, we phoned an elder at the P Church. He suggested that we go home and bind the evil spirits in this brother in the name of Jesus Christ, for it was nearly midnight. The elder told us we could cast the demons out another day as demon possession was not a big deal.

Several days later, I invited this brother to pray the deliverance prayers according to some spiritual books I had read. Later, the elder did not practice casting out the demons but focused on inner healing for the demon-possessed brother. He explained to us that a demon needs a foothold to dwell in a person, and that past hurts could be used as a foothold. In such a case, inner healing was

needed to minister to the brother. Years later, I heard that this brother wanted to be a missionary.

During that period of time, I read a dozen books about spiritual warfare. Although we experienced a very good time during those days (it felt like heaven to us), when a female counselor realized what we were doing, she stopped us from gathering privately at the church. She said that the church leaders were not aware of what was going on, and that they would oppose our Charismatic meetings.

Meanwhile, some women in the church were also ignited by Charismatic fire and held prayer meetings there. In 1993, the church's secretary had serious back pain and could not even play the electronic piano for three months. She consulted many doctors but did not get well. One day, after the prayer meeting, the secretary asked for healing prayer to cure her back pain. I was among those who laid hands on her head. Suddenly, I felt the Holy Spirit descend upon me like a weak electric current from head to toe. I was baptized with the Holy Spirit, and the sister was healed within three weeks without medication. We praised the Lord for this miraculous healing, and I praised God for His anointing too. Later on, the secretary went to a seminary and then became a full-time minister until her retirement in the early part of the 2010s.

In fact, from 1993 to 1994, God's work in some members of the church was obvious. Besides that secretary, I remember another sister who had been diagnosed with an ovarian tumor measuring five centimeters. We, the regular participants in the church prayer meeting, prayed for her healing earnestly and had great faith in God that He would heal her. Just before her surgery, the doctor

found that the tumor had disappeared. The doctor could not explain this, calling it a miracle. The Holy Spirit visited the church in a gentle way and touched those who were spiritually hungry.

We all sang hallelujah to God together, but Pastor N., the pastor in charge, did not even announce what had happened in the next Sunday service. I even heard one sister say to me that church prayer meetings were dangerous because they were attended by Charismatic sisters. She warned me that speaking in tongues would cause tongue cancer because she knew that such really was the case in Hong Kong. I grieved along with the Holy Spirit, for He was not welcome in the church.

In 1994 I seriously considered whether I should leave that church because I was disappointed in the leadership. I asked God if I should go to the Revival Christian Church that was led by Reverend Dennis Balcombe. I had visited a Sunday service in his church before, and I was moved by a prophecy there. Meanwhile, I felt I was making no contribution to my youth fellowship, nor was the fellowship doing me any good spiritually. I gave myself three months' time to pray and to consider this issue. I shared my thoughts with a counselor in the youth fellowship.

After three months, I had received no answer from the Lord. I said to God, "Lord, since I have received no direction from You, I have decided to stay at this church until You instruct me to leave."

The Lord replied to me, "Since you have decided to stay, I will bless you more abundantly than if you had decided to leave."

Sometimes God lets us choose our own way and blesses us in different measure according to whether we follow His way or our own way. As a result of the prayers and enthusiasm of the women mentioned earlier, the church launched a small group campaign in 1995. Our church leaders set up a working committee that was composed of all the pastors, several deacons, and me. I was the youngest among them. We worked to transform all of the fellowships into small groups. However, the hottest issue was not a structural one, but a doctrinal one. Hot debates broke out over how much of the Charismatic element should be planted in the proposed small group campaign. Eventually, Pastor N. decided to write a statement of faith about the small group campaign, and he invited me to write the part concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in small groups. That was really difficult for me.

Over time, I did write a statement of faith in favor of Charismatic belief and practice, which was passed on by Pastor N. to all of the transitional working committee members. However, it provoked a strong anti-Charismatic movement among the ex-deacons and some elder-like members. They felt that the small group campaign was promoting a revolution in the church, seeking to change it from a non-Charismatic church to a Charismatic one.

Meanwhile, I discovered that the origin of the church was, in fact, Charismatic. Missionary M. had set up the church in 1955 through the sponsorship of her midwife job, for she was a nurse. (I can only remember her translated Chinese name, but not her original English name.) She was from an English church. In 1995 she visited the church for the last time. During that

Sunday service, I rushed to the front and asked missionary M. a question in English: “Pastor M., my name is Daniel Cho. I just want to ask you one question. Was this church a Charismatic church as far as you know?”

She replied, “You know, I served in this church for twenty years. When I was here, this church was Charismatic. But after I left, I don’t know.”

At that time, I knew the legitimate belief of the church should be the Charismatic one. I heard a story about those years: a brother developed a mental disorder after he pursued the gift of tongues. After that, the church was renamed Evangelical Church in the early 1980s. In the Hong Kong context, “evangelical” meant “anti-Charismatic” during that time. This meant that several years after missionary M. left the church, the leaders in the church abandoned Charismatic beliefs and practices. They discouraged the whole congregation from pursuing spiritual gifts and implicitly said, “Holy Spirit, you are not welcome.”

How sad it was. The church did not know how to handle Charismatic-related problems and thus prohibited the pursuit of spiritual gifts. Deep in my heart, I thought that any member of the church who was anti-Charismatic should go to another church. Anyone who comes into a church should respect the faith of the founder of that church. This is our Chinese custom. We always respect the founder. If you oppose the founder of an organization, it should naturally follow that you would leave or establish another organization. Against all my expectations, the reality happened.

Nevertheless, I pressed on in my service at the church. After my graduation from Polytechnic, I became a secondary school teacher. The majority

of the church brothers and sisters thought that I was mature enough to minister in most of the voluntary services in the church. I was invited to lead the church's Sunday service and became the youngest chairperson in the service. I was also a guest speaker in the junior Sunday service, was put in charge of the church library, and became a youth cell group leader too.

As a cell group leader, I often knelt down before God and wept for my group members. I wanted to see God's transforming grace, but I seldom had this privilege. It seemed that God worked less and less after 1995. Moreover, it was hard for me to fight against the trend of unbelief in the church. I prayed with the prayer warriors at the church, but I sometimes found myself napping during church prayer meetings. The workload of a Chinese language teacher was too heavy for me. I knew my spiritual life was withering.

God's Calling and Those Interviews

[Jesus said,] If any man serves me, let him follow me.

—John 12:26a AV

For most school days from 1994 to 1996, I worked before eight o'clock in the morning until six in the evening, plus two more hours spent commuting. I taught in a secondary school that accommodated the bottom ten percent's underprivileged students. In my class there were some slow learners, hyperactive students, Triad members, and drug addicts, etc. The job nearly consumed my health, my time, and all my energy.

Meanwhile, my voluntary service in the church became heavier and heavier. With my weak body, it became unbearable. A respiratory allergy

emerged, and my health eroded quickly. The most problematic issue was that I did not have enough time to read the Bible and the spiritual books I needed and wanted. I shared with one of my Christian colleagues at school about how exhausted I was in my teaching job. She replied with a Chinese adage: “When the Heaven is going to give a great responsibility to a certain man, it first frustrates his spirit and will, exhausts his muscles and bones, exposes him to starvation and poverty, and harasses him by troubles and setbacks so as to stimulate his heart, trim down his impulses and develop his weak points (Mengzi 289 BC). And you are the certain man.”

I smiled at her bitterly as I did not know how to respond. I did not want to be “the certain man” in her quotation. But I agreed that God had indeed been putting me into a fiery furnace. I was experiencing great mental stress, tension, and physical problems at the same time. Coincidentally, my cell group intern at the church gave me a verse: “When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10b NASB). She said that I was the “me” in this verse.

On April 4, 1995, a brother gave me a passage about my mission:

Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise His voice, nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice (Isa. 42:1-3 NASB).

I was deeply impressed by the above words offered by different brothers and sisters.

During these two years of teaching, I needed to commute from my home to the school. Every day I witnessed the construction of Tsing Ma Bridge. It is the world's eleventh-longest span suspension bridge, and was the second longest at the time of its completion. The bridge was named after two of the islands at its ends; namely, Tsing Yi and Ma Wan. It is the main road to and from the airport for nearly all destinations in Hong Kong.

I saw the construction of its foundation and its cable in 1996. Once God said to me when I was riding on a bus, "There are so many people working on human construction projects. Who cares about my construction project?"

"I care, God," I replied.

"I want you to build and edify my church," God said.

"Yes, Lord, I will obey you, whatever you ask me to do."

Instantly, I knew God was challenging my thoughts of pursuing a comfortable life by being a teacher. In Hong Kong, teaching in a secondary school is a good job with a maximum salary of approximately 6,000 U.S. dollars per month. At that time, I considered my career path and my prospects seriously. I dreamed of a comfortable life and how I could attain promotions. I knew that after my first two or three years of teaching, the job would become easier. However, deep in my heart, I felt unsatisfied with my spiritual condition. I knew I should get out of my comfort zone. When I told God "I care," I knew that I would quit my teaching job very soon. Still, I struggled in my heart for several months. Finally, I resigned from my teaching post. "Doing God's project" is my calling.

I applied to only one seminary, a large and famous conservative evangelical seminary in Hong Kong. During the first interview, the chief interviewer, a professor, asked me, “Why did you apply to our seminary?”

I replied honestly, “I heard God calling me to apply to this seminary, so that’s what I did.”

“Mmm ... Do you ask God, for example, which meal you should choose for your next lunch?” he asked me further.

“I often pray this way. God often answers me. I think it is good,” I answered.

“Do you not think it ridiculous that God does not give you the freedom to choose your own meal?” he questioned.

“No, I don’t think so. I can choose, of course. But I believe that God can guide me too. I do not see any problem with this.”

Then he asked, “Do you think God is leading you into our seminary to let you suffer?”

I replied definitively, “No, I don’t think so.”

He then explained why many Christians thought that seminary tortures believers. My first interview was shorter than I expected. I wondered what mistakes I had made. I prayed to God, and He answered me about how to choose a seminary and what to have for lunch. This is natural for me because Jesus’ sheep hear His voice (John 10:27). Usually, I lay aside all my desires when I enter into a decision-making process. God often answers me in an inner small voice (1 Kings 19:12). Moreover, after I receive an answer from God, I would pray a

second time or ask for confirmation like Gideon (Jud. 6:36-40) if time allows. Sometimes God will reconfirm His instruction to me. Later I discovered that the interviewer, the professor, did not believe that God speaks to any Christian in this “era.” That was the problem, and it was really ridiculous. A professor who believes in a silent God could hardly have any positive impact on seminarians.

After the second interview, my seminary application was rejected. I felt perplexed, but I was glad about not being accepted into that particular seminary. I thought it would be very difficult for me to adapt to the poor spirituality of that seminary. I understood that sometimes God wanted me to experience a process but not necessarily to accomplish something. Within a few days, I recalled my learning at Ecclesia Bible College in 1993 (renamed Ecclesia Theological Seminary in 2015). I thought it might be a good idea to learn more about Charismatic subjects. So I asked God if I should apply to the college or not, even though the deadline to apply for the coming school year had already passed. I sensed that God gave me a green light, so I applied to the college.

In an interview the dean asked me, “Are you willing to engage in self-study at our college?”

“Yes, of course. I think I can,” I replied. I was then admitted to the college in such an easy way. At that time, Ecclesia Bible College offered only a bachelor program, but the dean allowed me to take any courses I wanted. So I took some advanced subjects in my first year.

Nevertheless, I often frowned throughout my first year. I wondered why my application to the previous seminary had failed after I had heard the voice of

God. (Now I know that when God calls me to do something, it does not necessarily mean I would be successful in it. Sometimes God may call me to enjoy the process, but not the outcome. God can surely give us an experience of failure so that we may have “abundant” life from Jesus. Abundance includes experiences of failure.) I was deeply affected by the weird and depressed atmosphere at the college. Due to the conflict between some Western and Chinese board members about the auction of the college’s site, many of my schoolmates dropped out before the end of the term. Some alumni even told me to quit my studies because they felt they could not trust the new president of the college. These rumors and the less-than-ideal atmosphere made studying difficult for me.

Before the end of my first year, the dean told me they were going to start a new program, a Master of Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, and asked me if I was interested. I said I would certainly go into the new program because I definitely wanted to learn more about Charismatic subjects.

A Good Time in Bible College

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord.
—2 Tim. 1:8a NASB

Being soaked in the spirituality of the church, I lost my enthusiasm for evangelism for several years. In one instance, I rode on a bus and sat on the upper deck. Then I was surprised by a junior secondary school student who sat beside me and asked for two dollars because she did not have enough money to pay the bus fare. Instantly, I heard the voice of God asking me to evangelize her. But I was afraid to preach, for I did not know how to start the conversation. Eventually,

I gave her the coins but did not share the gospel with her. Afterwards, I grieved over my disobedience and asked for forgiveness from God. I felt ashamed because I should never be reluctant to evangelize.

From 1996 to 1999, I studied at Ecclesia Bible College. The college was affiliated with the Hong Kong Assemblies of God. In general, I felt good about learning biblical Greek along with Bible and ministerial subjects. Such subjects equipped me for my ministry as well as deepen my understanding of Pentecostalism. I remember a subject called Pentecostal Theology. The lecturer taught that the gift of tongues is the initial evidence of Spirit baptism in Classical Pentecostalism, and this is the doctrine of the Assemblies of God in Hong Kong too. I strongly disagreed with him and wrote a paper arguing that tongues is not the sole “evidence” of receiving Spirit baptism according to an exegetical analysis of the Acts of the Apostles, especially based on relevant passages in chapters 10 and 19. I stated that the initial evidence in both passages was not tongues alone, but also prophecy and words of praise. I thought I might get a failing grade in that subject, but I unexpectedly received an A-. I really appreciated the openness of the lecturer.

I learned both inside and outside the program. The most life-changing learning happened when I read a book called *A Divine Revelation of Hell* (Baxter 1997). Despite controversies provoked by this book, I regained my passion for the lost. This book described the terrible reality of hell. I could not stop myself from deep reflection on my life and the ministry ahead. Through this book the Lord reignited my fire for preaching and saved me from coolness in evangelism. I

realized that the lordship of Jesus Christ is the supreme issue in all ministries, and that one practical way of acknowledging His lordship in our everyday lives is by listening to His voice. So I continued learning to listen to God.

During the school year of 1998, every weekend I needed to commute from my home to the church where I served. The bus left at twenty-minute intervals. On one occasion I saw the bus leaving the bus stop, which meant that I would have to wait for about twenty minutes for another one. I decided to have a bowl of congee in a Chinese restaurant nearby while I was waiting. But after ten minutes, I heard God's command to abandon the half bowl of congee so as to catch the coming bus. But I said to myself, "Is God commanding me to waste food? I don't think so." During that time, I was not familiar with God's voice. Nevertheless, the inner voice spoke to me more intensely. After eating several more spoonfuls, I abandoned the rest. This was very unusual for a poor seminarian. But after leaving the restaurant, I saw that the bus had departed again. Beginning right then, I realized that I needed to follow a Person rather than a set of rules which are apart from God.

Meanwhile, guilty feelings from these negative experiences eroded the assurance of salvation in my heart. In 1998 a sister from another church phoned me. Without knowing my doubts and struggles, she told me that I was surely cleansed and saved by God. She relieved me from my prolonged uncertainty about the assurance issue. I realized as well that I needed to obey God's voice when He asked me to do something. I remembered a sentence that was on a pen

holder given to me by a counselor of the church as a gift: “God’s will—nothing more, nothing less.” I knew I had been changed by the voice of God.

The testing of my faith did not consist only in listening to God’s voice. Since I was not good at financial planning before I went to the Bible college, I had difficulty paying my tuition fees twice, during my second and final years. Once I was sponsored by the Chinese Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). The second time I was sponsored by Priscilla. It was difficult for me to accept Priscilla’s donation, for it was not the custom in our Chinese society to accept a large amount of money from a girlfriend. But after I realized the wrong perception I had of “saving face,” I gladly accepted the money she offered for my tuition fee. Moreover, I learned a good lesson in trusting the providence of God. When God calls us to do a thing, he will surely provide what we need, but not necessarily in the accustomed way.

My first practicum was in a small church with a female volunteer missionary as my supervisor from 1997 to 1998. The missionary had worked alongside the founder of the previous church in the late 1950s, so I was able to learn more from her about the early history of the church. The greatest lesson I learned from her was the vitality of teamwork and the cost of going one’s individual way in ministry. The founder of the previous church was a strong leader, and the volunteer missionary in that small church was gifted in pastoring children, the weak, and the deprived. If these two missionaries had been working together for a longer time, the previous church might have experienced better

development. I reflected upon the blessings of the teamwork of these two missionaries.

My second practicum was the role of an assistant zone pastor at a chapel of the Pentecostal Church of Hong Kong from 1998 to 1999. Though it was called “Pentecostal,” it was more like an evangelical church. My field supervisor was a Charismatic Australian missionary. He could speak fluent Cantonese, my mother tongue. While he encouraged me to minister independently, the workload of that practicum was heavy. For example, I was assigned to be the host of a “March for Jesus” in the district and needed to meet with several pastors and ministers from other churches while I was just a seminarian. I was happy in the ministry although it was stressful to do those ministerial tasks in that church. I was happy in the chapel mainly because of the youngsters whom I shepherded. I was a zone supervisor who took care of four cell groups. I was frequently in contact with the cell group leaders. Their purity of heart refreshed me, and I sensed the beauty of Christian community. However, many of them experienced difficulties in their faith after I left. I felt sad about that. The leaders of the above two churches asked me to extend my practicums, and I gladly accepted their invitations.

The last incident that strongly impacted me was the commissioning element of my graduation ceremony in 1999. The dean of the college, Reverend Cheung, proclaimed this the verse to the graduates, including me,

Jesus therefore said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if

you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” (John 20:21-23 NASB)

I was astonished by these verses as I stood before the dean. I felt it was a holy and sacred moment for me to be a minister of the Lord, with promise, authority, and great responsibility. Even though I was leaving the college, the college would never leave me.

I continued my learning after graduating from Bible college by taking two courses in biblical Hebrew. Besides, the book that most impressed me during that time was *Christianity with Power* (Kraft, 1989). This book helped me to change my naturalistic Western worldview and to embrace the biblical worldview with supernaturalism.

Two Years and More in S.

How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who
brings good news.

—Isa. 52:7a NASB

After the end of my last church practicum, I had an interview for a vacancy at the Pentecostal Church of Hong Kong S. chapel. S. was located in the middle of a range of hills on the edge of East Kowloon. I went to S. chapel to serve because I had a vision in the summer of 1999. When I prayed about my place of ministry, I saw a group of young adults praying for a pastor to shepherd them. Then I realized that God wanted me to take the job, especially to shepherd those youth. At that time the chapel averaged sixty attendees, including children, in a Sunday service—but there was no single full-time pastor.

It was easy to recognize the character in those young adults very quickly. They were pure, lovely, and devoted to the Lord. I enjoyed spending time with them rather than with the deacons and married couples, for the latter came mainly from the middle class and were not as pious as the young people. Later I found that most of the deacons were the first-generation Christians of the chapel. They had received the gift of tongues and were filled with the Holy Spirit in the 1970s, but some of them drew back and became secularized with a lukewarm heart for the Lord. I was sad when I realized this. I was alerted that spiritual regression could happen, and that I should guard against anything that would cool down my zealous heart for the Lord.

The most enjoyable course I ever taught in the Sunday school at the chapel was Inner Healing and Spiritual Warfare. I saw the Holy Spirit doing a mighty work, including a revival camp with the young adults. Many of them were ignited spiritually. Meanwhile, I waged difficult spiritual warfare at S. chapel, both inside and outside, during the two and a half years I was there.

The birth of S. chapel coincided with the day of the “618 Rain Disaster” on June 18, 1972, just a few months before I was born. On that day, heavy rain poured down the hillside, causing a landslide that resulted in 71 casualties and 52 injuries below the chapel. It filled the area with the spirit of death.

From 2000 to 2001, I lived in an apartment owned by the chapel that was located just a hundred meters above the area where this tragedy had occurred. Once we held a church prayer meeting in my apartment. One sister saw a vision of several skeletons wearing black clothes kneeling down and worshipping at the

bottom of the slope. This slope was right below the high-rise where I lived. We trembled when we heard this sister sharing her vision, and we had goose bumps on our skin. We marveled that the power of death was still there—nearly thirty years after the tragedy. Moreover, I heard the wind making an eerie sound once when I was in the apartment. Priscilla saw some ghosts in the apartment too. We asked for the Lord's protection in Jesus' name but did not really know how to win this battle completely.

At that time S. chapel offered two study rooms that were subsidized by the government. A public staircase of several hundred meters connected these two rooms. The study rooms served lower-class families and students. Sometimes I needed to be the room attendant, so I came up and down by the stairs, which were somewhat deserted and isolated. On one occasion I saw dry human bones when I walked on the stairs. One of the church staff told me that some drug addicts and victims of crime had died there, so it was likely that their bones had dried up and been left near the long stairs. What a terrible thought. But I thank God for keeping me safe.

The more difficult spiritual warfare, however, was in the church because I had to follow the instructions of some deacons, who had little faith. I picked up the ministerial tasks very quickly and was asked to be the acting pastor in charge. This was never an easy job for me since every part of my proposal needed to be approved by the deacon board. During the second month of my post, I was asked to conduct some interviews with the candidates for the new study room attendant. I had also drafted a church plan for the coming year. But I had not been taught in

Bible college how to finish these two tasks. Thanks to God, I finished them properly by his grace.

On one occasion two teenagers from the teenage zone came to me separately and confessed that they had premarital sex for a period of time. I was glad they confessed but was sad about the hurt in their relationship. I felt two things deeply: the cost and the damage their sins had caused and the grieving of the Holy Spirit. This served as a personal reminder to avoid sin for the sake of others.

One of the happiest things in my ministry was the joy of evangelism. Once I mobilized some church members to participate in evangelism. I visited a family with a sister. I introduced Jesus to the father of the home. He listened to me attentively and gladly received Jesus. He was filled with divine joy and actively shook my hand to thank me. Normally, I would congratulate those who received Jesus for the first time; this time, however, the father of that home welcomed me as God's messenger who announced true happiness and salvation to him. "How lovely ... are the feet of him who brings good news" (Isa. 52:7 NASB).

I had a very special experience while interceding for an old lady at the chapel in 2001. There was an elderly group that numbered about a dozen attendees. An old sister had great faith; she was positive, joyful, encouraging, and was over eighty at that time. Everyone loved her, and so did I. Once she was hospitalized in an intensive care unit for a serious illness in her belly. I was not sure whether she had peritonitis or some other illness. When I heard about her bad news, I rushed to the hospital. I prayed for her on the bus, and I felt an unusual

ache and pain in my belly too. Instantly, I knew the Lord would surely heal her from that illness. I had no idea how I might share her illness, but I was sure that the love we had in Christ connected us. I was happy to share her sufferings as she was also loved by God. Finally, the old sister recovered from that illness, and I was glad to see her again at the chapel. I had some feelings about how I could share Christ's sufferings in my flesh by praying for her. As Paul wrote, "... in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body ... in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col. 1:24 NASB).

The Pentecostal Church of Hong Kong is registered as a charitable company in Hong Kong. There were about ten chapels under the church's registration, and S. chapel was one branch of the church. The church also operated several child care centers, two secondary schools, a sheltered workshop, and two study rooms. The church was mainly run by a board of lay leaders, but some pastors were elected to form a standing committee to run the entire. Several months before my resignation, I was chosen in a general meeting to be a member of the standing committee. They definitely appreciated my ministry. My experience on the standing committee benefited me greatly in understanding a large-scale church operation with more than a thousand congregations in different chapels and thousands of service users in different service units.

During that time, I joined the East Kowloon prayer meeting for pastors. This was actually a network reaching more than forty churches in the East Kowloon district. I talked and prayed with many senior pastors and learned a lot from them—from theological controversies and social concerns to church politics

and management. I witnessed many joys and struggles alike in the lives of different pastors. These broadened my horizons in ministry, to be sure.

In general, I felt tired but happy in serving the church. I was drawn by compassion to the poor and needy. As I witnessed the damage of some sins that had occurred in the chapel, my mind was clear about how sin destroys lives and alienates people from God. I decided, as much as possible, to stay away from sin. My identity as a pastor was affirmed. I thank God for this experience of more than two years in S.

My Marriage's Calling

Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'

—Gen. 2:18 NASB

When I was in Bible college and living with my parents, my small room contained a few things: a bed left behind from my third eldest sister; a bookshelf which was a gift from my second eldest sister; a computer desk left behind by my older brother; a desk given to me by my parents; and a wardrobe from a rubbish collection point. A chair was the only item I had bought. That was all the furniture in my room. At that time, all my siblings were living a middle-class life—a decent and comfortable life.

During my courtship with Priscilla, when we talked about our future, I wept in front of her for the first time. I was ashamed that I was so poor and could not offer her a comfortable life. When I was a minister at the S. chapel, my salary was just half of what I earned while I was teaching. I asked Priscilla if she really

wanted to marry me, thinking it might be difficult for her to be with me in the future. She insisted on following the calling of God and stayed with me, and she never showed any contempt toward me because of my poverty prior to our marriage.

Before marriage, we had premarital counseling that included a Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis test. After this test, I discovered that I was not as familiar with Priscilla as she was with me. I learned that she preferred to show her most beautiful side to me but hid the other side.

Six months before our marriage, I moved into an apartment owned by the chapel, and they charged me just less than half of the market price for rent. Priscilla and I had planned to decorate the apartment and bought some new furniture. Hence, I told her, my fiancée, that the first blessing of our marriage calling was a gift from God to enhance my living standard. The apartment was more than six hundred square feet. According to the common standard of living in Hong Kong at that time, it could accommodate four to six people. So the apartment was quite large for just the two of us.

By year's end in 2000, we were married in a beautiful Anglican cathedral. Before that, most of the wedding preparations were taken care of by Priscilla because I was too busy with my church ministry. I really appreciated her kindness and the work she did for the ceremony. Our wedding ceremony was filled with good worship, and we gave our testimony during the service. The wedding was attended by a large group of people—more than five hundred crowded inside the small cathedral. They were all amazed by our testimony describing how we

listened to God throughout our courtship. We were blessed greatly by our guests and thanked God so much.

What impressed me the most was a Chinese song based on Song of Solomon 8:6a, “Ask of you to put me like a seal over your heart gently, like a seal on your arm ...” (Amended). Years later, I felt that God used this song to encourage me to confront Priscilla softly and leniently. This was the second lesson or blessing of my marriage: I learned how to communicate.

The third aspect of our marriage calling was to learn the lesson of how to deal with our parents. As newlyweds, we tried our best to preserve, and even to improve, the relationships with our parents on both sides. The relationship with Priscilla’s family was especially difficult for me to deal with. I could communicate well with her father, but not her mother or some of her siblings. Her mother always thought I was too poor to marry her daughter and she looked down on me. Besides, not being very sociable by nature, it was difficult for me even to have casual talks with them. Then, at the end of April 2002, Priscilla’s father passed away. It was a very difficult time for Priscilla.

The fourth aspect of my marriage calling was to learn the lesson of sacrifice. Paul wrote, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25 NASB). After marriage, I found myself in a dilemma because I always wanted to make cooperative decisions with my wife. But I found that it was difficult at times to negotiate a decision we agreed upon. So sometimes I made concessions and did what she suggested, and there were times when she made concessions and took my advice. For example, in

the summer of 2007 my wife suggested that we register our daughter, who was then around three years old, in a full-day nursery for her preschool education. After some negotiation with me, she agreed to register her for another kindergarten, for the morning class only. Actually, my wife was still breastfeeding my daughter when she attended the kindergarten, so it was hard for my daughter to adapt to the new school for the first few months. Several years later, my wife shared with me that it might have been better for our daughter to go to preschool when she was four. And I agreed. I meditate on the love of Christ toward the church and am moved by His love for us. I am deeply impressed by the longsuffering of Christ for us. I felt that Christ had led me to love another human being. I am still able to enjoy our relationship.

The fifth aspect of my marriage calling was to learn the lesson of self-care. After our wedding, Priscilla observed that I suffered with a serious nasal allergy. I had a runny nose for approximately seventy percent of all my weekly holidays during my service in S. She told me that I needed to take good care of myself in order to love her properly. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies” (Eph. 5:28a NASB). So I learned to take good care of my own physical health. I then spent tens of thousands of Hong Kong dollars to consult Chinese medicine practitioners. During that period of time, my cough came back, but it wasn’t serious. I slept more and took no medicine. Sometimes after a hot night, I could detect that my sweat had a smell like antibiotics, antihistamines, or Flumucil, which was used to cure the cough I had

during my childhood. When I cried out to God about my infirmity, He answered me with the following verses.

O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children (Isa. 54:11-13 AV).

I prayed and hoped for a strong spirit and better health in my offspring.

The sixth aspect of my marriage calling was to learn the lesson of complementary roles. My wife is good with details, while my attention is always on the “big” things such as direction, goals, and objectives. However, sometimes a small detail makes an enormous difference. I often learned a lot and benefited from her advice and suggestions. For example, she is skillful at fixing electrical appliances and computers. Sometimes she fixes problems by her earnest prayers and with God’s mercy. In addition, I really appreciate her willingness to do the most “dirty work” in our apartment, including cleaning the washroom. Moreover, I am not good at presentation, but she is good at presenting her ideas and sharing her advice. In everyday living as well as in ministry, sometimes my wife plays an important complementary role for me.

Last but not least, I have a deep feeling about my wife being my helper, as described in Genesis, chapter two. She helps me in many ways and led me into a deep reflection of life. For example, she reminded me several times that some past wounds in my family of origin had not been healed properly by the Lord. She is concerned about my spiritual well-being and encouraged me to walk on a path of

spiritual wholeness in order to bless more people. Some reflections in this autobiography were inspired by her encouragement. Moreover, she sometimes points out my faults and wrongdoings so that I might face my own problems. She is a wonderful helper for me and introduces a new horizon into my life. Now I am learning to enjoy the time I spend with her.

“False Teachers” in a Church

For by grace you have been saved through faith ...
not as a result of works....

—Eph. 2:8-9 NASB

Commencing in April 2002, Priscilla and I served in a church. The church was not big at that time, having around seventy attendees at an average Sunday service, including children. The only reason we ministered there was that we felt a stirring from God to serve in a church together after more than a year of praying about it. The only church that welcomed us to serve together, as far as we knew, was that church, so we decided to serve there. At that time in Hong Kong, just a small number of churches accepted couples to serve in the same church together, and most of them were big churches.

The two of us were the only full-time pastors in the church; there was also a church executive. My role in the church was: to grow the church in number; to maintain church members; to lead the full-time staff team efficiently; and to develop good order in the church. Frankly speaking, most of my private prayers about the church were an attempt to balance my understanding of leading from the Lord and the needs of the church, especially the demands made by the lay

leaders. I felt I was spending my spiritual life to serve the functions of that church. Of course, it did not work for long.

On April 30, 2002, near the end of our first month's service in the church, my father-in-law drowned and died in an accident. That incident triggered a controversial issue I had never dreamed of. My father-in-law had prayed the sinner's prayer several months before his death but was yet to be baptized. At his funeral service, a sister from my wife's mother church had a vision that his spirit was escorted by angels and ascended to heaven. My wife shared this vision with a sister at that church. Then, in June, an American Chinese missionary, who served as a voluntary church consultant at that time, accused us of preaching unsound doctrine. Worse still, we were called "false teachers" by him. We did not understand the consultant's accusation. Meanwhile, the lay leaders kept silent, chose to wait, and further observed our work in the ministry. Some members of the church hung on to this issue and began to distrust us.

We then spent another six months trying to figure out why the consultant had said such harmful words against us. In November 2002, we discovered that one core doctrinal belief at that church was "A believer must be saved eternally by water baptism." This doctrine was one of the core doctrines of the denomination. At last we understood the reason why the consultant had accused us of preaching unsound doctrine and called us false teachers. Together with the church's lay leaders, we began to discern five critical verses concerning this belief (Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21). My wife and I decided to do some research.

Priscilla and I went three times to the seminary she graduated from, located on an outlying island, to do our research. We studied on our annual leaves to search for the proper interpretation of the five crucial passages concerning this issue. Then we both discussed the issue with the lay leaders of our church over the course of several meetings. We were wholeheartedly committed to our service in the church. Nine months later, in August 2003, we handed in our fifty-page report to them. In conclusion, we stated that salvation by water baptism is likely not biblical. After that, we were forbidden to teach the baptism class and were no longer permitted to preach our version of justification by faith alone, but only their version of “faith,” which included water baptism that brought forth salvation. We suggested that the lecturers in their denominational seminary could have a talk with our New Testament scholars about the meaning of water baptism in relation to salvation, but they refused to consider this.

The decision to resign our ministry at that church took three months. I clearly understood that this was more than a doctrinal issue. This concerned the expectations of the lay leaders, who wanted us to preach their doctrine, and it also involved a trust issue. They did not trust us, as young trained pastors, despite the fact that I was appointed as pastor in charge following my three-month probation in July 2002.

In the summer of 2002, I joined the intercessory team of a parachurch organization called Revival Fellowship. I thanked God for granting me the opportunity to have silent prayer many times during my office hours. Every day I spent time in habitual divine orientation before my work began. I started to have

ideas about the hidden spiritual problems of that church, and my ministry was trapped in a relationship of mistrust, enveloped by a real and serious doctrinal issue. So, before we handed in our report to the church in August 2003, I had a hunch that we might leave.

I reflected on my calling to be a church minister during the several months before I left. I was sure that God had called me to preach His gospel—justification by faith, not by human works (Eph. 2:8-9). In that church, I strongly sensed the spirit of gaining salvation (and human praise) by human efforts, especially considering their belief in the “magical power” of water baptism. By no means did I intend to change their belief in the “magical power” contained in water baptism in any way. On the other hand, I was not afraid of being fired, or of my reputation being ruined in any denomination. I resigned in August 2003.

My wife was reluctant to resign at first. She told a Hong Kong sister, who was in Australia at that time, about the difficulties we were facing. After prayer, the sister had a vision that we had participated in a weight-lifting competition, but the weight was too heavy for us to lift. God understood our difficulties. This gave me great consolation at that time. Maybe my wife wanted to participate in the “competition” as she was praised by the church’s lay leaders for her diligence and hard work. She treasured their appreciation. She pleased nearly everyone in that church.

When I proposed my resignation, both the lay leaders and my wife wanted to continue their working relationship and leave me alone. However, after she received a vision from the Lord, she made up her mind to resign along with me.

Nonetheless, I admitted that my understanding of the Bible had been deepened through the research we did. I remember writing an exegetical essay on John 3 when I was at the Bible college; I explained the “water” in John 3:5 as water baptism. But six years later, I realized that the interpretation of “water” in John 3:5 as water baptism was wrong. My conclusion came from serious Bible research. Instead, it should be understood as the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit (Ezek. 36:25). I understood the Bible on a different level. Not only was I re-reading my biblical Greek, but I was also able to understand discussions from different academic journals concerning the exegesis of water baptism. I really enjoyed this improvement in my understanding of exegesis. For example, there are at least two views about how the “rule of concord” in Koine Greek explains the relationship between water baptism and the forgiveness of sin in Acts 2:38 (Camp 1997; McIntyre 1996). In my understanding, McIntyre’s view in his article was more convincing than Camp’s.

Before my experience at that church, I was reluctant to pioneer any new church in Hong Kong. It was because at that time, there were more than 1,200 churches in Hong Kong, and the average church membership is less than 100. After twenty months of ministry, I had a deep understanding about the stubbornness of various kinds of Christians. Christians who emphasize salvation gained by human efforts (including through water baptism) are hard to teach and stiff-necked. I strongly felt it would be much easier for me to start a new church than to change these Christians’ minds. Lastly, though the ministry at that church

was hard for me, my monthly salary was rather secure. My salary was never so secure in the years that followed.

Pioneering a New Church

And my God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

—Phil. 4:19 NASB

Before I left that church, I started to pray to God, “Lord, where should we go? Which church should we serve?” But God did not answer me. I started to search and prayed for vacancies for my wife and me. To my great disappointment, God said no to all my requests. I got stuck and began to wonder if maybe God wanted Priscilla and me to start a new church. However, neither of us regarded ourselves as having an obvious evangelistic gift. We were not persuasive people, and we were introverts as well. At the end of 2003, I knew that God wanted to transform us by urging us to live on the edge—by calling us to pioneer a new church. During the process of waiting for God, somehow, we felt his forceful prompting. We had a negative feeling about God’s guidance at that time.

At first, Priscilla’s confidence in pioneering a new church with me was not too strong. God directed her to read a chapter in a book called *The World’s Twenty Largest Churches* (Vaughan 1984); she read its Chinese translation, which contained only ten churches. The chapter she read described Christian Miracle Center, a church in Latin America for which God miraculously provided all their needs. Priscilla sensed that God was promising he would provide all we needed in

the future. After that experience she had more confidence in pioneering a new church with me.

I asked God near the end of 2003 for specific guidance about where we would serve after we left that church. God said that we did not need a new ministry, but a new home first. At that time, the rental contract on our current apartment had more than two months until expiry, but I knew that we needed to obey God rather than making a decision on the basis of saving money. So, in late December 2003, I looked at one of the stations of the Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway (MTR) and asked God, “Would you give us a place to live in the near future and also lead us into a new ministry?”

I felt God saying to me that near the Shek Kip Mei MTR station, there was a place for us. (*Shek Kip* is a kind of Chinese fruit, and *Mei* means the end.) We found a landlord who had a flat for lease in Shek Kip Mei. We were afraid that she might ask what we were doing because we did not have any jobs at that particular time. But, thank God, she did not ask us that question. Moreover, she regarded us as “a good couple” and waived our rent deposit for one month. It was with gratitude that we rented the two-room apartment that was approximately 500 square feet, and then we settled all the other trivial matters.

Meanwhile, we thought and prayed about the name of our new church. We had seen many Christians who changed very little, if at all, following their conversion. We longed for the transforming power of the gospel; therefore, we named the new church “Life Transforming Gospel Church.” We bought some gospel tracts and made a stamp for our new church. We prayed earnestly about

evangelizing and renting a larger facility for our weekly Sunday services.

Unexpectedly, God said no again. He said, “You should not distribute those tracts, and you should not evangelize or do outreach.”

“Oh, God,” I cried out, “how can Priscilla and I survive then? If no one comes to our new church, our savings will sustain us only a few months longer.” I eagerly asked God to bring us the people and the offerings we needed. Meanwhile, Priscilla was pregnant.

At last, God directed us to rely on His provision alone. We had to believe that He would provide us with all we needed, just as God had shown Priscilla previously. And I clearly knew that we should not preach the gospel to earn our living. The defining moment was when I remembered a missionary’s saying, “God will surely provide what his faithful servant needs.” In other words, if I was obedient to do whatever God commanded me, He would surely provide me with all I needed; not only would He do this for me, but also for my family. The only person I could rely upon was God himself—He keeps His word. Since then, I sincerely and earnestly prayed for His guidance in every decision. It was very hard for me to live only by God’s guidance. I was afraid of doing something wrong that might prevent God from providing for our family’s needs.

Priscilla had a dream soon after we set out to pioneer a new church. She dreamed that I died and was laid inside a coffin. On first impression, we were afraid that my life would end very soon. Later, we understood that my “death” probably signified the death of my old life. Ten years later, we believe that the dream was the hallmark signifying the end of my old life, and that my new life

had begun since then. I live by listening for every word God speaks to me from moment to moment (Matt. 4:4).

I learned many lessons during that critical period of my life. The first lesson was the importance of waiting upon God. Since 2004 I had been waiting for God to open a ministerial door for us. The temporary gathering place for the church I served was my home, and this lasted for more than ten years. My “temporary” situation lasted for ten years. Now our church members still number fewer than ten. I realize that waiting for God is a great lesson, especially when my whole life may just last for seventy or eighty years. I understand better how Abraham must have felt when he was waiting for several decades to see God’s promise fulfilled.

Next, I learned the lesson of faith. During the first few years of our pioneering, Priscilla and I experienced extreme poverty. On one occasion, my university classmates visited my family in Shek Kip Mei. All of them were professionals and had monthly salaries of about 6,000 U.S. dollars. They asked us if we were eligible to apply for a public housing apartment. We answered yes, but we did not apply for one. They further asked us whether we might be eligible to apply for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA). We said yes again, but we decided not to apply for this either. (The CSSA Scheme is a safety net for people in Hong Kong who are really poor.) Even though we were in such desperate circumstances, Priscilla and I asked nobody for help. We knew that we should rely on God alone, so we shared our needs only when people asked us.

I experienced the true meaning of “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33 AV). Wonderfully, during the time when I was poorest, God granted me my first platinum credit card and let us buy our own apartment through the government’s Home Ownership Scheme.

During the past ten years, I have spent more time praying to God than at any other stage of my life. In my prayers, the most important thing for me is to listen to His voice and to follow His guidance. I enjoy praying for whatever God leads me to. Many times I prayed to God just like a beggar asking for His mercy and grace. God’s guidance is so precious to me, and I cannot live without it for a day. Confronting my wife’s problems in addition to my own has been a tough lesson for me. A few months after our pioneering began, Priscilla mentioned that God told her there was no need for her to do anything to help with the pioneering. At first, I was shocked and did not know how to respond to her. Years later, I realized that God was calling her to transform her life first, from a natural life to a spiritual one, so as to serve him. God’s first lesson for us in pioneering was not about doing things, but about becoming better people. To this day the transforming process is still going on. Recently I thanked God for giving us the Enneagram to help us understand the deficiencies and weaknesses of our personalities. My wife is now changing.

From 2007 to 2008, three or four years after we started pioneering, I realized that at the very beginning I allowed church planting to become an idol in my life. When I received the calling to pioneer a new church, I looked at it as my

supreme, non-negotiable god. This was because I thought I could not bear the consequences of failure in church planting. I forgot that God alone was my provider, even when I failed. I was silly during that time. Now I see church planting as a gift and grace from God. No matter what I do, I am still loved by God. He gives me profound tranquility deep in my heart.

A Fierce Spiritual Warfare

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

—Eph. 6:12 AV

This section is difficult. Please read it with a prayerful heart and an open mind toward the things I am going to share.

In January 2004, soon after we had moved into the new apartment in Shek Kip Mei, I always woke up at three o'clock in the morning. I sensed that there was an unnamed unusual thing in my apartment. I cast out demons in the name of Jesus as if there were demons in my home. But the next day, the same thing happened again. I was tired and prayed the “casting out” prayer for about two weeks. Sometimes I needed a nap during the daytime because my sleep at night was so interrupted.

One day, Priscilla was out and I slept for a while alone at home. Suddenly, I heard a loud literal voice “wow” in my ear. I was pierced in my sleep. After I woke up, I searched my home; as expected, I found nobody except me. This was the very first time that I clearly heard a demon’s voice with my physical ear. I was

angry but also afraid of possible threats from the devil. I prayed more earnestly, and after a month the disturbance subsided for several months.

In November 2004, my daughter was born. She was a lovely baby. Once in December, after she had drunk her milk, I gently patted her back to release the gas from her stomach, as usual. However, I saw her eyeballs roll upward, and both her eyes became totally white. Moreover, she had an extraordinarily large smiling face that reached to both ends of her small cheeks. It was obviously an adult's smiling mouth but was appearing on a one-month-old baby girl's face.

Immediately, I commanded the evil spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus. She recovered with her normal face very soon afterwards. Nevertheless, these unusual facial expressions happened again and again, lasting for two weeks. I told Priscilla about this, and she prayed for the baby too. We guessed that our daughter was so tired because of the demonic invasion, as it is described in *Healing Through Deliverance II* (Horrobin 1995, Chinese 2003, 241-242). As she became stronger physically, she was relieved from this disturbance.

A year later, in December 2005, Priscilla and I often smelled the odor of rubbish, trash, or excrement at home. As usual, we drove it away in the name of Jesus. Nonetheless, the odor went from one place to another; for example, from the washroom to the kitchen, or from the living room to the bedroom. We were annoyed by this weird thing. Once the Lord told Priscilla, "You cannot cast it away in my name."

"What should I do then?" Priscilla asked desperately.

"You should love her," said the Lord.

“How can I love a demon, Lord?” she replied.

“It is not a demon. She is a human being,” the Lord revealed to us.

Priscilla told me this with a wide-eyed face. That it was not a demon sounded reasonable because it had not responded to the name of Jesus for months. The odor was like that of a human being because it had about a two-foot diameter. Another time when my daughter was suckling at my wife’s breast, the bad smell became apparent again. That time I was nearby. My daughter cried out to show her discontent, as she sometimes did. I remember that during those days, she sometimes cried out when she was alone.

Then I remembered the Chinese translation of a book called *Healing the Family Tree* (McAll 1999) that seemed very strange when I first read it in the early 2000s. The book stated that we need to pray for the dead so as to save those “souls” who still remain on earth after their death. I thought that was unbiblical, so I decided not to finish the book. But I picked it up again, and Priscilla read the whole book. She had an idea that the odor was a real human soul that was trapped in our home for some reason, as revealed to her by the Lord. In Chapter Three of *Healing the Family Tree*, the author suggested holding a Eucharist for the dead soul, but before the Eucharist he or she needed to receive the full name of the dead person. We prayed, and God told us that the soul was called AU Chi-shan.

Then we held a Eucharist for her. We sensed that she was rejected by her parents while she was very young. This rejection created the bad smell around her soul. The book stated that someone should take the bread and grape juice for the dead. We asked our one-year-old daughter if she was willing to take another cup

and bread for the dead or not. She gladly took the other portion on behalf of the dead person.

After the Eucharist, Priscilla had two visions about the dead. First, she saw the back of a skinny, long-haired girl or woman who was dressed in a skirt and faced toward a city with a foundation (Heb. 11:10). Second, she saw that woman “fly away” through a window in our living room. At that very moment, my heart was moved with tears. I knew a soul had found her rest in the Lord and had returned to God peacefully (Eccl. 12:7). The date was December 29, 2005.

Soon after that, an electrical toy of my daughter’s rang without being touched by anyone. Another story began. During that time, our electrical appliances often broke down, even the newly purchased ones. One month later, a similar odor filled our home. We discerned that a demon had pretended to be the dead soul. Priscilla even saw two of me appear in different parts of our small home—one in our bedroom, and the other in the living room. Our spiritual battle raged fiercely. Years afterwards, I guessed that some problem had happened during that time.

In April 2006, another odor emerged in our home. Following prayer to ask for discernment, we were pretty sure it was a dead soul again. At that time, my daughter walked all around our home except for one place—the end of our bed. That area measured about four feet long by two feet wide. Our daughter was clever and knew how to answer us with a yes or no. We thought it was possible that another “soul” always stayed at the end of our bed, just as Ruth lay down at

the feet of Boaz (Ruth 3:4, 8). We asked our daughter gently, “Is there another person here?”

She said, “Yes.”

We asked her if it was like a grey fog, and she answered yes. We remembered the words in the Bible, “You are just a vapor that appears for a little while ...” (James 4:14b NASB). Jesus’ disciples believed that a human soul could appear without a body (Luke 24:36-39).

Out of God’s special guidance, the soul spoke to Priscilla once. The soul told Priscilla that his name was WONG Tai-hui and asked her to remember him after he had left. Priscilla promised, and hence his name is remembered here too. We will surely remember him until our days in heaven. We felt that he was not loved, and even his parents remembered him no more after his death.

For the whole month, God put so much love for Wong into our hearts that we treated him as our precious child. Eventually we sensed that God received him up into heaven on May 14, 2006, with our prayers. After that day, my daughter often walked to the end of our bed happily.

In the middle of 2006, a sister who visited us on a weekly basis shared a dream with us that she saw us as a family of six or seven members who were preparing to go out, whereas there were actually only three of us in my family. Her dream confirmed to us that there were always some souls with us, and we somehow treated those souls as family members for a period of time.

On October 10 of the same year, Priscilla dreamed of my daughter and me. I was wrestling with an angelic being in shallow water. Suddenly, my daughter

dived into the water and taught me how to fight. After her teaching, I was empowered to win against the angelic being. We prayed many times to discover the meaning of that dream, and we knew that God had put me into a test to fight with a powerful demon. That demon used some dead souls to strengthen its dark kingdom and even tried to entangle and deceive us. But my daughter could see through the spiritual realm at that time, and she taught me how to discern between the dead souls and the demons. This explained the unusual demonic work at the beginning of this section early in 2004.

When we confirmed a dead soul was really with us, we prayed for the cross of Christ to be placed between the soul and all other spirits. We asked for God's protection upon the soul and us. Then we asked for our prayers to be directed, usually for God's love upon the soul, and to give us a heart to love him or her. Finally, we prayed that God would receive the soul into His presence and let him or her ascend to heaven in His appointed time.

After June 2006, I could freely breathe the air in my home. Eventually, it was spiritually cleansed. From all these incidents, I understood that not only would Hades contain the dead, but also "death" and "the sea,"

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. (Rev. 20:13 NASB)

From my experience we had some idea of how "the sea" would contain the dead. In addition, Priscilla had dreamed about how "the sea" could accommodate the souls of the dead.

We had several other encounters, in fact, with dead souls, intercessions for societal incidents, and even more encounters with evil spirits during those three years. But my wife and I were too exhausted to record those events during that period of time.

“I See Angels and the Heavenly Father”

[Jesus said,] I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

—John 10:10b NASB

During first few months after her birth, Helsa, my daughter, was sleeping alone in her bedroom. (“Helsa” is a Hebrew name which means “devoted to God.”) Once Priscilla woke up at night, for she felt somebody patting her on her shoulder to wake her up. On that occasion she needed to take care of Helsa. The next morning, Priscilla asked me if it was I who had patted her during the night. I had no idea what she was talking about because I was not awake at that time. I was always tired during the years when my daughter was young. Priscilla then wondered if it was an angel who had wakened her to take care of Helsa.

In October 2007, Priscilla and I visited a four-year-old girl who was injured by an insect and had to be hospitalized. She told us that she saw a “pink” angel when Priscilla laid her hands on her to pray. The girl quickly recovered from her illness and realized that the pink angel was the healing angel. Then we told Helsa about her story. Helsa said that she had seen a pink angel too. Every time she told us that she saw the pink angel, she experienced quick recovery from any kind of illness.

In addition, Helsa told us that she had seen small angels, large angels, bright angels, and angels with swords. Moreover, once she described a large angel, nine feet tall, with a sword in his hand, and said he had appeared to her. Surprisingly, she showed no fear on her face when she described the angel with a sword. From the time she was two years old until the age of nine, she always prayed for God's protection in granting us guardian angels and for good sleep before bedtime (Matt. 18:10). She prayed this way because our sleep was always interrupted during her early years. It was also vital for us to ask for God's protection with angels during the days of spiritual warfare. She told us that a blue angel was always with me. I am not sure whether this was a visual image of the Holy Spirit or not.

The pink angel had special meaning for Priscilla and me too. From 2006 to 2008, Helsa became sick easily, especially between November and March. On average, she needed to take two weeks of medication per month. Our apartment was on the ninth floor. Below us were two restaurants. During that period of time, we could not turn on our air conditioners because of the cool weather. Our apartment felt like the kitchens of the restaurants below us because of the oily smell of cooking. It was so bad that we wanted to move to another apartment.

In March 2008, we applied to the Home Ownership Scheme of the Housing Authority (government owned) to buy an apartment. We were eligible to apply for a low rental apartment from the Housing Authority, but we had a hunch from the Lord to apply for the Home Ownership Scheme, which is targeted for people from the lower middle class to buy their own flats.

I agreed to apply for the scheme because I wanted to move to a flat in Lok Fu. (“Lok Fu” was originally called “Lo Fu Ngam,” which means “tiger rock.”) Lok Fu has many parks and recreational facilities. The high-rise we now live in is surrounded by three small parks and is near a small hill (one hundred meters in height) and two public swimming pools. I wanted to move to Lok Fu for another reason. In 1999, after Priscilla prayed for a place of ministry following my graduation, she had a hunch from the Lord that I should minister in the middle of Kowloon. However, I went to the east end of Kowloon at that time. But her words that my ministry would be in the middle of Kowloon echoed in my heart. So, in 2008, I wanted to move my home to the middle of Kowloon.

The name *Kowloon* consists of two Chinese characters: “Kow” means “nine” and “Loon” means (a range of) “small hills” that are several hundred meters in height. Kowloon is south of nine hills that form a natural barrier. The nine hills are Kam Shan, Eagle's Nest Hill, Beacon Hill, Lion Rock, Temple Hill, Tate's Cairn, Tung Shan, Middle Hill, and Kowloon Peak. Lok Fu is located near Lion Rock and Temple Hill, and hence is near the middle of Kowloon.

In April 2008, the process of choosing an apartment had begun, but we were not aware of it. We thought that our chance to choose a desirable flat for our family was nearly zero because there were more than four thousand applications. Families from the subsidized rental flats usually had priority in choosing their flats. The total number of available apartments was three thousand, but fewer than twenty were located at Lok Fu. So, if our application was successful, it would be a miracle.

One morning in late April, my three-year-old daughter told us that she had seen the “heavenly Father.” We asked her, “How do you know it was the ‘heavenly Father?’”

She replied, “He is bright and is different from the usual angels. He has no hair, but the familiar ones do have hair.”

We gently asked further, “Did the ‘heavenly Father’ say anything?”

“Yes,” she said. “‘God is abundance.’”

The word “abundance” in Chinese is a compound noun that she had not yet learned. Furthermore, we were living below the poverty line during those days, so the word “abundance” was uncommon for us. We had zero assets and were earning about 1,500 U.S. dollars of monthly household income at that time. We even reused our old and torn clothes when in time of need.

I remember once when my daughter was eight months old, she called “Baba” many times when I was cooking in the kitchen. Each time I heard her calling, I came out of the kitchen. However, when she saw me, she became silent. She did that eight to ten times: she called me, I went out, nothing happened, and I continued my work in the kitchen. I sensed that Father God told me that He, too, has such a father’s heart. He is willing to help whenever his children call out to him. Thus, we believed that the “abundance” promise was from God. We were not sure whether it was really the “heavenly Father” who appeared to Helsa, or whether it was just an angel of providence who had appeared to her.

That afternoon we received a phone call from the Housing Authority telling us that it was our turn to choose an apartment. The staff warned us that our

monthly income might be too low to pay the monthly installment for any purchase, though they set no lower limit on the income of applicants. After signing some documents, we were still not sure if there was a flat for us.

On the day before we chose our apartment, I received a word from God: “choose.” I had peace in my heart that God would give us the chance to choose a flat. Eventually, two flats were available for us to choose from. We chose a small flat in Lok Fu and are living there now. But another problem arose. We had too little income and too few assets to apply for a bank loan. As we were worried about this, we asked one of our cousins to be our financial guarantor. Then we contacted a local small bank manager. Miraculously, she asked for no guarantor and only spent thirty minutes with us before granting us a one million Hong Kong dollar loan (equivalent to \$125,000 U.S. dollars). We praised the Lord, for He truly was *abundance*, like the word our daughter had received.

We thanked our parents and my older sisters for lending us the first installment. They also provided us with all our appliances and paid for some renovations of the flat. Although our apartment is the smallest in our building, less than 400 square feet inside, there is enough space for us to have more than 1,000 books and ten people in our home. Is that not amazing? God never sets us up to fail when we follow his guidance.

Still, our financial situation had not improved after our move to Lok Fu in 2008. I asked God to provide us with what we needed. More than once, I saw visions where someone, probably angels, poured out treasures and coins over us in answer to my prayers. “God is abundance” is my belief and experience. In 2009,

when I prayed in a gathering with several brothers, I saw a vision of a big hand coming down from heaven. I understood that God would give His divine grace and guidance to my family and me. After we moved into the new apartment, my daughter's illnesses were alleviated. She has grown in happiness and stature since 2008. She enjoys the natural environment in Lok Fu at the time of my writing. Thanks be to God, for He is abundance.

Encountering the Spirit of a False Prophet

Many false prophets are gone out into the world.
—1 John 4:1b AV

In the summer of 2006, I participated in a global Chinese prayer summit in Hong Kong on my own. Although Priscilla did not attend the meetings, she had a special revelation from the Lord that one of the speakers for the summit was a false prophet. I bravely told the wife of one of the organizers, who was also an intercessor for the summit. After that, they put a stop to the annual summit gatherings. That was the very first time I had heard anything about a false prophet and had an understanding about how he worked.

In December 2006, Sister J. contacted us and joined our church. At that time, we were really poor. God told Priscilla to offer the best food to Sister J. in a hospitable manner, as if we were welcoming an ambassador in Christ. During the first couple of months, we did not ask her for tithes until she inquired about our financial needs. Indeed, Sister J. was eager to pursue God's will in every aspect. She was a devoted Christian and had enthusiastic faith.

However, about nine months later, I had a vision concerning her when I was praying for her. I saw an image of a grey frog in my mind. I sensed an evil force around her. I cautiously shared that understanding with her and asked her if she had any ideas about the frog. Unexpectedly, she told us that she had also had an image of a frog previously and wondered what it meant. After much prayer, I suggested that there might be the spirit of a false prophet around her. That was a bolt in the blue sky to her because she could not accept this. For years she struggled to accept that she was defiled by the spirit of a false prophet. Meanwhile, she shared some strange things that had happened to her before she came to our church.

She had followed a brother named Isaac for two years or more before she came to our church. During that time, she experienced someone unseen pulling her hair while she was praying in tongues. On another occasion, she also experienced someone unseen punching her belly while she was praying. She shared with us these strange things that happened while she was with Isaac. Finally, she left Isaac as he prophesied on several different occasions that God would supply him with a million dollars to start a new church, but those prophecies did not come true. Isaac was angry about her departure.

One night when I was in prayer, I sensed the spirit of Isaac close to me in my home in Shek Kip Mei. Maybe I was wrong, but I sensed that he was watching me with an unkind intention. Then I asked Sister J. if Isaac knew how to free his spirit from his body. J. replied that Isaac was not so “spiritual,” and that she had never heard about his doing so. Therefore, I was pretty sure that an evil

spirit connected with Isaac had come to my home, and I explained that to J. After this, she suspected that demons were attached to Isaac and to her as well. She shared with me that she really liked the prophets in the Old Testament. She sometimes rebuked other Christians, including her family members, just like a prophetess. I strongly suggested that she stop that practice and not imagine herself a prophetess anymore. She followed my advice.

From 2008 to 2009, I prayed all kinds of prayers for her deliverance, but I failed to save her from demonic attachment. She frequently dreamed about demons and remembered Isaac's teachings rather than mine. Later I discovered that during that period of more than two years, Isaac had talked to her for several hours three or four times per week. This made her tired and deprived her of the sleep she needed. I realized that Isaac was forcefully moulding her during that time. Meanwhile, Priscilla and I could not get the truth of God's Word to enter her heart. For instance, we shared ten times about a given truth in the Bible, but J. did not retain any of it. She still asked the same questions based on the teachings she had received from Isaac for years. The root of her problem was still there.

In fact, Sister J. challenged me rigorously in my faith by her genuine questions. I could not use common answers in responding to her questions. She easily fell into the trap of legalism, using "spiritual formulas" instead of pursuing God himself. Thus, she forced me to think about the faith and life of a false prophet. I told her that it was my pleasure to help an unintentional false prophet, for I had not met a false prophet in the two decades since I believed in Christ. I

liked challenge. I felt like the good shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep and searched for the only one who was lost.

Dozens of people came to our church and then left. One of the reasons for their leaving was what they saw the “faith” and condition of Sister J. I did not mind this at all. In order to help Sister J., I gave her spiritual books to read in 2010. I felt that I needed more helpers to carry Sister J. before the face of Jesus, just as the paralytic was carried by four men in Mark, chapter two. She really needed the absolution of Jesus. Some books were very helpful to her, one being *Recovering From Churches That Abuse* (Enroth 1994). This book helped her to get out from under Isaac’s teaching. The second one was called *Seductions Exposed: The Spiritual Dynamics of Relationships* (Greenwald 2003). This book reveals the common tactics of manipulation in Charismatic circles. The third one was called *Breaking Controlling Powers* (Liardon 1995). This book helped J. to recognize the controlling people around her, including her parents as well as Isaac, and to set her free from many controlling relationships. In addition, two other books, *There Were Two Trees in the Garden* (Joyner 1995) and *Spirit Wars: Winning the Invisible Battle Against Sin and the Enemy* (Vallotton 2012), helped her as well. She said she is now in the habit of reading spiritual books, thanks to my encouragement.

In 2010, I told Sister J. that according to my assessment, she did not believe in Jesus. I did not mean that she had not prayed the sinner’s prayer or that her water baptism was false. What I wanted to tell her was that she did not have steadfast faith in Jesus. She struggled for some time to accept her own spiritual

condition. I told her that she could not solve her spiritual problems unless she admitted what was really happening in her life.

In 2013, I tried to understand how her personality was structured and how her childhood had made her vulnerable to falling into the traps of a false prophet. It shed light on her longstanding problem. Recently I discovered that the Enneagram revealed the root of some of her psychological problems; namely, fear, worry, and skepticism. She was categorized as an unhealthy Type Six. This explained the reason why she was always skeptical toward the truth and toward what Priscilla and I shared with her. Building faith in her was not an easy task.

Sister J. wondered for years whether her efforts toward salvation were useful at all. She experienced a prolonged depression. She blamed God. However, she was willing to learn the basics of salvation by reading three books in the New Testament; namely, John, Romans, and Hebrews. For a long time, she was afraid she would be thrown into hell because of her sins, so she tried hard to do right instead of being right. Eventually, in late 2014, she understood the Christian faith and what it meant to be saved by grace, but not by human works, by the mercy of God and inspiration from the Holy Spirit. In other words, she finally understood that believers are justified by faith, not by works. Thank God.

With the help of the Enneagram, I encouraged her to always be faithful in staying within her true self. Now I see that the way to recover from exposure to a false prophet is not just by praying the deliverance prayer, but also by honestly embracing one's true self and reconstructing a healthy personality. It is often helpful to look back for some defects in one's upbringing in order to rebuild a

genuine and healthy personality. I learned from Sister J. that life is more complex than I thought before, and some people need to overcome many obstacles to come to Christ. Being true to ourselves is the starting point of true spiritual growth.

My Ministry and the Road to Tyndale

[Jesus said,] Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

—Matt. 7:7 AV

My experience in pioneering the new church was never easy. In 2004, the first year, we launched two groups: one was the discipleship Bible study group for women; the other was a gospel group. About six months later, the discipleship Bible study group ended, as mentioned in earlier section. On the other hand, the gospel group, whose four participants were all classmates of Priscilla's at university, lasted for around nine months and then ended. Two members committed to attending their own churches and then being baptized later. The other two joined the discipleship Bible study group for about two years. We had a total of eight Bible study groups at different periods of time.

During the first stage, I was eager to offer the Bible study groups to Christians who were interested. Because of my own experience, I believe that the Word of God has the power to transform lives. We did not mind whether these participants remained in our church or committed to their own churches. However, several years later, I thought this approach might not be good for the establishment of our church.

Meanwhile, we observed that the beliefs of most of the participants were challenged through the group's discussions, and they seldom chose to stay in groups very long. Many of the Chinese Christians we encountered in the groups were either afraid of facing their own spiritual problems or had little motivation to fix their own faith-related problems. As far as I was concerned, if every group member had a positive attitude about his or her personal growth, the group could then proceed healthily. This was the major cause of failure in our discipleship training. Later, in 2011, I searched for another direction of spiritual formation in my ministry as the groundwork for Bible study.

I wrote a whole set of discipleship Bible study material from 2004 to 2010 that included twenty booklets from the gospel for training leaders. I was edified through my writings as I thought about how to deal with the common problems of our church participants.

In 2008 the president of Ecclesia Bible College, who was also the pastor in charge of my last church practicum from 1998 to 1999, encouraged me to further my study. In March 2010, I sensed that God wanted me to do that very thing. I prayed for more than six months about that decision to re-enter Bible college. Priscilla agreed that I should return to the Bible college to study. Thanks be to God, during that month He provided us with all we needed. He has provided us with all we needed since 2004.

In March 2011, I attended an intensive course called Introduction to Spiritual Direction which was offered by the (Hong Kong) Chinese Mission Seminary. The lecturer, Janet Ruffing, from the Yale University Divinity School,

opened my mind and resolved some of the questions that had been niggling at me for many years. In the 1990s, I had some experiences in the spiritual disciplines at my first church, but I did not digest them well. Professor Ruffing helped to clarify my thinking concerning spiritual direction.

Consequently, by the end of 2011, I launched a Spiritual Direction Group with six participants. We mainly discussed various chapters and articles on spiritual formation. It ran for ten months, and I observed several things. First of all, novices cannot easily follow the path of spiritual direction. This group is a good fit only for those who have believed in Christ for at least a few years. Next, it took time for the participants to reflect on their own lives. It was never easy for middle-aged participants to reflect on their lives because my generation had experienced education by “force-feeding.” Thus, it was hard for us to reflect on our own lives. Moreover, I missed some stepping stones that may have promoted healthy spiritual growth among the group’s participants. Sometimes there was a big gap between the articles I shared.

Near the end of 2012, I started another spiritual direction group with four different participants. After we shared some articles and chapters from various books, I captured the attention of the participants when I told them about the Enneagram in 2014. With the help of the Enneagram, we discussed the stories of our various upbringings, and most of us benefited. Not only did we talk about our own problems, but also about how they were constructed during our lifetimes. Discussing different constructs of life stories enhanced our own self-

understanding as well as mutual understanding. I believe in the words of John Calvin: “Knowing yourself begins with knowing God” (Venema 1988, 156).

In 2012 I prayed about my passion to study, and I discovered that I love Christian spirituality. Therefore, I entered the (Hong Kong) Lutheran Theological Seminary after leaving Ecclesia Bible College. Lutheran Theological Seminary is one of two seminaries that offered studies in Christian spirituality that year. However, when I learned that they were traveling the path of liturgical spirituality, I wanted to find an evangelical seminary. Here, liturgical spirituality means some Christians want to experience God through certain formality with a decorated environment and some meaningful steps of Christian rituals. However, in Hong Kong many small churches, including my serving church, do not have the conditions to create a favorable environment for liturgical spirituality; thus I wanted to search for another kind of evangelical spirituality. So I searched and applied to Tyndale University College & Seminary in Toronto.

I had searched dozens of websites for seminaries that offer Christian spirituality. I found that Tyndale’s program best fit my ministerial and spiritual need. Moreover, I chose Tyndale so I could take my doctoral degree in ministry as I prefer an applied or practical Christian spirituality to one that is merely theoretical.

By faith I came to Tyndale in 2014. My parents paid my first year’s tuition fee. They felt it was their glory that I enter into a doctoral degree program, although my father has not yet put his faith in Jesus Christ at the time of my writing. My two round-trip flights in August 2014 and February 2015 were paid

by three sisters, one of whom is my second oldest blood sister. I thank God for all of His provision and believe that He will surely provide what I need according to His riches in glory (Phil. 4:19). Since May 2014, I have found the courses offered by Tyndale to be of benefit to my spiritual life. I enjoy learning there.

Ecclesia Bible College invited me to teach Pentecostalism for their extension courses in 2015. This matches a dream I had in 2011. In this dream I saw a big old classroom and noticed a teacher of Pentecostalism at Ecclesia Bible College leaving the room. Then I sat on his seat. I understood this dream to mean that I might take up his teaching ministry in the future. Besides, I also taught a bachelor's course on Spiritual Warfare at the Hong Kong Institute of Christian Counselors in 2007.

Three Visions and Dreams Concerning All Christians

He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

—Rev. 3:21 NASB

In 2008 I had three related visions and dreams, and I want to record them here because they are relevant to my calling in ministry for God.

The first dream was about the following verse: “Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Eph. 5:14 NASB). At the beginning of this dream, I saw some people sleeping in a dark basement. Each individual had his or her own bed. I saw many bricks being placed above their beds. Each brick was labeled; for example, love of money, love of reputation, love of a

comfortable life, love of golf.... The basement was so dark that I needed to walk carefully to see details clearly. As I walked along a narrow corridor, I saw a fountain. People who slept near the fountain had fewer bricks on them. They were able to wake up from their sleep more easily than those who slept far from the fountain. On the other side of the fountain was a path leading upstairs, and eventually to a big, sunny meadow.

I understand that many Christians are sleeping in the dark with their earthly desires. The Christians who live close to the fountain, which is the refreshing work of the Holy Spirit, are less burdened by sin. But those who live farther away from the fountain have more burdens and are sleepier spiritually. Nonetheless, God does not want us to be burdened or to sleep spiritually. To wake ourselves up is our own responsibility. He has prepared a fountain for us that will cleanse our faces and our eyes so that we can see the path toward the light and leave the deadly dark. In my understanding, this vision about sleeping depicts the experience of conversion and shows how people may turn away from worldly burdens.

The second vision was an inner vision I had while praying in the kitchen in 2008. God revealed to me that there were dozens of victorious Christians who stayed in the air in Hong Kong. They matched the following verse: “And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6 NIV). (In 1993, I had meditated on this one verse for several months. When we have faith and follow God’s guidance in our everyday lives, we can live in his heavenly realm above all demons and darkness.)

In that vision, I saw some Christians falling down from heaven all of a sudden. Wonder and sadness were clearly visible on their faces. I was disturbed by how easily a victorious Christian could fall. I realized that seductions and temptations of sin are great, and the battle against the devil is never easy for any Christian. But victory in Christ should be the goal for all of us in our everyday lives. Hence, we need to learn how to conquer every sin that could cause us to fall. In addition, of course, praying and asking God to grant us victory is also crucial. In my understanding, this vision describes the victory and struggle of growing Christians, including me. To keep ourselves in a victorious “heaven” should be the goal of every growing Christian, and this is my goal too.

I saw the third vision with my physical eyes. Once I noticed how beautiful the clouds were when I saw them through a kitchen window. (I live on the twenty-eighth floor.) I saw the clouds become a large, kingly stage like a grand throne hung in the sky. I saw a “cloudy” throne that could accommodate millions of people. But I saw no one seated on it.

Meanwhile, I heard an inner voice say, “My throne is ready for my people, but only a few want to sit with me on my throne.”

It was momentous when I heard God’s voice and saw a physical vision (Acts 2:19a). I can imagine millions of people standing around the kingly stage with shining clothes. God has invited all Christians to sit on His throne with him. This was awesome, but I also felt the sadness in God’s heart. He has destined us to win and to sit on His throne, but many Christians have refused His invitation. In any case, God has invited every one of us to share His destiny—to reign in

eternity. This is the stage of maturity for every Christian. It resonates with the following verse: “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne” (Rev. 3:21a NASB).

God is calling us to be awakened from our spiritual sleep, and to get rid of all our sins and burdens. Next, God is calling us to ascend into the sky and to live a victorious life every day. Finally, God is calling us to sit on his throne, to reign with him, and to glorify him in heaven eternally. These are the three blessings that every Christian may experience: to awake, to ascend, and to reign with Jesus Christ. I think those visions are God’s invitation for me, and I would accept his invitation.

All in all, my spiritual journey may be summarized by a verse in the Psalms: “The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all” (34:19 NIV). Through many troubles in my life, I hope that I am going to the glorious heaven in the future because of his voice.

**CHAPTER THREE: A MODEL OF
SPIRITUAL GROWTH FOR HONG KONG
SEMINARIANS WITH REFERENCE TO**

1 JOHN 2:12-14

Introduction

This assignment was designed as partial teaching material for use in a Pentecostal seminary course, instructing students about spiritual formation in general, and the methods of application for spiritual growth in Hong Kong.

Authentic spirituality aims at being Christ-centered, Spirit-led, and love expressive. An authentic model of spiritual growth [or an authentic use of models of spiritual growth] will seek to reconcile, for example, faith and works, or evangelism and social action. For this, we will need a sufficiently broad understanding of maturity, joining love for God to love for others. (Howard 2008, 252, bracketed words original)

The model proposed in this chapter aims to build spiritual maturity, this ‘authentic spirituality,’ by encouraging a growth-filled journey on both an individual and corporate level (Gal. 5:22-23). While its utility presents itself as a general guide for the fostering of spiritual growth environments, this model’s intended purpose is to be used as a teaching aid and outline for use by those anyone interested in teaching these principles—professors, counselors, and pastors. Various sources in this model are quoted and responded to in their corresponding styles, according to the main theme. This is intentional, as different stages of Christian spiritual

growth become apparent in various means and flavours, distinct and beautiful in and of themselves. Each section provides main principles as a rule, and some will also suggest relevant spiritual disciplines for practical application of the ideas therein.

Teaching Hong Kong Seminarians

This section provides a brief introduction about the course's teaching and learning environment. Goals of Christian education on a large scale are considered, and the course's expectations, outline, and evaluation method are briefly discussed.

Some Preparation for Teaching Seminarians

The format and general attitude of this course is informed by the middling success of the 2007 Hong Kong Institute of Christian Counselors' Spiritual Warfare course, which was also designed by the author. A review of the teaching material revealed that, in some cases, the course did not meet some of the adult learners' expectations, which prompted serious reflection and reconsideration of the course's focus and learning environment. This reflection led to the desire for a positive learning environment for students, created by intentionally teaching positivity as well as encouraging positive attitudes in students (Gagne 1985, 232).

Linda Vogel, in *Teaching and Learning in Communities of Faith*, suggests nine strategies for teachers to promote exploration and inclusivity. Two key points that have influenced this course are the ideas that "Teaching should cause people to explore," and "There generally is not only one right answer" (159-160). These

were key strategies for this teaching, as the Hong Kong education system usually favors one standard answer for every question, allowing for little answer variation, and often promoting intolerance toward a questioning attitude. This combination often opposes the phenomenon of Christian growth, in which there are many layers of depth to apparent answers, as well as various concurrent truths that could colour a particular denomination's school of thought. Also utility of classical critical thinking, including synthesizing, appraising, and integrating new data with existing information (Habermas & Issler 1992, 106) to Hong Kong students would be expected to build a solid foundation for their spiritual growth.

Next, my goal in teaching would be to facilitate Christian spiritual growth. Perry Downs states that “adult converts must be taught to understand life in new ways [according to the Bible], that we take the [spiritual] development process in people seriously” (Downs 1994, 60, 195, bracketed words added). I remember how disappointed I was twenty years ago when I entered Bible college for the first time. I asked a professor about Christian spiritual growth, and he said that he did not have any resources about it and wanted to know about this subject too. Now I would present some useful knowledge about Christian spiritual growth which was grounded in God's word, according to a passage of the Bible. That could provide a certain understanding of a desirable process of spiritual development or growth in Christian life.

Finally, it is important to recognize the role of the teacher as God's assistant.

To teach well in the sight of God, then, we must hold fast to the idea that God chooses to use us for a time as facilitators of an educational process in which God is the Great Teacher and we are God's assistants. (Yust & Anderson 2006, 162)

In following this model for spiritual formation, it is crucial that instructors maintain a grand focus on their role; instead of simply teaching from a book or manual, the teachers act as the hands and the voice of God for the spiritual growth of their students. The Holy Spirit is the chief instructor, and the instructor stands simply as the Spirit's assistant.

The Chinese Classroom: Learning Environment and Lesson Plan

The total teaching time for each lesson was approximately two and a half hours. Depending on the required classroom hours for courses across various institutions, this chapter could be subdivided into their component sections in order to provide emphasis, or to promote meditation across five lessons.

Each lesson was designed to begin with a one-hour lecture using each section, followed by a student presentation. The first lesson, an overview of spiritual growth, provided a general understanding of the concept to students who might not have had exposure to the subject in the past, and later lessons outlined in greater detail the eight tasks of spiritual growth referred to in 1 John 2:12-14. Student presentations involved discussion of text covered the theme; these presentations were to last approximately thirty minutes. After the presentations, a half-hour group discussion was encouraged, both to discuss the content presented and to encourage the discussion of practical application, including potential

pastoral implications of the topics. Each group could contain three or four students, and the overall number of groups would vary by class size.

In the Hong Kong Chinese classroom, is generally understood that “[s]tudents are socialized to respect, not to question, the authority of the teacher” (Lam 2011, 167). Group discussion, therefore, is an essential tool for Chinese students as it encourages them to have deeper understanding through the formulation of their own questions, through open conversation, and through response to the questions of their peers. Next, a twenty-minute discussion report time was integrated, as was customary for some seminaries; this aided group focus and accountability while discussing the issues. Finally, a time of reflection, evaluation, and conclusion was suggested for the end of each lesson.

Table 1. Lesson plan for the four sessions of the lesson

Time required	Content of lesson	Responsible person(s)
60 min	Lecture on relevant topic	Instructor
30 min	Book summary presentations	Students
30 min	Group discussion	Students
20 min	Discussion reports	Group representatives
10 min	Reflection, evaluation, and conclusion	Instructor

Evaluation Criteria

Since undergraduate Hong Kong seminarians could find English textbooks prohibitive or hindering, some Chinese texts were included in the course readings and are referred to in the following sections. While graduate students in this case were required to read English books, and were permitted to write in Chinese, the language restrictions might vary depending on a seminary’s guidelines. Deep reflection was encouraged, and demonstration of this reflection in students’

written assignments was appreciated. Since “Hong Kong’s competitive and examination-oriented education system and expository teaching methods encourage a surface approach to learning,” (Salili 1999, 96, 238) the final assignment required students to write a more conceptual paper detailing exercises, texts, and disciplines most relevant to their own personal spiritual growth. Lesson learning, book summary reports, students’ own personal reflections, and the assignments aimed to promote a deeper understanding of the Bible verses should set students on the path for success for their own spiritual growth.

Table 2. Evaluation criteria for the suggested course

	Assignments	Value
1	Attendance	10%
2	Group participation and discussion report	20%
3	Book summary presentation	20%
4	Essay on spiritual growth learning task and self-reflection	50%

The evaluation criteria were established on a competency-based learning model which emphasizes the students demonstrating integrative learning and experiences from their own traits and learning process throughout the course. Competency-based models shift the focus from instructional delivery to student performance, including student performance in classroom presentations. (Voorhees 2001, 9, 90-91) Most seminarians were expected to be familiar with many passages of scripture, including 1 John 2:12-14. Thus, the criteria of assessment largely focused on the students’ reports detailing their practical integration of disciplines into life situations and potential pastoral applications of the passage. Psychological input on spiritual growth with reference to the passage

was considered one kind of integration into life situations. It was optional for students to include some psychological input in their assignments.

Students were asked to select one of eight topics outlined in the following sections and to write a self-reflective essay that considered the topic. In rare cases, other essay topics were welcomed, providing they were relevant to the course. Undergraduate students were encouraged to demonstrate their comprehensive understanding on their selected topic or learning task within the context of their own stage of spiritual growth. Students were also expected to read and cite some books that inform their report, so as to encourage further reading by interested students. Graduate students were to be held to a slightly higher standard of research, demonstrating their insight by also citing sources related to the topic other than the recommended reading lists. Writing standards, including plagiarism, etc., were in accordance with the seminary's standards.

Overview of Spiritual Growth With Reference to 1 John 2:12-14

Although the Apostle Paul wrote that only God causes Christian spiritual growth (1 Cor. 3:6), Peter urges all Christians to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18 AV). There is no controversy about the need for Christian spiritual growth after conversion, but because of the nuances within the encouragements to grow, different denominations have decidedly different ways of suggesting what this growth, in fact, looks like.

The Roman Catholic Church uses the terms ‘faith formation’ or ‘formation of faith,’ with emphasis on a human aspect of faith development toward God (Gordon 2008, 31). In fact, every Christian needs faith formation. The Orthodox Church favors a thematic approach with liturgical emphasis in promoting the progress of Christian spiritual growth; for example, Divine Liturgy, commemoration of the saints, and deification etc. (Mantzarides 1994). There is no doubt that Christian spiritual formation is multi-faceted.

According to some Christian traditions, spiritual formation emphasizes the workings of the Holy Spirit within the human spirit. “The point is that a very important part of a biblically focused spiritual formation agenda would attend to the work of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit” (Averbeck 2008, 34). The work of the Holy Spirit extends to the whole Christian community and urges Christians to do Christ’s mission work. Gordon Fee even urges church leaders to trust in God’s Spirit to “guide the whole community to a life in the Spirit that leads to genuine *Spirituality* in the believers’ daily lives” (Fee 2010, 43, italics in original). One important trait of Christian spiritual formation by the Holy Spirit is the continual forming of that which will never be complete on this earth (2 Cor. 3:18) and always aiming at ‘here and now holiness’ (Nelson 2010, 28).

Some Protestant Christians view ‘spiritual formation’ as a synonym for ‘spiritual growth,’ but this conflation can prove unwieldy at times, as the two are markedly different. Psychologists prefer the term ‘spiritual growth’ to ‘spiritual formation’ due to its connotation of measurable advancement within one’s spirituality, either qualifying actions as those that contribute to progress or decline

(Desai and Pargament 2015, 43; DeHoff 1998, 334). Spiritual growth implies a process and, in some cases, distinct, measurable, and separable stages.

Different Protestant denominations provide different models for spiritual growth and formation. Don Willett points out that

Various denominations, however, offer distinctly different paths for believers to follow and different milestones by which to measure one's progress to spiritual maturity. As a result, rather than a consensus, much confusion about spiritual growth exists ... (Willett 2012, 4).

Many Chinese Christians long to grow spiritually and biblically. We also want to walk in the biblical path of spiritual growth simply for fear of being led astray. As some heresies are taught in mainland China (for example, the 'Church of Almighty God' claims that the second coming of Christ is actualized with a woman's body [Ma and Li 2015]), a biblically-sound model for Christian growth is greatly needed. Such a model has the potential to be the best approach for evangelicals and should be the hallmark of evangelical spirituality.

There are several passages in the Bible that include accounts perceived as Christian spiritual growth, with some indicators that may be understood as different stages or progressive characteristics in the advancement of Christian spiritual life. One spiritual growth model, based on 2 Peter 1:5-7, has been developed by a Christian counselor named Dr. Troy Reiner (2014). In his book *Revelations That Will Set You Free: The Biblical Road Map for Spiritual and Psychological Growth*, Reiner proposes an eight-step spiritual growth process with relevant experiences of God; namely, faith, virtue (or yielding), knowledge,

self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and agape love. The book discusses Christian character formation and is helpful for Christians who want to practice the passage. Another significant passage concerning biblical spiritual growth is 1 John 2:12-14, the textual source for this model.

1 John 2:12-14 as a Blueprint for Christian Spiritual Growth

The writer of 1 John, supposed to be the Apostle John, proposes a spiritual growth framework by using a three-stage human developmental metaphor—namely, children, youth, and parents—in 1 John 2:12-14. This essay uses the terms ‘youth’ and ‘parents’ for the source’s *neaniskoi* and *pateres*. According to Don Willett’s research, eight scholars or commentators—namely, John Stott, Guy King, Robert Law, August Van Ryan, Arthur Pink, F. F. Bruce, W. E. Vine, and James Montgomery—interpret these three stages as a metaphorical understanding of Christian spiritual growth (Willett 2012, 15-19). Furthermore, recent commentators Howard Marshall (Marshall 1990, 138), John Christopher Thomas (Thomas 2004, 100-101), Peter Rhea Jones (Jones 2009, 74-75, 79-80), Robert Yarbrough (Yarbrough 2008, 116-118), John Painter and Daniel Harrington (Painter and Harrington 2002, 185-186, 188) also favor the metaphorical interpretation. Taking a different view, John Calvin, the reformer, as well as Bruce Schuchard, a recent scholar, interpret these age groups as chronological ages (Willett 2012, 14; Schuchard 2012, 202). This essay would work under consideration of the metaphorical interpretation of the passage as it accounts for

the stages of growth in the new believer to the mature one; one may experience spiritual growth that does not necessarily correspond to their physical age.

Duane Watson, in his analysis of the text, identifies four groupings of three in the first two chapters of 1 John (Watson 1989, 99). In fact, his third group contains two groupings according to the Greek text. As a result, there are five groupings in the two chapters, as shown in the following table.

Table 3. Five groupings of three in 1 John 1–2

	Verses	Beginning with ...	Group one	Group two	Group three
1	1:6, 8, 10	“If we say that ...”	“we have fellowship with God ...”	“we have no sin ...”	“we have not sinned ...”
2	2:4, 6, 9	“The one who says ...”	“I have come to know him ...”	“he abides in him ...”	“he is in the light ...”
3	2:12-13	“I am writing to you ... because ...”	“little children ...”	“fathers ...”	“young men ...”
4	2:13-14	“I have written to you ... because ...”	“children ...”	“fathers ...”	“young men ...”
5	2:16	“For all that is in the world ...”	“the lust of the flesh ...”	“the lust of the eyes ...”	“the boastful pride of life ...”

Source: Modified from Watson, Duane F., 1989, “1 John 2.12-14 as *Distributio*, *Conduplicatio*, and *Expolitio*: A Rhetorical Understanding,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35: 99.

With reference to the Table above list number 3 and 4, Howard Marshall points out that

Most writers explain the verb in these two tenses (2:12-14) as a matter of stylistic variation, perhaps to relieve the monotony of ‘I write’ occurring six times over. In Greek it was possible to use the past tense in a letter with the effect of a present tense: the writer projected himself forward in time to the situation of his recipient for whom the writing of the letter would be a past event.... In this way, John made use of a stylistic device to enable him to repeat certain things for emphasis. (Marshall 1990, 135-136)

In fact, in the Vulgate translation, the latter three occurrences of “I have written” (*egrapha*) were translated into present tense, “I write,” (Barclay 1996, Chinese edition, 58). Moreover, a New Testament scholar Stanley Porter, based on John’s use of the verb form, concluded that “the ‘*hoti*’ (because) clauses in 2:12-14 use the most heavily marked Perfect to summarize the entire theology of the epistle” (Porter 2010, 230). That means the three-stage Christian growth of John’s proposal was regarded as a really important message in that epistle.

According to Bruce Demarest,

The American Heritage dictionary defines a model as ‘a schematic description of a system, theory, or phenomenon that accounts for its known or inferred properties and may be used for further study of its characteristics.’ A model thus represents a ‘repeatable pattern or sustainable outcome [that] can be described that others could use or imitate.’ (Demarest 2008, 150, bracketed word added)

Therefore, 1 John 2:12-14 can function as the foundation of a possible model for Christian spiritual growth, both because of its demonstrated repetition within 1 John, and due to the pivotal role of the theological message in the book. Needless to say, John’s description of the three stages is surely a repeatable pattern that outlines certain traits or properties; this model will interpret these properties as eight tasks for Christian spiritual growth.

Now established that 1 John 2:12-14 as a metaphor for spiritual growth, it can be further elaborated to eight learning tasks which cater to those within three stages of growth. Although most of the scholars describe ‘six’ signs or characteristics of these three groups of Christians (Jones 2009, 73), Don Willett proposes eight issues described in 1 John 2:12-14 (Willett 2012, 78); spiritual

‘children’ and ‘parents’ certainly have some inherited traits or characteristics, just as spiritual ‘youth’ are ‘strong’ (2:14).

Table 4. A summary of my elaboration of John’s three-stage Christian spiritual growth model

Stage	Verses, (1 John)	Learning Task	Some Relevant Points
Children	2:12-13	Children	Humility, encountering God, learning and changing
	2:12	Forgiveness	Self-acceptance, conscientization, confession of sin
	2:13	Knowing the Father	Receiving God’s love, life sovereignty, quietness
Youth	2:14	Strong youth	Psychological health, inner healing
	2:14	Abiding in God’s Word	Learning God’s Word, meditation
	2:13	Overcoming the devil	Overcoming different levels of battle, fasting
Parents	2:13-14	Parents	Spiritual parenting and mentoring
	2:13-14	Knowing God, who is from the beginning	Ignatian ‘Indifference,’ contemplative prayer

According to Don Willett,

Throughout *The Path*, the group of children refers to those believers in the Childhood stage of faith, the young men to those in the Young Adulthood stage, and fathers to those in the Parenthood stage. The attributes addressed in each of these stages will be referred to as *milestones*, an allusion to those roadside markers or signs that tell the distance to a particular place. Each milestone shows travelers that they have made some progress and are heading in the right direction, toward their intended location. (Willett 2012, 77, italics in original)

In general, the term ‘learning tasks’ may be better suited than ‘milestones’ to describe Christian principles learnt and experienced in the path of spiritual growth. A ‘learning task’ describes a key principle that must both be learned and applied in order to experience spiritual growth in our lives. More importantly, the linear nature connoted to the term ‘milestone’ is negated, allowing growing Christians to

learn and practice two or three ‘learning tasks’ at the same time. An example could be a spiritual youth in 1 John 2:13-14 who needs to let God’s Word abide in him while at the same time gaining victory over the evil one. In this case, this spiritual youth could attend to two spiritual growth tasks at one time.

Charles Kraft agrees with this sentiment, asserting the lack of distinct or distinguishing boundaries between these steps or other events in a biblical Jewish worldview (Kraft 1989, Chinese edition 1991, 283). If anything, from a biblical perspective, Christian spiritual growth clings to a spiral form rather than a linear form.

Dr. Paul Bramer’s words:

John is using these age groupings as psychological metaphors for different levels of spiritual maturity. These verses are not a complete description of three groups or stages, but they are suggestive, both as to the issues involved and some of the characteristics. (Bramer, 3)

In this case, even though the passage does not necessarily completely describe the stages of Christian spiritual growth, it may be used as a framework to guide growth due to its relatable and compelling nature. Once understanding for the choice in text is established, one must consider the psychological mechanics of spiritual growth.

Some Psychological Aspects of Christian Spiritual Growth

In recent years, some psychologists have realized that the human spirit and being are inseparable. Ken Wilber, in his book, *Integral Psychology*, acknowledges the spiritual dimension of human beings but also proposes that

spiritual experience, as well as spiritual stage models, should be considered by secular psychology. However, Wilber's description of 'the spiritual' includes all religious experiences (Wilber 2000, 31, 133), and does not solely focus on a Christian perspective. In addition, some Christians do not Christianize the whole psychological theory, but some segments inside some psychological theories. Furthermore, some Christians feel the limitation of psychological theories, so they even invent their own models of spiritual growth.

For the purpose of this chapter, consider that Christian spiritual growth must exist hand in hand with psychological growth. In the stage of spiritual children, for instance, some Christians may need to address their psychological problems or meet their psychological needs in order to build the proper mentality and psychological energy to walk the path of spiritual growth. In the part two entitled *Self-Knowledge* from *The Spiritual Life: Recognizing the Holy*, Robert Fabing (2004) approaches various afflictions, such as repression and anxiety, from a psychological perspective in an effort to promote transformation in the Christian's life. Similarly, psychiatrist Robert McDonald and Professor Wilkie Au, respectively, point out how improper repression and wrong introjections can cause substantial troubles in the Christian life (McDonald 1983, 98-114; Au and Au 2006, 149-153). In another book, *Moving Toward Spiritual Maturity*, Neil Pembroke (2007) also utilizes psychological counseling methods when addressing concerns in the lives his counselees. For example, Pembroke adopts a cognitive therapeutic approach to encourage Christians to grow out of the habitual mindset

of shame-based perfectionism. This approach has been proven effective, and will continue to be transformative as long as spiritual growth exists.

Recommended Material for Fostering Spiritual Growth

In the beginning of one's spiritual journey, the processing of negative emotions, promotion of positive mentality, and the practice of some rudimentary spiritual disciplines are often recommended. Several steps to kickstart growth may be taken from the following books. First, it is important to frame spiritual growth under the paradigm of grace; life itself as well as spiritual growth is a gift from God. David Benner's book *The Gift of Being Yourself* (2004) provides proper perspective and firm foundations while teaching the fundamentals of spiritual growth. Whatever the spiritual path, personal uniqueness should be acknowledged, as our individuality is a gift from God. Because of God's acceptance, Christians may accept themselves as they are. If readers are willing to consider a secular approach to an authentic mind and heart, *The Authentic Heart* by John Amodeo (2001) also can help restore an honest heart before God and humankind. As Christians learn the lesson of self-acceptance, *Surrender* by Mary Hynes (1999) will encourage a loosening of the soil of the heart, development of a reflective mind, and an attitude of to surrender toward God. With an honest heart and healthy self-image, Christians can be well-equipped for their spiritual journey and with joy. Once established, *Soulful Spirituality* (Benner 2011) further promotes self-acceptance and introduces the practices of silence and prayerfulness to deal with negative emotions (Benner 2011, 164-165).

In the stage of spiritual youth, some Christians may experience inner healing that strengthens their spiritual life. One good example is derived from Erickson's eight stages of life, *Healing the Eight Stages of Life* (Linn, Fabricant and Linn 1988, Chinese edition 2011). This book instructs the healing of deeply-seated wounds, including those from family of origin or those gained during our life development, through prayer and the correction of our false images of God. This book may be used, along with some other books in the realm of inner healing, to build both a strong spiritual and psychological life. Some more elaboration will be presented in the following sections outlining spiritual youth.

Finally, two books that have adopted a 'three-stage' model for Christian spiritual growth; namely, *Seasons of the Soul* by Bruce Demarest (2009) and *Spiritual Passages* by Benedict Groeschel (2003). These two books describe Christian spiritual growth that is in some ways compatible with Apostle John's proposal of Christian spiritual growth according to 1 John 2:2-14.

Eight Learning Tasks

The following sections describe eight learning tasks for Christian spiritual growth. Most of the following descriptions of all eight tasks begin with the Scripture and are then tailored for personal and practical use. Some segments of the passage provide little exegetical information about those tasks, and are elaborated upon in order to provide deeper understanding for the reader. In the concluding remarks, some characteristics or issues of spiritual growth in general and the areas that need to be further studied in the conclusion are considered.

Spiritual Children: Becoming

Apart from 2:12, the term ‘little children’ (*teknion*) occurs in 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21, while ‘children’ (*paidion*) occurs in 2:13, 18 in 1 John (*BibleWorks* 2013, 5040 *teknion*, 3813 *paidion*). Most scholars consider John’s use of these two Greek words as interchangeable in his letter, despite their slightly different meanings. Some scholars comment that, in the case of 1 John, the group ‘children’ should be interpreted as to include all Christians (Painter and Harrington 2002, 185). While the learning tasks of humility, forgiveness of sins, and knowing the Father are for Christians of all ages, this model considers these ‘children’ in a spiritual light; John specifies and distinguishes between the two groups. Besides, these tasks are fitted to address the spiritual need of new believers in learning.

I would like to suggest that the Apostle John use of the term ‘children,’ highlights an important characteristic of the new believer: humility. Before the main passage of this essay, John addresses some possibly boastful claims by some Christians: “we have fellowship with God ...” (1 John 1:6); “we have no sin ...” (1:8); “we have not sinned ...” (1:10); “I have come to know him ...” (2:4); “he abides in him ...” (2:6); “he is in the light ...” (2:9). John might have been addressing the hidden pride of his recipients as they claimed to have good spiritual lives, encouraging them to be changed by God’s truth while also demolishing their pride.

One of the characteristics of spiritual ‘children’ is to “be converted, and become as little children [*paidion*]” (Matt. 18:3 AV). This passage might describe

the willingness to follow as a disciple of Jesus in the Christian community (John 13:33). Moreover, Jesus calls us to turn from our previous ungodly mindset and behavior in order to fully trust the heavenly Father (Matt. 18:4) (Wang 2005, Chinese edition, 155). “As truly humble people, we need to depend on God completely—for all things at all times” (Mack and Mack 2005, 38).

Psalm 131:1 (NASB) presents a beautiful description of humility: “O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty; nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me.” New believers need to reset their hearts and minds to become humble and honest, not proud or haughty. In fact, humility is an important trait that believers need to learn and embrace throughout their entire spiritual journey. Andrew Murray wrote, “God’s grace can only root in the soil of humility” (Murray 1997, Chinese edition 2012, 8). Humility, then, is the crucial criterion for receiving God’s grace as well as for encountering God (James 4:6-8). With this kind of humility, new believers are not only ready to kickstart their spiritual journey, but also ready to begin to experience God.

At this point I would like to introduce a ‘Search → Encounter → Transformation’ model by Mark Cartledge (Cartledge 2006, 25). While spiritual longing is so often the key in searching for God, humility is the key to encountering God. Both longing and humility foster an ever-learning attitude in the believer’s heart, continuously setting the stage for spiritual growth until we meet Jesus face to face. “Learning truth... demands that we invest time in exposing ourselves to biblical truth, and it requires a sense of humility” (Waggoner 2008, 57). The learning tasks that follow describe the transformation

of the Christian life. John writes: “Now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from him in shame at his coming ” (1 John 2:28 NASB)

Abiding in Christ Jesus may sum up the whole process of Christian spiritual growth. No matter which learning task has been experienced or lies ahead, the most important thing is the leading of Christ through his Word and in prayer (John 15:7). With a humble heart, God’s prompts will be made known, facilitating spiritual development. One way to train the heart in humility and in God’s discipline is to accept criticism and even humiliation from other people (Bourke 2002, 120-122). The goal of spiritual growth is not for our own selves, nor is it another kind of self-actualization, but is to prepare ourselves to welcome the second coming of Christ in divine faith.

Beginning at the stage of spiritual childhood, as mentioned in 1 John 2, it is of paramount importance to Christians to learn the lesson and discipline of humility. With humility, believers will learn the truth well and experience God all along the way of spiritual growth; on the contrary, God opposes those who are proud (James 4:6).

Spiritual Children: Forgiveness

The Apostle John considers the nature of sin and the problem it poses for Christians with necessary gravity. On the one hand, according to his teaching, we cannot say that “we have no sin ...” (1 John 1:8) or that “we have not sinned ...” (1:10); on the other hand, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin,

because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God" (1 John 3:9 NIV). Thus John deeply understands the dilemma of sinful human beings and the believer's divine nature in Christ. The realization of sinful acts, and even of our sinful nature, requires a clear conscience with reference to God's holiness or God's Word.

[Human] conscience ... is a human capacity, a human process [of thinking], and the judgment that is conscience is a human judgment. However moved, inspired, instructed or guided by the Holy Spirit, the so-called voice of conscience which I hear is my voice, my judgment, for which I must take full and final responsibility. (Hanigan 2004, 175, bracketed words added)

In short, the Holy Spirit works on the conscience of believers, guiding it to make good and holy judgments. According to the Apostle John, the Holy Spirit testifies to our conscience that some behaviors are sins. The greatest sin is disbelieving Jesus (John 16:8-9). Furthermore, not believing Christ is a kind of antichrist spirit that Christians in the 'children' stage should beware of (1 John 2:18-19).

Moreover, God's Word illuminates Christian conscience. According to the Wesleyan-Pentecostal tradition,

Experience of sanctification brought about a new moral and social sensibility. Sanctification thus became a process of consciousness-raising whereby people answered God's call to a holy life and to co-create with God in the transformation of society. Reality was to be critically perceived and injustice was to be the object of reflection and action guided by the Holy Spirit. (Johns 1993, 65-66)

The underlying assumption here is that these Christians are willing to accept and change the previously unregenerate standard of judgment to that of repentance, informed by scripture, due to the experience of sanctification. Then, this process

of consciousness-raising could occur in the hearts and minds of Christians. In other words, Christians need to let God's Word change their moral standard at every level toward God's justice. This process is called Christian conscientization.

Conscientization in the context of Pentecostal environment is initiated and maintained by the Holy Spirit, who unveils reality in a manner which incorporates by superseding human praxis. Pentecostal conscientization is thus an ongoing dialectic of humanity and deity. (Johns 1993, 62)

In Johns' words, Christians and the Holy Spirit maintain an ongoing dialogue about reality, needing its guidance and perspective in order to make the right choice. However, if this guidance is ignored, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus provides the means of repentance. "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1 NASB). This verse provides the most suitable explanation of forgiveness because of Jesus' sake—"for His name's sake" (1 John 2:12 NASB). Thus we know,

The basis of our forgiveness is not confession, repentance, or faith, though all three are essential to our experience of forgiveness. The basis of our forgiveness is the sacrificial, substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross. (Charles Stanley, quoted in Smith 1995, 72)

Jesus' death offers those who believe forgiveness, divine peace, and healing (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:24). In a word, God's forgiveness is life-changing (John 8:1-11) (Jones and Ledwith 2005, 73) while confession, repentance and faith are closely linked with God's forgiveness.

The practice of cycling through ongoing confession, repentance, and forgiveness is an important learning task in this stage, and remains so throughout the entire Christian spiritual journey. In the epistle of James, the author suggests that believers could confess before elders or in a small group setting; in this way we will experience God's healing, which is vital for Christian health (James 5:14-16). Confession requires a heart of honesty, which itself comes from genuine self-acceptance. Genuine self-acceptance comes from a deep sense of security in Christ. Leanne Payne rightly points out that self-acceptance is the root of all spiritual experience, but failure to deal with inner insecurities and self-hatred thereby comprises failure to gain a secure identity in Christ. Self-hatred, over-scrupulosity and perfectionism are common problems often caused and perpetuated by dysfunctional families (Payne 1991, 22, 31). In other words, genuine self-acceptance is sometimes necessary for an honest confession of sin.

David Seamands (1990) offers a good analysis on parental disgrace (he calls it 'dysgrace,' denoting the opposite of God's grace) and how God's grace changes the believer's life in his book *Healing Grace*. Parental dysgrace describes parents who, intentionally or otherwise, withhold unconditional acceptance and love toward their children, resulting in the child's formation of a performance-oriented mentality. This hinders children from receiving God's grace. In addition, he stated that this dysgrace also appears in Western culture and even in some churches (Seamands 1990, 30-43, 104-112). Self-unacceptance often involves some kind of idolatry because we see ourselves not according to God's Word, but according to our own view or a view other than God's. Thus John encourages us

to keep ourselves from idols (1 John 5:21). In fact, a strong longing for God would likely cast out all idols from our hearts (Fitzpatrick 2001, 127). Besides, in order to receive God's forgiveness, believers need to learn and practice forgiveness toward one another. *Choosing Forgiveness*, written by John and Paula Sandford and Lee Bowman, teaches forgiveness rooted in the cross of Christ and then extended to forgiving others, with special attention to our emotional health through forgiveness (Sandford, Sandford, and Bowman 2007, 27, 59, 85, and 177).

Last, but not least, the goal of receiving Christ's forgiveness is the goal of striving—the goal to be a righteous Christian. John writes, “Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous” (1 John 3:7 NASB).

In summary, God's forgiveness of sin stands as a constant reminder that everyone has sinned, and only through Jesus' name are we forgiven. Believers are to maintain a recursive cycle of confession, repentance, and forgiveness, and model forgiveness after God's; this promotes righteous living in Christians. Moreover, confession of sin will help Christians to receive his forgiveness, and conscientization may help Christians actualize their desire to live righteously. Meanwhile, obstacles to receiving God's grace of forgiveness in the Christian life must be faced and dealt with properly.

Spiritual Children: Knowing the Father

From the beginning of 1 John, the Apostle John aims to share the knowledge of Jesus, who is with the heavenly Father (1 John 1:1-2). To 'know' in

Greek *ginosko* is to “perceive, recognize, to become acquainted with” (*BibleWorks* 2013, 1097 *ginosko*). John uses the same verb to describe how spiritual ‘parents’ know God (1 John 2:13-14). It follows, then, that the building of a relationship with the heavenly Father and knowing him is a lifelong process. The Holy Spirit helps us recognize him (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:6-7; 1 John 4:13-14), and knowing Jesus will lead us to know the Father as well (John 8:19). Gordon Smith’s book *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion & Authentic Transformation* presents a comprehensive explanation of seven elements in Christian initiation: the initial belief in Jesus Christ, repentance, trust in Jesus, transfer of allegiance to God, water baptism, reception of the Holy Spirit, and incorporation into congregational life (Smith 2001, 125). I would like to suggest that knowing the heavenly Father could build our loyalty in God, often in replacement for something or somebody.

Although God the Father is the Judge (1 John 2:1), according to the beginning of the second chapter of 1 John, he calls us his children and thus shows his love to us (1 John 3:1). The first task of knowing the heavenly Father is to experience God’s love. Since many Hong Kong Christians are first-generation believers, some have a distorted paternal image due to their earthly fathers. Such believers may only experience an affectively distant earthly father and therefore cannot experience God’s love easily. I highly recommend *Experiencing Father’s Embrace* (Frost 2002) and *Abba’s Child* (Manning 2015), for these two books testify how Christian clergy or ministry leaders may enter into an intimate relationship with the heavenly Father. We need to tackle the negative and

distorted impressions of our childhood toward our fathers, which we may intentionally or unintentionally be projecting toward our heavenly Father (Frost 1978, 78-99).

John continues, explaining that many Christians cannot experience God's love because we love the sinful or secular world so much (1 John 2:15-16). If we love the world, we cannot love the heavenly Father. Therefore, we must strive to become totally committed to Father God. *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* or *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (de Caussade 1959) is a spiritual classic, and explains the total commitment that will surely lead us to experience God's love. Our Father cares for us and will surely provide everything we need if we pursue his kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:26-33). However, many Christians struggle between loving the Father and loving this world. This struggle clearly shows our need of spiritual discipline from the heavenly Father.

God's discipline allows us to have a share in his holiness and righteousness (Heb. 12:5-11). Like clay in a potter's hand, a humble, softened heart (Isa. 64:8; Jer. 18:5-10) eases the duration and intensity of discipline required to produce meaningful shaping in God's hand. Nevertheless, it is often hard for us to accept any humiliation, which calls for another spiritual discipline.

There are two essential spiritual practices in the 'children' stage. One is reading or hearing God's Word. John writes,

As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. (1 John 2:24 NASB)

Believing and living in accordance with God's Word results in the formation of an intimate relationship with the Father. Meditation upon on his Word fosters spiritual growth and leads to spiritual prosperity (Ps. 1:1-3; 1 Pet. 2:1-3).

Moreover, Psalm 131:2 (NASB) presents a beautiful description of quietness in God's presence: "Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me." While the psalmist describes motherly love, this quality is also certainly apparent as believers continue to know God. "In the very nature of God, there is a mother's heart, the storge love that nurtures and comforts us in tenderness and compassion" (Frost 2002, 129). Another method that builds an intimate knowledge of God and his presence silent prayer, particularly disciplines outlined in either *Quiet in His Presence* (Harris 2000) or *Out of Solitude* (Nouwen 2004). These disciplines encourage the experience of peace from the Father through silence and solitude. Finally, *You Have Not Many Fathers* (Hanby and Ervin 1996) provides advice on how to find and treat a spiritual father, and it may be helpful to some Christians.

As mentioned before, experiencing the reception of the Holy Spirit can help Christians to know the heavenly Father and then lead to a transfer of allegiance to God. Believers may experience the Father's love as well as his discipline, and, in doing so, will have intimate relationship with the Father. However, sometimes a distorted image of our earthly fathers may prevent spiritual children from properly understanding their heavenly Father. If this problem emerges, the believer needs to address it in order to continue their spiritual growth.

In addition, the practices of silence, solitude, and studying God's Word will help prepare the heart to receive the Father's love and to know him in a deep way.

Spiritual Youth: Becoming Strong

Neaniskos, the Greek word for 'youth' (1 John 2:13-14), refers to those of peak strength who are in the prime of life;

Philo and Josephus used the word to describe the twenty-four-year-old to forty-year-old man, when he reaches full development and the height of his vigor and strength (Willett 2012, 101).

John uses the word *ischuros*, meaning 'strong' (1 John 2:14), just this once in all of the Johannine letters. However, in the Book of Revelation, he uses *ischuros* to describe a 'mighty' angel (5:2; 10:1; 18:21), the 'mighty' God (18:8), and even the evil spirits who did not possess 'might' enough to fight against God's angel (12:8) (*BibleWorks* 2013, 2478 *ischuros*). Moreover, *ischuros* was sometimes used as comparative speech in the New Testament; Jesus is described as 'stronger' or 'mightier' than John the Baptist (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16), and he had bound the 'strong' man (i.e., the devil) because he is stronger (Matt. 12:29; Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21-22). Notably, God's people can become 'strong' from weakness by faith (Heb. 11:34). God's Word makes the faith of the Christian 'strong' (Rom. 14:1-19). Paul knew how to rely on God's grace in his weakness and became 'strong' (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Given the above references, becoming a 'strong youth' is a learning task of the believer that is marked by a strengthening life transformation. While there are many catalysts and methods by which this transformation can occur, one

general transformation manifests itself through inner healing and the development of a psychologically strong heart and mind. Every growing Christian should have a self-understanding, a knowledge and direction to follow to grow strong; in other words, a blueprint to highlight weaker areas in their lives that require fortification. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, promotes a deeper biblical understanding about the old self and the new creation in Christ. He proposes that one major weakness in humans may be traced back to the Garden of Eden. When Eve and Adam were tempted to pursue the wisdom that God prohibited, the false self ('I am what I do') took over them (Mulholland 2006, 27, 31). The following paragraphs in this section are only a suggestion about how a Christian might grow psychologically as well as spiritually strong.

In Charismatic circles, inner healing has been viewed as a gift from God to reconstruct the Christian soul, recognized as early as the 1960s. In *The Transformation of the Inner Man*, John and Paula Sandford (1982) encourage Christians to seek God's healing by relying on the Spirit's guidance in prayer to expose our wounds and deficiencies. They clearly state that the problems of sin and a relationship with God must be restored to find strength according to God's promise. It is expected that spiritual gifts such as words of knowledge and words of wisdom will be received, leading to healing of memory and life transformation (Sandford and Sandford 1982, Chinese edition 2004, 21-22). The subject of inner healing deserves its own dedicated course so that students may learn about it and experience it for themselves.

The Path to Salvation by St. Theophan the Recluse (2006), a bishop in the Eastern Orthodox Church, describes the path of Christian transformation into strength by discussing spiritual awakening, repentance, forgiveness, and inner change filled with divine guidance and stillness. In addition, he includes some insights as to how to survive the turbulent youth period (68-79). At the end of this book, the writer describes the mature stage of the Christian that follows:

Those who have attained dispassion through stillness, and through dispassion have been made worthy of most sincere communion with God ... serve ... [Christian] seekers, enlightening them, guiding them, working miracles. (325, bracketed word added)

In this case, the ongoing practice, the stillness of the heart (*hesychia*), is the key to attaining dispassion, leading to the strength resulting from deep communion with God (325).

Moreover, there are a number of resources dealing with Christian psychological maturity. For example, Stephen Fortosis, in his article “Theological Foundations for a Stage Model of Spiritual Formation,” lists three stages of Christian psychospiritual growth: Formative Integration, Responsible Consistency, and Self-Transcendent Wholeness (Fortosis 2001, 59). It is worthwhile to learn about psychospiritual integration, logical consistency, and psychological wholeness as these stages promote psychospiritual growth in Christians, Chinese or otherwise.

Spiritual youth learn how to transform their lives from weak to strong, and is pertinent to John’s description. The largest hindrance to this transformation is the obstacle of the false self. This may be resolved through the process of inner

healing and through the practice of stillness for the purpose of building dispassion. In addition, the psychospiritual integration approach suggested by Fortosis may be helpful in strengthening spiritual youth.

Spiritual Youth: Letting the Word of God Abide

Although one common interpretation of God's Word (*logos*) is Jesus Christ himself (John 1:1-3), and a certain commentator argues that 'the Word (*logos*) of God' is in any case not to be understood as doctrine or written Scripture in 1 John 2:14, Edmond Hiebert argues that 'the word of God' in John's understanding signifies "the message of God as brought by Christ and now embodied in the inspired Scriptures" in 1 John (Hiebert 1991, 91, quoted in Yarbrough 2008, 124). Christians believe that Jesus and the Father can speak to us through the Bible in the present day. This is by no means a limiting factor; God can speak to us apart from the Bible, but he would never speak against his own word. In fact, there is a divine life in the words of Jesus. Jesus says, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63 NASB).

There exists a close relationship between the Holy Spirit and Jesus' words; both are formational to human spiritual life. The psalmist calls believers to let the law of God remain in their hearts and to love doing God's will (Ps. 40:8). Those who love God's Word will let his Word abide in them. Since Jesus' words represent himself, acting according to God's Word is a way to let him abide (John 15:7). Those with the intention to do God's will in every aspect in their lives (Ps.

143:10) will not only discern his will (John 7:17), but also win the battle of spiritual warfare with Satan, fleshly desire, and the world (1 John 2:15-16). The promise of God is true and firm (Num. 23:19) (Traylor 2011, 22), and God's Word is more long-lasting than the heavens and the earth (Matt. 24:35). So Christians who do the will of God live forever (1 John 2:17 NASB). In addition, living a righteous life with the Spirit's orientation is a prerequisite to the enjoyment of fruitful meditation (Ps. 1:1-2).

Meditation involves "savoring, repeating, thinking about or digesting the words so that they become personally meaningful and nourish us spiritually" (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 18). The art of biblical meditation is derived from Jewish tradition. Customarily, rabbis read the appointed portion of Scripture aloud repeatedly in order to allow for deeper reflection upon its contents, to impress its truth deeply on the heart and mind, and to commit it to memory (Toon 1993, 66). The discipline of memorization is a good preparation for meditation.

Fix your attention upon what you are reading without thinking about what follows.... Pause briefly, from time to time, to let these pleasant truths sink deeper and deeper into your soul, and allow the Holy Spirit time to work.... Simply let the truths sink into your heart rather than into your mind. (Nouwen, Christensen, and Laird 2013, 51)

Real meditation involves letting God's Word touch and transform the heart as well as the mind; in this way God's Word abides in us.

In meditation, a metaphor can be drawn upon as one chews upon what has been received from the Bible, allowing it to be digested for the sake of nourishment through the process of thinking on this truth repeatedly; the more

deliberate the chewing, often the greater the nutritional impact. Christian meditation is a receptive process allowing God's Word to break open, reform, and transform us spiritually (Pennington 1998, 61). Meditation also enlivens biblical text in such a pondering way that the written Word of God becomes the living Word of God which affixes upon our hearts through the work of the Holy Spirit (Tan and Gregg 1997, 86). God's Spirit shapes and reshapes our souls and spirits by his Word.

Biblical meditation includes synthesis, or comprehensive thought. After Jesus' mother Mary welcomed the shepherds, who were instructed by an angel to visit the baby Jesus, she pondered (in Greek *sumballo*) the shepherds' words (Luke 2:19). This word *sumballo* means "to consider, meet with, bring together, and discuss [within one's mind]" (*BibleWorks* 2013, 4820 *sumballo*, bracketed words added). Mary tried to comprehend all the unusual incidents concerning the birth of Jesus, concluding that this was indeed a divine message from series of events. In the comprehension of God's work and the concluded divine message in her heart and memory, God's Word abides in her. Sometimes Christians need to think about a sequence of events in the Bible in order to understand God's message behind them. This may suggest why we need to meditate day and night on His Word (Ps. 1:2; 119:48, 148).

Last, but not least, when John writes "God's word abides in you," he intentionally specifies 'you,' plural. John calls for a Christian community in which God's Word abides, echoing the psalmist's call for a community that loves

God's law (Ps. 119:79). When God's Word is shared (Ps. 119:43) with believers' understanding, divine light shines upon all recipients (Ps. 119:130).

In order to allow God's Word to abide in them, Christians must diligently meditate upon it, comprehend his message in their hearts and minds. Following God's Word and being submissive to his guidance is the only means by which to have a spiritually fruitful life. In addition, as seen in Mary's case, God's Word also can manifest itself in his work. In either case, it is crucial to meditate upon it and conclude that God is at work in order to have the Word abide, as for a task of spiritual youth.

Spiritual Youth: Overcoming the Evil One

Since there is repeatedly a definite article (the) before 'evil one,' the 'evil one' is understood as Satan or the devil. In fact, John uses 'overcome' (*nikao*) seven times to seven churches in the Revelation (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) (*BibleWorks* 2013, 3528 *nikao*). To have victory over the evil one is a major theme in Christian living (Brown and Yoder 1995, 128-131). John mentions spiritual warfare between the spirits of antichrist and spiritual 'children' (*teknion*) in 1 John 4:3-4. John wrote that these young children of God have overcome those spirits who stand in opposition to Jesus (1 John 4:3-4). Therefore, in John's opinion, spiritual warfare between the evil kingdom and those in Christ begins in the first stage of spiritual growth. In addition, these spiritual children may not conquer the devil in every battle until they reach the stage of 'youth.' If this is true, the war between the evil kingdom and Christians is long indeed.

Gregory Boyd (1997) analyzes the long-running war between God and the evil kingdom in his book *God at War*. He not only provides us an overview of spiritual warfare throughout the Bible, which extends into church history as well, but also insists that Satan is, even now, waging war against the church. The church can now combat Satan's threat with exorcisms and combat evil with God's truth and righteousness (Boyd 1997, 278-283).

Father Timothy Gallagher analyzes the first and second sets of the Ignatian Rule in his books *The Discernment of Spirits* (2005) and *Spiritual Consolation* (2007), emphasizing the spiritual warfare within the human spirit from before conversion until the Christian growing stage. He provides a micro-understanding of how the devil works against God in or around Christ-followers before they come to Christ and after, until they grow strong in their faith. Understanding the Ignatian Rule not only benefits spiritual growth, but also informs pastoral care and counseling.

Jesus says, "I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over me" (John 14:30 NIV). If Christians cede a foothold to the devil, there is no hope of complete victory. However, if God cleanses believers completely in their total surrender to him, the devil has no hold, and is subdued. In other words, the decisive spiritual warfare happens within Christian life. Moreover, Neil Anderson and Timothy M. Warner (2009) advise in *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Warfare* that only staying in truth—not lies—ensures that Christians stand on the firm foundation of victory over the devil. In order to stay in God's truth, Christians must love God, forsaking the sinful world

which echoes the boastful pride and the lust of the flesh and eyes in us (1 John 2:15-17; Jeremiah 17:7-8). *Seductions Exposed* (Greenwald 1990) instructs methods of how to expose fake Charismatic manifestations in Pentecostal or Charismatic churches, allowing Christians to preserve the spiritual purity of the community. Greenwald reminds Christians to beware of manipulative tactics and cursing that might be masked with some ‘spiritual’ practice or jargon (Greenwald 1990, Chinese edition 2005, 104-131).

John speaks to Christians (plural ‘you’) about a corporate victory over the evil one in 1 John 2:13, encouraging Christians often to help each other in their struggle to overcome him. This is especially pertinent in the area of the deliverance of children from evil, which can be viewed in spiritual warfare on a familial or church ministerial level. Although only a small percentage of children are under severe satanic attack, their resistance is weak due to their age. The author suggests *A Manual for Children's Deliverance* (Hammond and Hammond 2010) as a guide for parents or ministers if required. Furthermore, if some Christians might be called into the ministry of deliverance, strongly recommended readings include *Counseling and the Demonic* (Bufford 1988), which suggests that Christian counseling and praying for deliverance are complementary; *Healing through Deliverance* (Horrobin 1995), which emphasizes that deliverance may bring out the Christian wholeness God originally intended; and *A Comprehensive Guide to Deliverance and Inner Healing* (Sandford and Sandford 1992), which deals with deeper psychospiritual issues beyond the previously mentioned two books for general use with individuals. In deliverance ministry, the spiritual

practice of fasting is also vital (Mark 9:29), and I strongly suggest this discipline in relation to this learning task. Additional books on this topic are suggested in the bibliography.

John's suggestion that spiritual youth can learn and experience victory over the evil one is an encouraging call toward spiritual maturation. The most important battlefield of spiritual warfare can happen within the hearts and lives of Christians, but battles occur in churches and other organizations as well. Spiritual youth gain victory in corporate warfare with the devil, as they bolster each other.

Spiritual Parents: Becoming

'Fathers' (*pateres*) (1 John 2:13-14), a plural form in Johannine writings, usually denotes the Israelite ancestors (John 4:20; 6:31, 49, 58). A unique description in John's writings is of certain 'old' Christians in 1 John 2:13-14 (*BibleWorks* 2013, 3962 *pater*). Several points are worthy of noting in the text.

Primarily, the mention of spiritual 'fathers' twice immediately following after spiritual 'children' in 1 John 2:12-14. Dan Schaffer understood that "John placed the child and father together so that we would see the essential nature of reproduction in reaching and expressing maturity" (Schaffer 2006, 6). According to this observation, then, Christian spiritual maturity may be understood as an emergence into the stage of spiritual parenting with successful relevant experience. Spiritual parents need to reproduce and take care of spiritual children in order to be mature spiritually.

Secondly, passage in 1 John 2:14 places ‘fathers’ just after the ‘children’ who know the Father in 1 John 2:13. This likely implies that spiritual fathers in the church are to emulate the nature heavenly Father, and that spiritual children may find some help from spiritual fathers to know him in a better way.

Thirdly, in 1 John 2:12-14, the Apostle John delineates Christian spiritual growth as ‘children, fathers, young men,’ not the typical chronological growth sequence of ‘children, young men, fathers.’ This may suggest a pivotal role of spiritual fathers in Christian growth beyond that of reaching self-maturity; spiritual fathers bridge the divide between the stages of spiritual childhood and youth. This passage may also suggest that spiritual fathers are key during these various stages of Christian spiritual growth. To become a spiritual father should be the goal of every Christian as they mature, as spiritual fathers are the facilitators for different stages of Christians on others’ paths to maturity.

The nurturing traits of motherhood should be present in spiritual fathers as well as in mothers. For this reason, alongside the more obvious fact that believers can be mature regardless of gender, the term ‘parents’ will stand as a replacement for ‘fathers’ in the following discussion. Practically speaking, the task of spiritual parents is parenting, but the Apostle John does not describe the act of parenting.

Spiritual parenting, first and foremost, is an invitation from God; it is his gracious way of enlarging our spiritual lives. In this final stage of spiritual growth, the Apostle John states that Christian maturity includes an interpersonal ministry. Through spiritual parenting, Christians may attain a more fruitful and mature Christian life. However, for some Christians, spiritual parenthood is a calling of

God. It would be good for mature Christians to engage in parenting with a calling or confirmation from God (DePriest 2005, 110). It is possible for some Christians to live as hermits, or in a kind of peer-to-peer spiritual brotherhood with other Christians. Nevertheless, the understanding of how to be a spiritual parent is important good for every Christian whose goal is spiritual maturity.

Second, spiritual parenthood begins with a return to the Father's heart through a covenantal relationship with God (Mal. 4:6). Then,

The solidarity between fathers and children must be determined from the covenant relationship. The present order must be reconciled with the previous state of things when God has entered into a covenant relationship with the "fathers." (Verhoef 1987, 342)

Spiritual parents, therefore, must choose to live in God's presence, to hear his voice, to make decisions according to his leading and guidance, and to know his desire. In other words, spiritual parents must always be led by the Holy Spirit. Living in intimacy with the Father and receiving his blessing results in the passing-on of God's blessing to their spiritual children (DePriest 2005, 34, 37, 73).

Third, spiritual parenthood requires God's intervention "to turn the hearts of parents to children" (Luke 1:17). Norval Geldenhuys suggests,

These words imply that there had been a turning away of the hearts of the fathers from their children but they will again become affectionate towards them. Here we have, therefore, a reference to the re-establishment of the correct relation between fathers and children. (Geldenhuys 1979, 66)

Every spiritual parent needs to understand and to have an affectionate heart toward his or her children. The parent's responsibility involves the adoption of their child's perspective, to know what they know. This process functions in the

same manner as any interactions with young children; by drawing on one's experience of childhood, the gaps of communication, understanding, and respect can be closed. Besides, this openness is crucial to build the knowledge of one's spiritual children to understand their path of maturation. The key to turning parents' heart to their spiritual children may be unconditional acceptance and a listening ear.

Fourth, spiritual parenthood is a process of reproduction through the preaching of the gospel. Spiritual parents have the Father's heart for the lost; they carry the incorruptible seed of God's Word (1 Pet. 1:23) and sow it in people's hearts. They pray for the work of the Holy Spirit to induce spiritual birth (1 Cor. 4:15) (Schaffer 2006, 110). In fact, spiritual parents pray for their children throughout their lives. Their goal is to produce Christlike character in the children's lives (Biehl 1996, 10, 87). A capacity for knowing the Holy Spirit and encouraging children to live and walk in his presence and power are chief characteristics of spiritual parenting (Newberry 2003, 61-62).

We must acknowledge that "different personalities result in different approaches to ministry" (Sellner 2002, 84); this idea holds true in the context of spiritual parenthood. A spiritual parent should be prepared to parent those with different personalities and gifts (Kreider 2014, 53). However, the task of spiritual parenting is to invite those who receive the call, to welcome them with reverence, and to nurture them with generosity (Sawyer 2008, 4). Spiritual parents should not judge potential children by their outward appearance or performance at any given time. Instead, they should offer generosity, resulting in joyfulness as they set their

children up to surpass their own successes (Conley 2001, 125, 131). Nurturing involves a personal investment in spiritual children by talking to them to find out what they are thinking and feeling (DePriest 2005, 96, 169) and relies heavily on the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Horsfall 2008, 47).

Biehl suggests that it is dangerous to mentor the opposite sex on a one-on-one basis (Biehl 1996, 64-65). It is wise for spiritual parents to approach the parenting ministry on a group basis rather than an individual one. In fact, the Apostle John pluralizes spiritual ‘fathers’ (1 John 2:13-14) as well, possibly to imply a joint effort in the ministry of spiritual parenting. Spiritual parents, like their biological counterparts, should learn to serve as a team so as to benefit the next generation and the church as a whole.

In some ways, spiritual parents function similarly as spiritual mentors for Christian spiritual growth, most notably, in providing care, support, and guidance. Because of this, spiritual parents are a blessing to any church. Churches that have spiritual parents who are genuine, warm, compassionate, loving, gentle-hearted, and wise demonstrate God’s love and presence (Bersche 1995, 155) are desirable churches indeed.

To sum up, the calling to become a spiritual parent is a personal invitation and calling from God to enter into a covenantal and intimate relationship, both between him and spiritual children. A spiritual parent needs to be affectionate to spiritual children, to ‘reproduce,’ to grow new spiritual children through the teaching of the gospel, to acknowledge and accept the differences between spiritual children, and serve them as a team. This might be a picture of spiritual

father looks like, as mentioned by John. As a result, spiritual parents promote Christian growth and are a blessing to local churches.

Spiritual Parents: Knowing Him Who Has Been from the Beginning

The word ‘to know’ (*ginosko*) in 1 John 2:13-14 is used, both in the ‘children’ stage to ‘know’ the heavenly Father, and in the ‘parents’ stage to ‘know’ the One who has been from the beginning. This idea of ‘knowing’ encompasses the intimate experience both of the Father and Jesus. Most likely, ‘the beginning’ in 1 John 2:13-14 refers to the Word of Life in the beginning (1 John 1:1), as is Jesus Christ; also “in the beginning the Word ...” in John 1:1. “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him” (John 1:18 NASB), so the Apostle John might likely refer to Jesus Christ when he writes about the One who is from the beginning.

There are many ways for maturing Christians to know Jesus Christ on a deep level. First, the Apostle Paul mentions his experience of Jesus’ death and resurrection in Philippians 3:7-14. At the beginning of this passage, Paul compares all things to Christ and states his aspiration to know the supreme Christ only (Phil. 3:7-8). His aspiration to experience Jesus’ resurrection power is based on righteousness through his faith in God (Phil. 3:9-10). Meanwhile, Paul’s experience of Christ’s death resonates within him as he writes: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me ...” (Gal. 2:20 NASB).

The Ignatian concept of ‘indifference’ may help to elucidate a proper mentality of “sharing his death” (Phil. 3:10 NLT), largely because the principle and foundation of Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* resonates with Paul’s mentality:

We are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to experience salvation. All things on earth are created for us and help us praise, reverence and serve God. . . . For this it is necessary that we become indifferent to all created things so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what helps us praise, reverence, and serve God. This attachment comes *only* if we have a stronger detachment; therefore our one dominating desire and fundamental choice must be to live in the loving presence and wisdom of Christ, our Savior. (Wakefield 2006, 179, italics in original)

The above detachment from the world is called indifference or holy indifference, which results from a very strong attachment to Christ. This holy indifference helps Christians to know the One who has been from the beginning. In fact, *Spiritual Exercises* in their entirety are strongly recommended for every mature Christian as an ongoing practice. Within the framework of directed seminary-style teaching, however, it is impossible to find enough time for a retreat that could encompass the entire work. *Sacred Listening* (Wakefield 2006), a Protestant version of the *Spiritual Exercises*, functions extremely well in its place as a twenty-four-week devotional study. In nearly six months of devotional time, Christians are likely to have enough time for meaningful meditation and reflection upon the *Exercises* for life transformation. In fact, I had done these twenty-four-week private devotional readings with a peer group sharing in class when I was a student in Hong Kong Lutheran Theological Seminary with a course name

Christian Counseling and Spiritual Direction in spring 2013. It was an enlightening journey that deepened my commitment in the Lord as well as sharpened my spiritual discernment through the readings, meditation, and sharing.

Second, obeying God's guidance and relying on the work of the Holy Spirit can help us to know God. Bayless Conley claims that intimate knowledge of Jesus and the Father is achieved only through the operation of the Holy Spirit (Conley 2001, 78). The Holy Spirit leads us in soaking up God's love (Rom. 5:5). For some Christians, the 'secret and obscure promptings' of the Holy Spirit may be simply understood as God's voice. "No matter what our situation, we have God's perspective and his guidance as we move forward in obedience to his voice" (Payne 1995, 152). This kind of obedience will lead believers into a transformative 'knowing' of Jesus Christ.

If our goal is in any way related to God's eternal purpose then we must look outside the box of human discipline and fleshly imitation. When it comes to knowing and doing God's will, our most fundamental and vital need is that the body of Christ comes to live by his mind.... And consequently, all that the Lord does not see, recognize, or value, falls away from our hearts as when a snake sheds its dead skin. Walking in his light, our souls become branches that flow with his sap and produce that fruit of his Spirit. (Henderson 2013, 250)

In addition, God's will and guidance often need to be discerned by the community of mature Christians (Barry and Doherty 2002, 67).

Third, as a spiritual parent shares Jesus' heart and mind, they will surely share his ministry. He said, "Where I am, my servant also will be" (John 12:26b NIV). Jesus invites believers to share in others' brokenness, fear, confusion, and

anguish with his love and compassion. God's compassion is the awareness of the interconnectedness of all human beings. Intercession, compassionately praying for others, is the usual style of prayer for those who know Jesus deeply because Jesus "lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf" (Heb. 7:25b NLT). The fact that the intercessor's life is a living demonstration of the righteousness of God causes the words he prays to have authority and anointing (Bersche 1995, 19). Furthermore, God's compassion and righteousness compel us to pursue his justice on every level of life, including social justice (Boers 1991, 158-159).

God's righteousness goes hand in hand with his goodness. In fact, maturing Christians sense that God calls Christians to dwell in his goodness, stand in his righteousness (Hos. 10:12), and act according to these attributes (Tutu and Tutu 2010, 151, 162). Some Christians refer to this phenomenon as the 'fullness of the Holy Spirit,' signified by the manifestation of holiness and spiritual gifts (Lovelace 1985, Chinese edition 1995, 187-189). As Christians exercise divine righteousness and goodness, they may draw near to God. This intimacy with God, which builds the urge of spiritual reproduction, allows believers to emulate Jesus through the production and fostering of the next spiritual generation.

John identifies the characteristics of the spiritual father as one who intimately knows God as the eternal 'I AM' and is reproducing that pursuit into coming generations of spiritual children who in turn become spiritual mothers and fathers (Schaffer 2006, 175).

Imitating Christ (1 Cor. 11:1) is the long-lasting goal for Christian spiritual maturity, and it "is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others" (Mulholland 1993, 12).

In conclusion, “knowing him who has been from the beginning” (1 John 2:13-14) may involve the experience of Christ’s death and resurrection, and obedience toward God’s guidance, as in Apostle Paul’s life. This transforms the lives of Christians. Solitude with a prayerful heart may help this experience, while a principle of Ignatian indifference allows for bearing of fruit for God. In fact, starting from spiritual children, knowing the heavenly Father stands as the overarching goal of spiritual growth, and proves substantially rewarding when achieved. While spiritual youth is supposed to be deeply rooted in God’s Word by the practice of meditation, a spiritual parent is supposed to practice unceasing prayer by being anchored in God’s guidance. In any case, knowing God is a lifelong goal for any Christian.

Concluding Remarks

In 1 John 2:12-14, John shares his vision to evangelize and to multiply the church through the spiritual growth of Christians’ lives according to God’s Word and his Spirit in everyday life. However, there are some issues relevant to spiritual growth in general that I would like to discuss, including precocious mentality, exemption, stagnation, regression, and transition.

Sometimes precocious mentality proves to be a hindrance, but in this case, it is generally beneficial for a Christian to know that which lies ahead along the path of their growth; a spiritual child who has some understanding about spiritual warfare would likely be more prepared for coming combat. During this growth, however, it is important to avoid overreaching one’s capability for the purpose of

accelerating growth or skipping steps. For example, it is not good for a spiritual child to learn how to be a spiritual parent before experiencing the period of spiritual youth. Thankfully, spiritual children generally don't feel this proclivity, but some Christians also experience phases of life that render them unsuitable as spiritual parents; for example, they may be in a stressful period of life striving for survival (Biehl 1996, 62).

Another issue is that some Christians may be exempted from some learning tasks. It is surely possible that if a Christian ignores certain learning tasks, he or she may be exempted from them. But I would say it is not an exemption, but an escape from normal spiritual growing. Besides, a Christian could pass away when he or she is only a spiritual child. So this is not an exemption, but quitting on the path of spiritual growth. Can a Christian grow his or her spiritual life into maturity without passing all eight learning checkpoints? I would say yes, but such "mature" Christians are not maturing in the Johannine sense. They might be mature in some senses (for example, in growing into psychological maturity), but not in a Johannine way. I did not have any intention to undermine any other Christian growth or maturity models other than this Johannine type. As a matter of fact, there are so many theories and models about Christian growth and formation that are valuable, helpful, and useful for Christians, and the model proposed in this chapter is only one among many.

Concerning spiritual stagnation, if Christians practice a particular stage and need to return to solidify a concept from a past stage—something we did not experience or were disobedient in—God is faithful, and will ensure that these

lessons are not avoided or completed. Stagnation may occur, nonetheless. If so, this calls for the yield to God and his assignment is made clear so as to not halt during the growth process (Bersche 1995, 73, 77). In some situations, God may lead Christians to revisit a spiritual task in order to deepen their learning and experience. When a Christian is called to be a spiritual parent, for example, they should revisit the early learning of the heavenly Father in order to best lead their spiritual children. In the novice stage, Christians usually stand in a position to receive the Father's grace. However, in the parental stage, Christians model the heavenly Father and learn to acquire his heart.

So often, the Johannine spiritual growth tasks described in this essay indicate some fundamental learning and experience in each stage. This is not to say that no spiritual warfare, for instance, would occur in the spiritual parent stage. Most likely Christians in the spiritual youth stage would learn the basics or fundamentals about spiritual warfare and how to conquer the devil. In this way, Christians who are in older stages revisit their previous spiritual learning tasks, refining the disciplines they had integrated into their lives at that particular stage. Christians should never intentionally forget the principles learnt during previous tasks. Christian spiritual growth, cumulative as it is, is therefore a spiral of experience, orbiting around God as the centre.

In addition, stagnation is inclined to happen when a Christian is journeying inward or experiencing a spiritual disorientation. Some might call the stagnation 'a dark night' or 'wilderness experience.' God may provide a spiritual trial to purify our soul and strengthen our faith (Demarest 2009, 94, 98). In the

spiritual youth of Christian life, stagnation often occurs because of God's actions, such as breaking an overly stubborn ego, or dealing with hidden guilt and shame. Hagberg and Guelich describe this as the meeting of 'the Wall,' describing the blocked feeling that Christians may encounter rather than a clear path (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 115-116).

The process of meeting the Wall requires going through the Wall, not underneath it, over it, around it, or blasting it. We must go through it brick by brick, feeling and healing each element of our wills as we surrender to God's will. Our ego and will are transformed and made new.... We do not get rid of ego or will.... We let them be turned inside out so that unconditional love can emerge.... Accepting care and love from someone else is an important part of the process.... The Wall invites us to consider anything that God brings before us and to be open to understanding when it is from God. In a word, that means discernment.... It means taking a risk and really listening to God in a new way, perhaps seeing God now as Provider, Healer, [and] Friend.... It asks us to defer our judgement and let God lead.... We must set aside time for solitude—time to walk, to listen to God's voice, to think, to feel, and to reflect. This, too, is highly individual, since one person's way of experiencing God differs from another's. (Hagberg and Guelich 2005, 119-120, 122-123, bracketed word added)

It is clear that this kind of Wall experience signals the time for some kind of life change, and can therefore be considered with hope; some may not even consider it as stagnation, at all.

If one resolves the crisis of guiding the next generation negatively, then he or she is characterized as being stagnate and also indulgent like a child (Steele 1990, 163). In this case, the spiritual youth under their care may never proceed and take up the task of spiritual parenting. This could even be interpreted as spiritual regression. Regression in spiritual growth is possible because of the

possibility for Christians may forget their first love (Rev. 2:4-5) (Steele 1990, 117). In addition, Christians always have a choice to quit or draw back from the spiritual journey at any point in time (Heb. 6:6; 10:38). Regression or cessation, the effect is entirely similar.

In normal spiritual growth, there might be some transitions between the stages of spiritual child, youth and parent, that are not mentioned in John's letter. In times of transition in Christian spiritual growth, some sensitive Christians may sense unusual uncertainty and restlessness (Bersche 1995, 76). Life transitions mean changing one's meaning-making model, or frame of reference, due to struggles with relevant issues. This changing of the mind in Christians impacts their understanding of God, self, others, and the world (Liebert 2006, 72, 169). The changing of the frame of reference also means a change in life structure related to spiritual advancement. Life structure is the basic pattern or design of a person's life at a given time, providing a framework to discern the engagement of the individual in community and in relationship with God (Levinson 1978, 41-42, 206). Therefore, when Christians proceed from one stage to another, their mind, as well as their participation in the Christian community, and with God, will change. For example, a spiritual child's concern changes from having mainly a relationship with God (knowing Father God and the forgiveness of sins) to enjoying a relationship with God's Word and an enlarged vision of the spiritual realm as they grow. This kind of change impacts interpersonal relationships, as well as believers' relationships with God.

Christians may concentrate on God and grow their spiritual lives in a focused way with total trust in him. As Merton wrote,

If you yourself try to measure your own progress, you will waste your time in futile introspection. Seek one thing alone: to purify your love of God more and more, to abandon yourself more and more perfectly to his will and to love him more exclusively and more completely, but also more simply and more peacefully and with more total uncompromising trust. (*What is contemplation?* [Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1981] in Merton and Shannon 2004, 97)

Purifying our love of God, abandoning ourselves to his will, and trusting God uncompromisingly are the keys for every Christian's spiritual growth in all stages and seasons. Deeply relying on God can help Christians to grow successfully through different stages and seasons of life. All in all, God's timing for every one of us and our obedient hearts are crucial in every moment for our spiritual growth.

**CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH REPORT:
THE EFFECT OF TEACHING BRIEF
SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND
SPIRITUAL GROWTH STAGES WITH
REFERENCE TO 1 JOHN 2:12-14 ON
SEMINARIANS' PERSONAL AND
SPIRITUAL GROWTH AT ECCLESIA
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, HONG KONG**

Introduction

The Personal Growth course at Ecclesia Theological Seminary (Hong Kong, China) has been taught for a decade. Many instructors have used psychological approaches or therapeutic models in their teachings. However, the president of the seminary asked for a spiritual approach to this course. Through the use of the author's brief spiritual autobiography and a model of spiritual growth stages with reference to 1 John 2:12-14, along with an action research methodology in this project, the course was refocused and taught. The methods employed for data collection in this research were observation with journals, two questionnaires, a mid-course evaluation, and an interview with the dean. One of the key findings was that students highly appreciated the teaching methods employed but rated the course as only slightly good overall, with the students

preferring the teaching on the spiritual autobiography to the spiritual growth model with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. Finally, some suggestions were made for the improvement of future teaching as well as action research.

The Personal Growth course is a compulsory subject for Associate Bachelor of Christian Ministry, Bachelor of Theology, Master of Christian Ministry, and Master of Divinity seminarians at Hong Kong Ecclesia Theological Seminary during the time of this research. The president of the seminary committed to the personal growth of seminarians and launched the course about a decade ago. Over the past decade, according to the dean of the seminary, previous instructors focused mainly on psychological or therapeutic models in teaching the course (for example, the Satir model, the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator® [MBTI®], the Enneagram, etc.). However, the president of the seminary wanted to change the direction to a spiritually focused approach in that course so as to promote Spirit-centered growth among seminarians (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017).

In 2013, when I asked the president to write a letter of recommendation for my application to the Doctor of Ministry program at Tyndale, he agreed to offer me a teaching position at the seminary and also welcomed my research project. It is a new attempt for the seminary to adopt a spiritual approach to the Personal Growth course and entrusting me to teach in this way.

Despite the fact that all Bachelor of Theology and Master of Divinity students were required to submit their testimonies of conversion and ministry calling in admission, they did not have a chance to share or reflect on their

testimonies. In fact, the deep reflection and refreshment that a reflection on testimony provides is immense and rewarding. As a result, it was suggested as a major focus of the refocused course. The brief spiritual autobiography in this research constitutes the writing of conversion and ministry calling, plus one important spiritual experience. Those experiences are considered a subset of spiritual autobiography and were called ‘brief spiritual autobiography’ in this report.

The course was composed of two parts. In the first half of the course, students shared their experiences of conversion, ministry calling, and an important spiritual experience to compose their brief spiritual autobiographies. The model drawn from 1 John 2:12-14 was taught in the second half of the course. Don Willett suggests that the three-stage spiritual growth model in 1 John 2:12-14 is “normative for the universal experience of believers” (Willett 2012, 168). The model taught in the second portion of the class uses this idea, based on the premise that every Christian needs to grow spiritually according to the teaching of the Apostle John. Writing the autobiography caused students to draw on insight from their past, with emphasis being placed on God’s work in their lives, while learning from 1 John 2:12-14 would benefit their future; setting the stage for spiritual growth. The spiritual autobiography emphasizes individuality, while the spiritual growth tasks with reference to the passage emphasize commonality in the Christian’s spiritual growth.

In 2013, when I asked the president to write a letter of recommendation for my application to the Doctor of Ministry program at Tyndale, he agreed to

offer me a teaching position at the seminary and also welcomed my research project. It is a new attempt for the seminary to adopt a spiritual approach to the Personal Growth course and entrusting me to teach in this way. In 2015, the suggestion that I teach the Personal Growth course was orally approved by the president and followed up by Dr. Solomon Hon-fai Wong, the acting dean of Hong Kong Ecclesia Theological Seminary. Subsequently, my pending teaching in the fall of 2016 was confirmed by Dr. Wong on March 19, 2016 (Appendix Five).

This course aimed to promote reflection and awareness toward spiritual experience through the writing of a brief spiritual autobiography and to foster spiritual growth by identifying individual spiritual learning tasks with reference to the model described in 1 John 2:12-14. Students were expected to recollect or reconfirm God's calling in their spiritual autobiographies (Peace 1996, 21-22) and could identify their specific developmental stages and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 with some help through the course material. The outcome was that students benefited spiritually from at least one of the teaching components, in this research, the brief spiritual autobiography (Figures 9 and 10), a result further confirmed by through observation of the class (Cho 2017, Section 12 on lesson 12, December 8, 2016).

This action research project was designed to measure the effectiveness of the above teaching goals and material. The first questionnaire was originally designed to be used at the beginning of the course in early September 2016. However, permission was granted to conduct the questionnaire in the middle of

the course in order to solidify the action research (mid-October). Accordingly, the mid-course evaluation became the late mid-course evaluation.

The late mid-course evaluation, ethnographic observations in all lessons with journal writing, the second questionnaire, and a post-course interview with the dean were used as instruments to assess the outcomes of the course. The design of the first and second questionnaires was inspired by pre- and post-learning measures for students of psychology (Stark-Wroblewski, Ahlering, and Brill 2007, 406-407). All students felt comfortable either participating or withdrawing from my research project according to their wills; Hong Kong students are always invited to participate in citywide educational research conducted by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority starting from grade three to grade nine in the form of an examination (http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/sa_tsa/introduction/, accessed on April 8, 2019), so most students are accustomed to such research. Eventually, no report of any discomfort from students due to this research was collected by the dean (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017). A power issue, however, between students and teacher was acknowledged and would be discussed in a subsequent session, Ethics in Ministry-Based Research. It was stated in the consent form (Appendix One) that students might benefit from the research as they could compare their learning experiences in the middle of the course and at the end. At the end of the course, students were asked to answer the second questionnaire. Ten of twelve students willingly answered the two questionnaires, and three out of twelve participated in the late mid-course

evaluation for this research. The above methods employed in this research present the course from three different perspectives, ensuring a certain degree of accuracy delineated in this report. Although the data collected in this research was not exhaustive, it did provide some valuable and sufficient information for analysis.

As suggested by the dean orally, there were no formal individual interviews with students, and research occupying lesson time was minimized. This followed the customary practice of the seminary because no course involving research has been taught there to date. The role of teacher was the most important, therefore, with the role of researcher as the second priority. The teaching element was accountable to the dean of the seminary. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that the Personal Growth course at the seminary will improve due to this research.

Key Terms in This Chapter

The following terms are used in this report:

Growth: Refers to a positive change and maturation, often over a period of time.

Spiritual growth: Indicates a positive change and progress in a Christian's spiritual life, focusing mainly on the stages delineated in 1 John 2:12-14 according to this report.

Personal Growth Course: The seminary officially named the course 'Personal Growth,' but I would like to add a spiritual aspect to the course. So, in this report, *Personal Growth Course* was actually a course dealing with both personal and spiritual growth.

Spiritual growth model: Indicates spiritual stages and tasks which are on the path of Christian spiritual growth, focusing mainly on the elaboration of 1 John 2:12-14 in this report.

Spiritual growth stages in this report indicated three different phrases of Christian life; namely, ‘children,’ ‘young men’ or ‘youth,’ and ‘fathers’ or ‘parents’ with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. However, this metaphorical interpretation did not have any commonly agreed indicators, and the relationship between years of believing in God and the specific spiritual stages was not clear. Eventually, the teaching content of these growth stages slightly frustrated my students, and their quite negative comments were presented later in this report (Figure 9).

As Ball states, “the interpretation of data [in educational research] is not merely a theoretical exercise; it also is a contextual exercise” (Ball 1993, 40, bracketed words added). Unfortunately, the context of Hong Kong Ecclesia Theological Seminary during the time of my teaching, including the differences between the students taught, was not taken into consideration during the creation of this study. Furthermore, this study coincided with the author’s first course taught at the seminary, as well as his first action research project alongside course material.

There certainly exists the chance for and risk of personal bias throughout the more reflective sections of this report. Some interpretation in this report was largely constrained by personal value, especially concerning aspects of teaching and learning. Therefore, data collected from the second party (i.e., answered

questions from two questionnaires and late mid-course evaluations from students) and the third party (i.e., the dean of the seminary) proved invaluable because the data were independent of the author's subjectivity. After advice was received from those in Tyndale's leadership, amendments were further made to minimize the presence of personal bias within the report.

Context

This research project was conducted at Ecclesia Theological Seminary, which is located in Tuen Mun, Hong Kong, a town with a population of around 50,000. However, the seminary recruits students from all over Hong Kong, with a total population of more than 7,000,000 within the territory, and even some from overseas and mainland China. Ecclesia Theological Seminary was a small seminary in Hong Kong with a dozen full-time students and about one hundred part-time students from 2016 to 2017. Since my research field was in Hong Kong, I needed to translate into Chinese all of the research instruments (namely, the consent form and questionnaires—Appendixes One and Two) and then translate the raw Chinese research data into English.

The seminary is affiliated with Assemblies of God churches and Pentecostal churches in Hong Kong, and has three major educational divisions: Cantonese (for local Hong Kong Chinese people); Mandarin (for Chinese mainland pastors); and English (for English-speaking people). The Mandarin and English divisions provide only part-time programs, but the Cantonese division provides a full range of theological education programs from a Diploma of

Theology Studies to a Doctor of Ministry. According to the dean of the Hong Kong Ecclesia Theological Seminary, there was no official Ecclesia ethical policy that was applicable to this research (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017).

The class I taught held two associate bachelor degree students, six bachelor degree students, and four master's degree students. The first challenge presented itself there, in wide range of students; the associate bachelor (AB) degrees were open to those who had not graduated high school, and these two AB students had weak English comprehension skills. Meanwhile, the master's degree students were in the same class with the associate bachelor degree students. Because of the small window for tailored preparation, this disparity was taken into account as the class progressed.

One full-time lecturer shared with me in July 2016 that some students' lack of motivation in studying compulsory courses had caused teaching and learning problems; some of the most extreme students stated clearly that they only wanted to get a certificate from the seminary to guarantee their ministerial jobs, and they just wanted to finish the course with a passing grade. Their mentality, that academic learning had little value and/or would make little contribution to their lives and ministries, echoes the anti-intellectualism in Pentecostal circles in America nearly a century ago (Nanez 2005, 116).

Seven of the twelve students in this course were part-time pastors in their churches, while the other five were full-time students and doing their church practicums. One student worked in a Christian social service organization, and

eleven served in various Hong Kong churches. There were two ordained ministers in my class, and one of them was an associate senior pastor in a medium-large sized church in Hong Kong, studying to gain support and ready-to-use materials for their ministries. The spiritual needs of the students in my class were varied. One student came to Christ only four years ago, while four students came to Christ more than twenty years ago. Most of them came from a Pentecostal or Charismatic background, but one student came from a conservative evangelical church. In addition, half of the students were open to materials from Roman Catholic spirituality, and none of them showed discontent toward my use of Roman Catholic materials.

Finally, group discussion is essential for the Hong Kong Chinese student. In fact, group discussion encourages Hong Kong students to ask and respond to questions more freely. In the late mid-course evaluation, some of my students reported their expectation of discussion in groups of three to five students in each lesson. With this in mind, small group discussion was arranged with as much time as possible for them. Ten out of thirteen lessons included small group discussion time. The first, the second last, and the last lessons did not have time for small group discussion because of the overview of expectations in the first lesson, extra presentations in the second last lesson, and the final evaluation during the last lesson.

Models and Other Resources

The author's spiritual autobiography and spiritual growth model with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 were used as the main teaching components in the course. Although these two segments are interrelated, this paper will briefly summarize them individually, as they have been included prior. After this, some resources in teaching, research, and reflection for this research will be presented.

The writing of this spiritual autobiography solidifies and memorializes God's work, while also revitalizing God's calling. As the Apostle Paul said, "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19 NASB). Christian personal growth cannot be separated from interactions and communication with God, including our unique calling received from God. After the spiritual autobiography was completed, an essay entitled "Reflections on the Process and Benefit of Writing a Spiritual Autobiography," which emphasized God's work, including God's calling, in the Christian life, was written and served as a teaching aid through the brief autobiography segment of the course. It was also translated into Chinese for the sake of some of the students with weaker English facility.

Besides the autobiography that stood as a model to follow, students were recommended to write with guidance by *Arc of the Arrow* (Erickson 1998), *Reclaiming Your Story* (Jordan 1999), and *Spiritual Storytelling* (Peace 1996). These books were not required reading for students, but resources for their reflection and writing. Three other books that proved useful to students in writing their autobiographies were *The Heavenly Man* (Yun and Hattaway 2002), *Heaven Is So Real* (Thomas 2003), and *When God Shows Up* (Wildeboer 2013), in part

because of the existence of Chinese editions of these books. The students were asked to choose one of the three autobiographies. One student read and presented the Chinese edition of *The Heavenly Man*, and the Brother Yun's account particularly impressed the whole class because of his strong faith as well as the miraculous work of God in China (Cho 2017, Section 7 on lesson 7, October 27, 2016).

“Chapter Three: A Model of Spiritual Growth for Hong Kong Seminarians with Reference to 1 John 2:12-14,” which describes three stages with eight different developmental tasks for Christian spiritual growth, was used as the second major teaching material. Sections three to seven served as the foundations for teaching five lessons, including: 1) an overview of 1 John 2:12-14; 2) ‘children’; 3) ‘youth’; 4) ‘parents’ stages of spiritual growth; and 5) stagnation and transitioning of spiritual growth. These five sections were used in class as suggested reading for my students. (Refer to chapter three.)

Chapter three also presents three developmental tasks in the ‘children’ and ‘youth’ stages, respectively (‘becoming spiritual children,’ ‘sins being forgiven for His name’s sake,’ ‘knowing the heavenly Father’ and ‘becoming strong spiritual youth,’ ‘letting the Word of God abide in us,’ ‘overcoming the evil one’), but only two developmental tasks in the ‘parents’ stage (‘becoming spiritual parents’ and ‘knowing him who has been from the beginning’). Students had knowledge of the eight tasks, and were encouraged to specifically identify one task as their own immediate need in their spiritual growth journey, writing their essays accordingly.

All students were encouraged to wisely discern God's calling and to support one another within this class and seminary community. Two chapters of *Listening Hearts: Discerning God's Call in Community* (Farnham et al. 2011, 25-32, 51-55) were prescribed to promote individual as well as group spiritual discernment during a lesson (Cho 2017, Section 2 on lesson 2, September 15, 2016).

While teaching the course, two books stood out as invaluable very helpful for the educational research teaching project: *Doing Educational Research* (Opie 2007) and *Action Research in Teaching and Learning* (Norton 2009). These two books not only provide a pragmatic overview for educational research, but also lay a framework with advice to set up a project for success. In addition, several articles proved helpful for reflection about the research. First, "Characterising a teaching and learning environment capable of motivating student learning" (Kember, Ho, and Hong 2010), This article discusses the learning motivation of students in a higher education context in Hong Kong while presenting some relevant suggestions for improving teacher competence in creating a better learning environment for undergraduates. Likewise, "Beliefs about Knowledge and the Process of Teaching and Learning as a Factor in Adjusting to Study in Higher Education" (Kember 2001) analyzes the influences of different beliefs about knowledge from the students' perspective on students' learning attitudes in the context of Hong Kong. Specifically, Kember distinguishes between those who tend to memorize knowledge to reuse on another occasion and those who transform knowledge for their own purposes and context (Kember 2001, 215).

“Knowledge is a Dangerous Thing: Authority Relations, Ideological Conservatism, and Creativity in Confucian-Heritage Cultures” (Ho and Ho 2008) portrayed a strong cultural illustration of the teaching environment in a broader Asian context, especially in regards to Confucianism’s influences in the classroom. Furthermore, “A Glimpse of the Y-generation in Higher Education: Some Implications on Teaching and Learning Environments” (Maurtin-Cairncross 2014) delineates the learning needs and traits of those who were born from the 1980s to the early 2000s. These two articles provide a wider context of learning which closely paralleled the learning context and characteristics of this course’s students.

Research Field

The research data was collected from the Personal Growth course in the Cantonese division of Ecclesia Theological Seminary. Ten of the twelve students participated in this research, as well as the dean and the professor. I had a teacher-student relationship with the ten participants. The course was taught from September 8 to December 15, 2016, but the research officially started on October 20, immediately following the approval for my research from the Tyndale Research Ethics Board on October 15. During the period from September 8 until mid-October, I kept a personal research journal to provide data for this research report.

The age of the ten students who participated in the research ranged from the 20s to the 40s. All of them were from Hong Kong except for one, who was

from Malaysia. This student was a Malaysian Chinese who could speak fluent Cantonese. Table 5 provides a descriptive overview of the participants. In addition, all of the participants took this as a compulsory course, as required by the seminary.

Table 5. Demographic summary of the participants on October 27, 2016

Variables		No. of students
Gender	Male	6
	Female	4
Nationality	Malaysian Chinese	1
	Hong Kong Chinese	9
Age	23 or below	1
	24-40	6
	41 or above	3
Academic year of study	1st year	2
	2nd year	1
	3rd year	2
	4th year	0
	5th year	2
	6th year	2
	7th year	1
Study Mode	Full-time	5
	Part-time	5
Years of believing in Christ	5 or below	1
	6-10	0
	11-15	3
	16-20	2
	21 or more	4
Ministry being engaged	Part-time pastors	5
	Church practicum	5

Research Scope

This research fell into the domain of educational action research.

Educational action research is a term used to describe a family of activities in curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programs, and systems planning and policy development. These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are *implemented*, and then systematically submitted to *observation, reflection and change*.

Participations in the action being considered are integrally involved in all of these activities. (Carr and Kemmis 1986, 164-165, italics in original)

This research focused mainly on the development of course curriculum and on the teaching profession. Policy development, specifically on developing seminarians' critical thinking, was also discussed with the dean during the interview (Cho 207, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017). However, school improvement programs and systems planning were not included in this research. Therefore, the implementation of a teaching plan, including a lesson plan, observation, reflection, and revisions according to students' feedback, were all included in this research. Personal comments and opinions from the researcher, students, and an outsider (the dean) on students' learning and their experience of my teaching on the spiritual autobiography and spiritual growth stages with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 were collected as data in this research. In other words, this research primarily investigated the effect of my teaching of personal and spiritual growth on seminarians in a Hong Kong seminary classroom setting.

According to the dean, a typical three-credit course, such as this one, effectively run for thirty-two and a half teaching hours, spread over thirteen three-hour courses, factoring required break times for courses exceeding fifty minutes. My research scope fell within this lesson time, with one exception; the late mid-course evaluation was independent of the lesson time.

Students' written assignments in the Personal Growth course were excluded from the data collecting process in this research due to the instruction to

conclude the research period before the end of the term's final essay collection date, before mid-March 2017. One student actually handed in his final assignment to me in early March. I decided not to analyze any of the written assignments by the students for this research. I also suspected that the separation of student grading from this research might diminish their anxiety about deciding whether or not to participate in this research. Nonetheless, the sharing of students in a group as well as their presentations, as part of student assignments, were included in this research because of their occurrence during lesson time. However, after a review of some research reports, I believe that it would have been constructive to include the students' written assignments, for the purposes of adherence to common practice, and for the potential to glean additional insight from the students (e.g., Huet et al. 2009, 159-160; Zhang and Zhou 2011, 710-711).

Research and Teaching Methodology

This report uses action research as major research methodology, and teaching as transmission of information to support student learning with Christian emphasis. According to Kemmis and McTaggart, action research is

A form of collective, self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality, coherence, satisfactoriness of justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as the understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, 5)

In other words, action research aims at a deeper understanding of a certain practice, including educational practice, in a social context, and then suggests some improvement with relevant reasons and findings. Kemmis further elaborates

on his idea: “[the] spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting is central to the action research approach” (Kemmis 1993, 178, bracketed word added). This spiral process of “planning, acting, observing or looking, reflecting or thinking, re-acting or modified action” was adopted in this research and in my teaching as well because I believe teaching involves an ongoing process of adjustment depending on the feedback of students gathered by various research methods. The above central approach also matches the three elements of “looking, thinking, acting” as a spiral in doing action research suggested by Ernest T. Stringer (Stringer 2014, 9). This kind of research does not aim at prediction or control over research objects. Therefore, people do research on themselves and others with a spirit of collaboration rather than a spirit of competition (McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead 2004, 133).

Action research facilitates a high degree of involvement from participants (students in this research) in shaping the style of teaching throughout the course as well as the research process. One of the fundamental characteristics in pedagogical action research is driven from the teacher’s own need to know why barriers exist in students’ learning and what the teacher can do to improve matters (Norton 2009, 56). In principle, action research in teaching may improve the effectiveness of teaching in whatever subject “since action research is research into one’s own practice” (Kemmis 1993, 186). However, this kind of improvement by research is not a straightforward application from theory, but one that results from deep investigation, reflection, and even struggles on the part of the researcher. Educational research is intertwined with changes in teaching

methods in many ways. I actually amended some lesson plans with the help of this educational action research. This report is a record of such a process.

Clive Opie proposes some personal suggestions when considering undertaking action research (Opie 2007, 81-82):

- Involve yourself in the action research
- Be organized
- Start small
- Ensure that supportive work-in-progress discussions are planned for
- Be tolerant and supportive throughout the process
- Be persistent about monitoring
- Be prepared to work hard to ensure the sharing of responsibility for the whole process
- Be open to changing how you think about things
- Register progress with all interested parties, not just those involved directly
- Ensure time to write up your work
- Be explicit about what you have achieved
- Continually question whether your work is actually helping you.

I found that my research closely matched the above guidelines except for the fourth point; I couldn't ensure that supportive work-in-progress discussions are planned for as I could not discuss my research with my students at all, mostly due to constraints from the seminary. Not only was I open to change regarding how I thought about teaching during the research, but also in how I changed my practice according to the expectations of my students. For example, after the late mid-course evaluation, I increased the allotted time for small group discussions to meet my students' expectations. My research started small, and I often questioned the effectiveness of my research work throughout the process, monitoring it through journal writings. After the research, I felt that my competence in

monitoring, research journaling, and searching for helpful work in research was strengthened.

Second, Lin S. Norton introduces two concepts of teaching. The first views teaching as information transmission. The second views teaching as supporting student learning: "... academics see their role as facilitating the process whereby students actively construct meaning and knowledge for themselves" (Norton 2009, 6). I admit that I struggled between these two conceptions in my teaching, and did not prudently practice the second approach because of my inexperience in teaching seminarians during some of the lessons. For instance, when I taught the last stage of spiritual parenting with reference to 1 John 2:12-14, as I followed my students' suggestion to extend the time of small group discussion, I became frustrated with the time constraint; I wasn't sure how to fully explain the message of 'knowing Him from the beginning' in that short time (Cho 2017, Section 12 on lesson 12, December 8, 2016). I could not find a decent balance between meeting students' learning needs and transmitting knowledge, and sometimes I was not sure about the roles of facilitator or lecturer in teaching, especially when introducing some new knowledge to my students when I first taught. Nonetheless, I used written essays to teach in my second time.

Last but not least, throughout the lessons, several teaching principles with Christian emphasis were employed; namely, the transformation of the mind according to the Bible, reliance on God's grace in the process of teaching and learning, a communal context of education, paying attention to the developmental process of the whole person (Downs 1994, 198-200), encouraging students to

explore the truth, fostering connectedness and integration, and leading human beings in community to actions that seek justice and show lovingkindness (Vogel 1991, 159-160). As a result, students reported an overall positive comment toward my teaching in class (Figure 8). This positive report from students was also mentioned in an interview with the dean (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017).

Analytical Description of Teaching and Research Methods Employed

In this section, the research journals, two questionnaires, the mid-course evaluation, and the interview with the dean were the research methods employed in this research. I would also like to analyze the Confucian influence encountered in my teaching and curriculum negotiation.

Initially, I had a plan for the thirteen lessons in the Personal Growth course. In the first lesson, I invited students to voice their expectations for the course in an open discussion with the whole class. However, six among eleven expressed only that they wanted an ‘easy’ course, with as few assignments as possible and good grading from me. One student was absent during that lesson (Cho 2017, Section 1 on lesson 1, September 8, 2016). Besides that, my students made no other concrete suggestions.

I thought that two issues might result from the expectation they shared. First, some students seemed to have very low motivation for the course; second, I wondered if there was some hindrance to the voicing of their expectations. It seemed that the near silence from my students about course expectations might be

due to a Confucian influence in my cultural context. This matched a research finding offered by two scholars, which stated that the teacher is assumed to be an authoritarian figure as perceived by students in Hong Kong Chinese culture. Students felt they dare not express their expectations due to fear and expected teacher-student power struggles, especially when the students did not know their teacher well (Ho and Ho 2008, 69, 76-77).

One important detail to remember in my students' learning is that this was a compulsory course; this contributed to their low motivation to learn. I decided to adopt curriculum negotiation to resolve this issue. Frances Edwards summarized curriculum negotiation as follows:

Curriculum negotiation describes a dynamic process in which what is taught and learned [the curriculum] is negotiated between teacher and students, rather than being solely pre-determined by the teacher. . . . Negotiating curriculum is like negotiation in other contexts such as law or business. It is an act of working with others to achieve one's goals as well as shared goals through a process of agreement and disagreement, resulting in consensus. It therefore involves teachers and students in reflecting on their own needs and wants, questions and interests, and their subjective interpretations of the agenda. (Edwards 2011, 144, brackets in original)

The act of curriculum negotiation complements educational action research because both embrace the same spirit of democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing social values (Stringer 2014, 14-15). I practiced curriculum negotiation at the beginning of the course as well as in the late mid-course evaluation on November 10, 2016. In lesson one, although I had no concrete idea about how 'easy' they wanted the course to be, I promised all the students that if I

subjectively witnessed clear effort in all of their presentations and assignments, a B- or above was guaranteed (Cho 2017, Section 1 on lesson 1, September 8, 2016). Eventually, my guarantee became a reality for them.

At the time of the late mid-course evaluation, I practiced another cycle of “reflecting or thinking, reacting or modified action, then observing or looking” again (Stringer 2014, 9; Kemmis 1993, 178). When I learned that some students wanted more small group discussion time in lessons through the mid-course evaluation, and confirmed this in the next lesson, I changed my teaching plan to reduce my lecturing time and to increase small group discussion time in the remaining lessons. Even though I had no idea at that time how small group discussion could be a tool in my teaching on the spiritual growth model with reference to 1 John 2:12-14, I made this concession and followed the expectation of my students in making much more space and time for their small group discussions (Cho 2017, Section 10 on lesson 10, November 24, 2016). I believe that the most profitable educational result happens only when the curriculum meets the students’ learning needs. This may be complemented by doing action research. Nevertheless, when I taught the same course for the second time in the fall of 2017, I designed some relevant questions for small group discussion in class. It seemed better than the first time I had conducted pedagogical small group discussion with reference to the passage.

The late mid-course evaluation was conducted in a focus group by voluntary participation of students after class. This provided an informal environment for students to freely express their opinions about the course as well

as my teaching. Students were asked to respond to several questions for the purpose of improving the course and my teaching (Appendix Three). Their feedback served as the basis for the entire class discussion in the next lesson.

I started to write my research journals right after the first lesson I taught on September 8, 2016, before my research proposal was approved by the Tyndale Ethics Review Board on October 15, 2016. My journal recorded any major events that happened during lessons as well as my feelings and reflections after class. It was important for me to record all relevant details in my journal because I could not remember all of the important things for each of the thirteen lessons. I wrote approximately 11,000 words in my research journal to record events and reflections after each lesson, including a summary of my interview with the dean after the course. In many ways, my journal and the record of the interview with the dean (questions in Appendix Four) confirmed the findings from the results of the two questionnaires (questions in Appendix Two).

Furthermore, concerning the two questionnaires, I regarded the findings in the first questionnaire (conducted on October 27) as a review or evaluation of the first half of the course (begun on September 8) in which I mainly taught the spiritual autobiography. While the findings in the second questionnaire (conducted on December 15) covered the whole course, students tended to focus on the second half of my teaching, primarily on the spiritual growth stages and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14.

There were two main analyses according to the completed questionnaires. One set of seven questions was used twice in both questionnaires—in the middle

and after the course—and was answered by the participants. The second questionnaire was longer than the first one because some extra questions were designed to evaluate the course as a whole (see Appendix Two). The two questionnaires provided some useful information over a period of seven weeks with six lessons. The same seven questions in the two questionnaires and the several additional questions in the second questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) to indicate the preferences of respondents. The Likert scale is widely used in research, including educational research (Opie 2007, 212). The advantages of surveys and rating scales include the fact that they are very effective at gathering data concerning students' attitudes, perceptions, or opinions. Rating scales and other closed-response items can be answered, and the responses can be tallied or counted quickly (Mertler 2009, 124).

As all students had similar learning goals and access to the same materials during the course, in my assessment it was appropriate to use a rating scale to gather research data. In general, a five-point Likert scale is easy for students to understand. However, a scale such as the Likert does not let us really know “if the rating given by one observer means the same as the same rating given by another observer” (Opie 2007, 125). Therefore, one open-ended question in the first questionnaire and four open-ended questions in the second questionnaire were designed to collect data from students. Open-ended questions could provide additional or supplementary information which close-ended questions would not

provide (Mertler 2009, 124). Students could reflect on their learning and/or give any opinions about the course or research throughout the two questionnaires.

After the course was completed, I interviewed the dean of the seminary on January 11, 2017, to request some feedback about my teaching. The seminary always has its own evaluation form for students at the end of each course. The dean is responsible to give feedback to every lecturer at the seminary according to the students' evaluation. However, he did not give me a sheet summarizing the students' evaluation of the course because he did not have one. He explained to me that this was because the seminary was experiencing a shortage of manpower (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017). In addition, he always receives some informal feedback from students who have finished courses. As an outsider, he provided some observations and an impartial opinion. His comments served as one data set which could be cross-checked with my questionnaires' findings (Sensing 2011, 72, 75). The dean provided some valuable information and advice for my teaching as well as for the course itself.

In total, there were five data sets in this research:

1. Research journals after all thirteen teaching lessons.
2. First questionnaire (October 27, 2016).
3. Mid-course evaluation (November 10, 2016).
4. Second questionnaire (December 15, 2016, after lesson).
5. Interview with the dean as an outsider (January 11, 2017).

The above five methods revealed some key themes about my teaching and the students' learning in class and highlighted some discrepancies between them.

Some cross-reference analyses within these five methods will be presented later in this chapter. Special attention was given to the ineffectiveness of my teaching and problems raised by students.

Data Analysis

Data triangulation that included review of materials, such as the teacher's course design, the teacher's record of lessons, the interview record with the dean, and students' presentation in class, was employed in this research (Sensing 2011, 72-73). As mentioned above, I had five different sources of data. Source one was my research journals, which were written according to the lessons from September 8 to December 15, 2016 (every Thursday except September 29 and November 17 for school holidays). This data was an ethnographical observation journal. During the lessons I taught, I became a learner from my students (Moschella 2008, 142) and interpreted what happened in the classroom (Sensing 2011, 194). I took time to reflect on what bothered me during lessons (Moschella 2008, 106) and recorded it in the journal. Source two was the first questionnaire given to my students, as participants, to answer on October 27 (Appendix Two). Ten out of twelve students chose to answer the questionnaires, and they answered them all by themselves. In the first questionnaire, there were eight questions with Likert scale and one open-ended question. Most of the questions with the scale were answered, while six out of ten answered the open-ended questions. Source three was the data from the answers of three students who were willing to participate in the mid-course evaluation on November 10 (Appendix Three). I

transcribed the data from students' opinions. Source four was the second questionnaire given to my students, as participants, to answer on December 15, 2016 (Appendix Two). Again, ten students chose to answer the questionnaires, and they answered them all by themselves. In the second questionnaire, there were eleven questions with Likert scale and four open-ended questions. All ten students answered at least one open-ended question. Again, they answered them all by themselves. Source five was the data from the dean, the outsider, in an interview on January 11, 2017, according to the questions in Appendix Four. I transcribed the data from the dean's comments.

For source one, my research journals, I read the transcripts three times. This was one set of data. For sources two and four, I summarized them respectively and then compared question numbers 2 to 7 with the two answered questionnaires. There were seven codes derived from six questions. After that, I designed Figures 1 to 7 and presented them in the subsequent section. Afterwards, I summarized students' answers to other questions and created Figures 8 to 12. There were another five codes. I read the figures and answers from the students three to four times. In addition, there are thirty-one different responses from participants in all the open-ended questions and from the personal particulars of the two questionnaires. Source three was the record of the mid-course evaluation with three students. There were four answers from the questions in that evaluation. I checked some main points in it with the whole class on November 17 and then filed the record. Source five was the record of the interview with the dean. There were seven questions in total; however, he only answered five of them. I read the

transcripts of source three and source five three times. This led to a total of fifty-three codes for my research data. Then I coded it deductively, based mainly on the students' answers for the two questionnaires. I did this to avoid any personal bias in presenting the research findings; so I started my data analysis with the answers from the two questionnaires. Data in my research journal and the third party (i.e., the opinion from the dean) served as cross-reference materials. I grouped the fifty-three codes into seventeen categories according to teaching and learning in the course as well as for better development of the course in the future. I then compared the categories derived from these data sets to answer questions about teaching effectiveness and learning about spiritual autobiography and the spiritual growth model with reference to 1 John 2:12-14.

In data analysis, I adopted content analysis to examine all data, and a unit in content analysis was a theme. Content analysis means systematic analysis of the inclusion and exclusion of content or categories for which only materials supporting the investigator's hypotheses are examined. Moreover, the findings which have theoretical relevance are also examined (Haggarty 1996, 99-100). I paid special attention to the data that did not confirm my own expectations and also the discrepancy of data between three parties; namely, my journal, responses and answers from students, and data provided by the dean. Moreover, I also adopted pattern matching and explanation building methods together with content analysis. Pattern matching involves an attempt to link two patterns, where one is theoretical pattern and the other is an observed or acquired one (Yin 2009, 126). The theoretical pattern included my teaching effectiveness with specific content

and related themes. The observed or acquired pattern involved the data from the questionnaire answers, from ethnographic data, and/or from the data of my interview with the dean. On the whole, I traced some possible patterns using all the data and explained it with reasonable suggestions, finally presenting it in this report. Last, quotations from my research journal, students' responses, and the interview were extracted for presentation in the findings section.

Phases and Timetable of Research Action

The Personal Growth course was scheduled by the seminary between September 8 to December 15, 2016 (except September 29 and November 17), with thirteen lessons. At the end of September, I finished my research proposal. Then, on October 15, I received permission via email from the Tyndale Ethics Review Board for my research. On October 20, this research started officially in my class. On January 11, 2017, I interviewed the dean and gathered some data for the research. Subsequent work took the form of analysis, reading, and revising. Table 6 presents the timetable of my research in detail.

Table 6. Timetable of research action

Phases	Date	Action	Time Required	Who	How
Preparation	Before Sept. 30	Writing research proposal	50 hours	Researcher	Development of research framework and instruments
Preparation	Sept. 8 – Oct. 13	Research journal writings	2 hours per lesson	Researcher	Researcher jotted down observations and responses

Table 6. Timetable of research action (cont.)

Phases	Date	Action	Time Required	Who	How
Doing research	Oct. 20 – Dec. 15	Research journal writings	2 hours per lesson	Researcher	Researcher jotted down observations and responses
Doing research	Oct. 20	Consent form	30 min.	Researcher and Students	10 of 12 students decided to fill in the form
Doing research	Oct. 27	First questionnaire	15 min.	Researcher and Students	10 of 12 students answered the questionnaire
Doing research	Nov. 10	Mid-course evaluation	15 min.	Researcher and Students	3 students discussed the course informally
Doing research	Dec. 15	Second questionnaire	20 min.	Researcher and Students	10 students answered the questionnaire
Doing research	Jan. 11, 2017	Interview with the dean	30 min.	Researcher and the dean	Discussing seminary's evaluation and informal feedback from students
Analysis and reading	Late Jan.	Analyze data with reference to some readings	30 hours	Researcher	Compare two questionnaires and draw key themes from them with some readings
Writing draft report	Feb.	Write draft report	30 hours	Researcher	Sort out the relevant information from analyzed data and compile the report
Peer review	Feb. 27	Presenting and discussing the report	1 hour	Researcher	Peer review by other two classmates

Table 6. Timetable of research action (cont.)

Phases	Date	Action	Time Required	Who	How
Amend-ment	July	Revising	20 hours	Researcher	Amending according to Dr. Mark Chapman's comments

Considering the above framework, I would like to explain some details of this research action. From September 8 to December 15, I wrote my research journal to record all things related to lesson teaching, learning, and also to this research. During lesson time, I shared some of my reflections or rationales for any change in my teaching due to feedback from students, as recorded in my field notes and research journal.

On October 20, at the end of the lesson, I introduced the consent form to prospective participants (my students) to invite their participation in the research. The prospective participants were given a thirty-minute briefing to become acquainted with all the details on the consent form. They were then invited to consider for a week whether or not to participate in the research. When I gave them the option of returning their signed or unsigned consent forms right after the briefing, nine of the ten students voluntarily participated and returned their signed consent forms to the teacher's table immediately. Only one student did not return his or her consent form to me. Perhaps the student did not wish to participate in the research. It is very understandable in the Hong Kong context that most of the students returned the signed consent forms after the briefing because we often

participate in research this way. Meanwhile, two other students were absent from class that day.

On October 27, there were still ten students present; however, the two who had been absent from the previous lesson were present. They were willing to participate in the research and signed the consent forms. Meanwhile, two other students, who had received and signed the consent forms on October 20, were absent on October 27. As a result, there was a total of eleven signed consent forms collected, but only ten participants who answered the first questionnaire. I briefly introduced the first questionnaire for ten minutes and then invited one of the participants to help me to distribute them. All of the questionnaires were voluntarily answered, but they did not actually answer all of the questions (Figure 4). They had real freedom to answer, or to choose not to answer, the questions on the questionnaires. After about fifteen minutes, all students placed their completed questionnaires on the front desk, which was near the lecturer's desk, according to convention in Hong Kong.

On November 10, I conducted the late mid-course evaluation with participants after class. Although I invited all of them, only three of the ten students voluntarily participated in the evaluation. Most of them left right after class because that period of time was their peak season for completing their assignments in order to meet their deadlines, and the students were tired after the three-hour lesson. I was frustrated; worried that the late mid-course evaluation did not reflect the reality with so few participants. Nevertheless, this turnout proved that my students had true freedom to refuse to take part in my research at any time.

The evaluation took about fifteen minutes; and four questions were asked (Appendix Three).

On December 15, the last lesson, I delivered the second questionnaire (after the course) to participants after the end of class. They took about twenty minutes to finish it. Although all twelve students were present, I invited only the ten who had answered the first questionnaire to participate. That day, after filling out the questionnaire, the students were encouraged to share their opinions about the whole course. The opinions they shared were recorded as research data.

On January 11, 2017, I interviewed the dean of the seminary. It took about 30 minutes to discuss my previous teaching. The dean provided some feedback based on course evaluation conducted by the seminary as well as some informal feedback from several students who had talked to him at previous times. I asked him several questions (Appendix Four), and he answered some, but not all of them.

Finally, I analyzed all the data collected. This included comparing the two sets of questionnaires. The journals, the interview notes, and other relevant information were also processed, some themes drawn from them, and presented in the following sections. In late January to February, I wrote the draft of this chapter and then revised it in July.

Ethics in Ministry-Based Research

In this section, the main concern relates to how ethically the research was conducted, especially as it pertained to the welfare of the participants (my students).

Appendix Six is proof of a previous oral confirmation from the dean of Hong Kong Ecclesia Theological Seminary that permission was granted for my research project earlier than September 30, 2016.

Concerning the power differential issue between me as a teacher, I implemented several measures to protect my students' rights, human rights, and dignity. In lesson one, I explained to my students, who were prospective participants in this research, that I would do my research in the course, but that since I had not yet received permission from Tyndale, I would only write in my journal after every lesson until I obtained approval. Through my journal writings, I became more concerned about my students' learning needs and reflected on my teaching more often in a thoughtful and constructive way.

Having noted that the students who were reluctant to participate in the research might be afraid of receiving a lower grade, I designed a consent form (Appendix One) to state clearly that those who were not willing to join in the research would receive the same standard of grading. Since most of the students were concerned about their final grades at the end of the course, the separation of my research from their grading gave them a guarantee that my research would in no way affect their grades. In addition, students had the right to freely choose whether or not to participate in this research. I told them that the most important

thing was their willingness to participate in this research, along with their genuineness in answering questions if they chose to participate. If they were not willing to participate in this research, it would be fine with me, as it simply reinforced the voluntary nature of the study (Cho 2017, Section 7 on lesson 7, October 27, 2016). Therefore, student rights, human rights, and dignity were ensured in this research.

There was no need to identify who had said what in my research, so I did not collect the names of participants except for the consent forms. Therefore, I considered that I did not break the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (Hong Kong Legal Information Institute 2018), the only law in Hong Kong related to this research project. The principle of anonymity in all questionnaires was employed throughout the whole process. Therefore, this research project could be regarded as having low risk in research ethics. The comparison between the answers from the first and second questionnaires in this research was a whole group comparison rather than an individual one.

No secondary use of data in this research was suggested or intended. All raw written materials on paper and/or electronic files as research data for this research will be destroyed following the completion of my final integration report after 2018.

Although I was in authority over my students regarding the research, the worst possible negative effect in students due to my research was psychological stress and anxiety. In safeguarding against this, I adjusted my mentality toward my students and while teaching. I accepted some suggestions from Ernest Stringer

and others to address these possible problems. As he wrote, “education could be identified as the search for truth in the company of friends” (Stringer 2014, 69). All of my students were regarded as my companions in searching for truth together in this research, but I was afraid that only a few of my students shared my view in this way. In addition, I adopted a so-called ‘client group perspective’:

This perspective is consonant with an ethic of caring that celebrates personal expressiveness, emotionality, and empathy; values individual uniqueness; and cherishes each person’s dignity, grace and courage (Stringer 2014, 56).

In this research, my primary role was teacher, and my secondary role was researcher. To minimize potential bias from the teacher-student relationship, I always listened to my students. For example, when a student voiced that he wanted to present a Catholic spiritual book which was not listed in the course outline, I accepted his proposal. He finally presented the book summary in the last lesson (Cho 2017, Section 13 on lesson 13, December 15, 2016).

Moreover, I cared for my students’ learning needs. For instance, I talked to an associate bachelor degree student after class because of her perceived incompetence in regards to essay writing. I encouraged the student to write something in an organized manner that might edify or be beneficial to spiritual life (Cho 2017, Section 11 on lesson 11, December 1, 2016). I noticed that a few associate bachelor students might experience some difficulty in writing essays. Eventually, I commented on some outlines for essay writing in the last lesson, and some students expressed that it proved very helpful to them in writing essays

properly with my comments (Cho 2017, Section 13 on lesson 13, December 15, 2016).

Christianity values grace, courage, and faith. These virtues are also valued for personal and spiritual growth. In any situation of conflict, the students' welfare was my primary concern, and their subjective view of their own welfare was highly respected. In fact, respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice are the basic principles or attitudes for research ethics involving humans in Canada (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada 2014, Article 1.1). As Tim Sensing wrote, “[researchers] have a moral obligation to the care of people first” (Sensing 2011, 42, bracketed word added). Not only have I practiced these values in this research, but I would continue to practice them for the rest of my life as a minister of Jesus Christ. Above all, I found that the key to ethical research practice concerning human beings is a sensitive mind and a caring heart.

As a result, the risks the participants experienced were no greater than what students customarily experience in taking a course. From my observations, I saw no obvious psychological stress in the students due to my research, either during or after any of the lessons. I received no complaints from my students or through the dean (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017), or in any other manner, and this research did not incur any obvious damage to the students from an ethical perspective.

Research Findings

In this section, I would present the findings from the results of the two questionnaires, my research journals, the late mid-course evaluation, and the data from my interview with the dean. The data was organized and grouped first, and then some themes and issues were discussed. The main finding in this research was that the teaching on the spiritual autobiography was more effective than the teaching on the spiritual growth tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 for seminarians in the Personal Growth course (see Figures 9 and 10). The teaching methods I employed in class were very good (see Figure 8), but the students' overall comment about the course was only slightly good (see Figure 12).

First, concerning eagerness for spiritual growth among students, ten students' longing for their own spiritual growth was quite similar based on the answers to question 8 in the first and second questionnaires. Longing for spiritual growth is commonly understood as being closely related to substantial spiritual growth. As Bruce Demarest observed,

Many of us are discovering that if we would continue our growth in Christ, we can find help if we are willing to move beyond our prejudices and open up to God... *Growth requires an open heart and a receptive mind to every overture of the Spirit.* (Demarest 1999, 58, italics in original)

In Figure 1, just one student changed his or her attitude from 'strongly agree' to 'agree.' This means their longing for spiritual growth did not change a lot over those seven weeks. The responses of the students display a consistency in answering this question. Figure 1 shows the findings on question 8 from two different days.

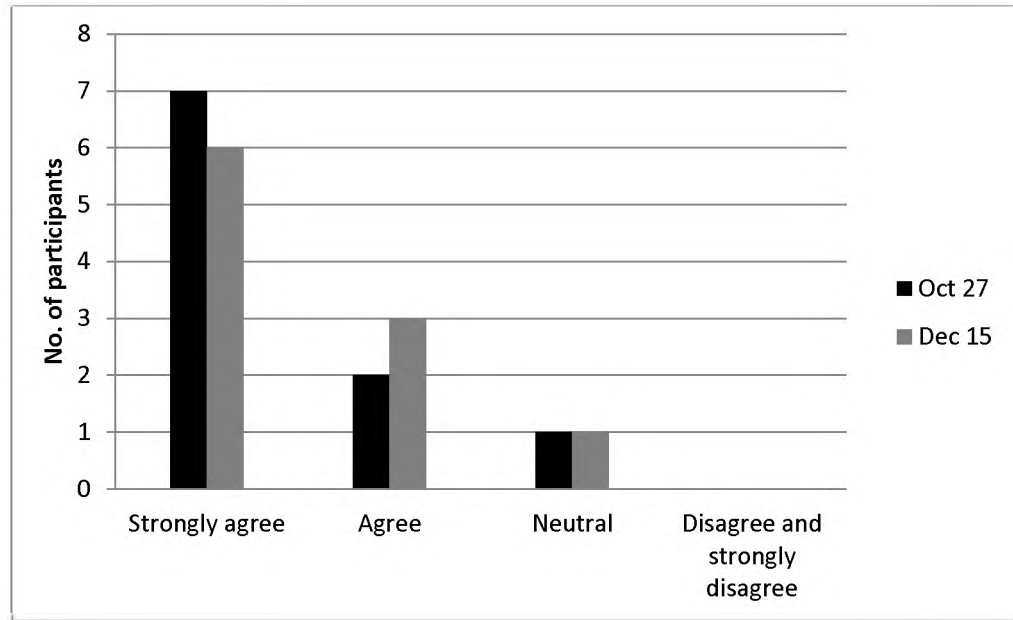


Figure 1. Students’ answers to question number 8: “I eagerly long for spiritual growth.”

Similarly, question 4 in the two questionnaires asks about their awareness of God’s activity in their daily lives. When a person discovers his or her experience of God, he or she will have greater awareness of God in daily life (DeSiano and Boyack 1992, 3). One student changed his or her attitude from ‘agree’ to ‘neutral’ from questionnaire one to questionnaire two. We can see in Figure 2 that these ten students’ spiritual awareness and longing were quite consistent within those seven weeks; one person, who might not be the same person, decreased slightly. This might mean that during those seven weeks, the Personal Growth course did not change the student’s perspective on these two issues in general.

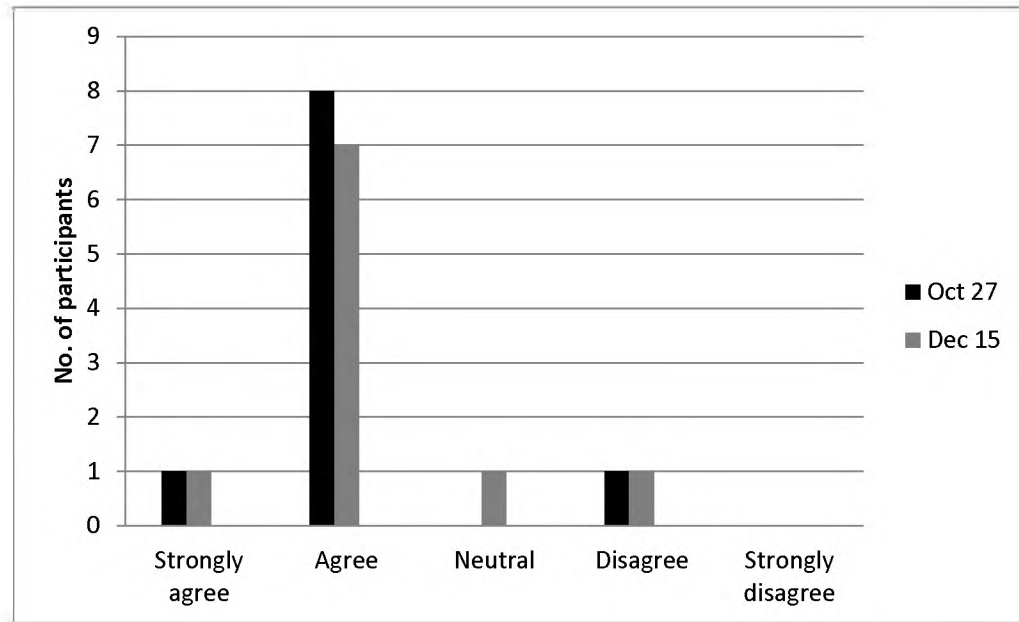


Figure 2. Students’ answers to question number 4: “I am often aware of God’s activity in my daily life.”

Third, in Figure 3 two students changed their answers from ‘neutral’ to ‘agree’ within these seven weeks. It may appear that the course was making a slightly positive impact on students to interpret their spiritual experiences from different angles. In fact, human experience with God has at least two angles, one from a human point of view and one from the divine perspective. Moreover, Christians usually view spiritual experiences from various angles, including perspectives from personal feelings and impressions, their relationship with the Bible, their relationship with life events, etc. (DeSiano and Boyack 1992, 21-29, 38). However, Hong Kong people tend to follow a single or a common perspective in understanding their spiritual experiences under the influence of the conformity rules in Confucianism (Jia *et al.* 2009, 288, 290). In my experience, multiple perspectives toward one single thing are uncommon in Hong Kong.

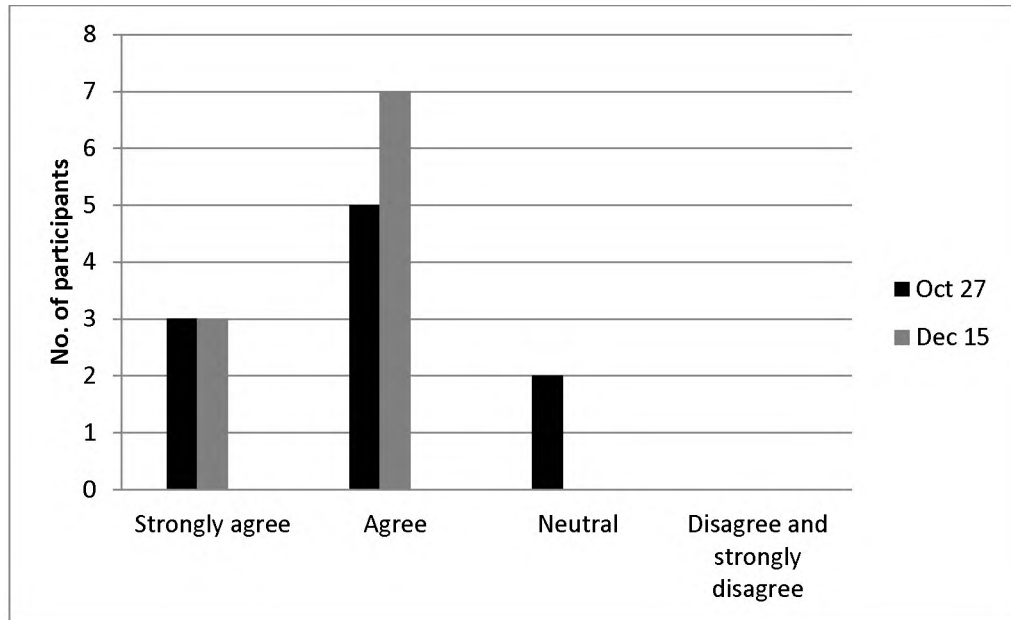


Figure 3. Students’ answers to question number 2: “I understand my personal experience with God from various angles.”

Fourth, concerning whether writing a brief spiritual autobiography could deepen one’s spirituality, students’ answers to question 3 on the two questionnaires did not confirm this idea. Please notice that the number of respondents’ answers on October 27 was nine instead of ten. From Figure 4, it is hard to come to any conclusions because the missing answer on October 27 could play an important role. One thing worthy of mention here was that the sharing of the students’ brief autobiographies in the first half of the course did not show deep reflection compared with my cohort’s experience at Tyndale. The spiritual impact of writing and sharing spiritual autobiographies in Hong Kong seminarians should therefore be further explored.

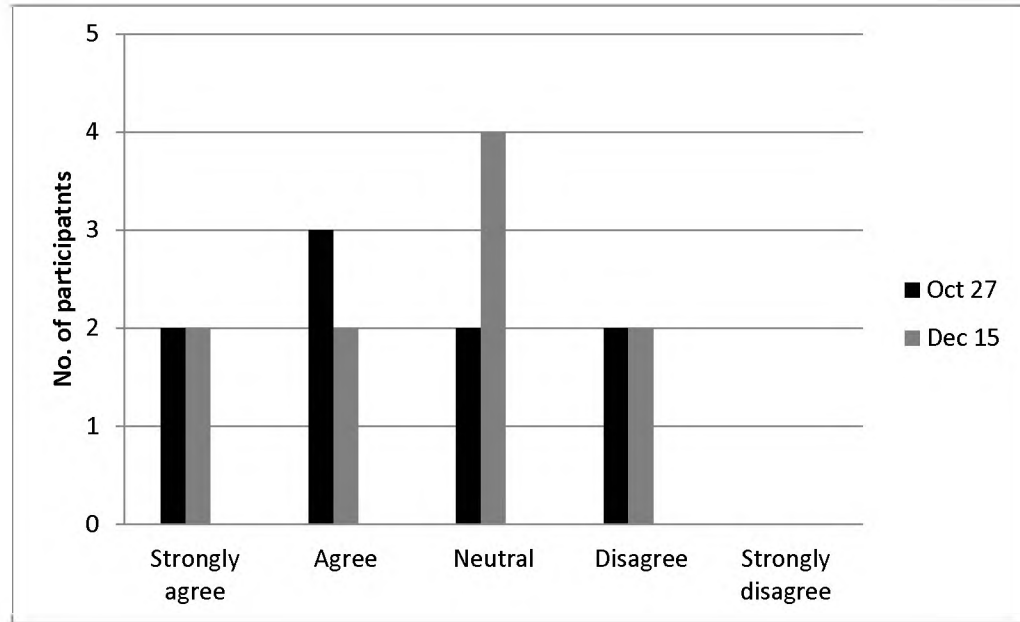


Figure 4. Students’ answers to question number 3: “I believe that writing a spiritual autobiography could make Christians more spiritually oriented.”

Fifth, two out of ten students indicated that their understanding of the spiritual growth stages and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 was weakened during these seven weeks. From my perspective as a teacher, I observed that a few students expressed their astonishment about their suspicion or discovery of their real spiritual locality as ‘spiritual children’ with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. As most of them were either part-time pastors or in church practicum, some of them voiced in class that they felt somewhat disappointed that their real spiritual age was so ‘young’—something they had never considered before the course (Cho 2017, Section 10 on lesson 10, November 24, 2016).

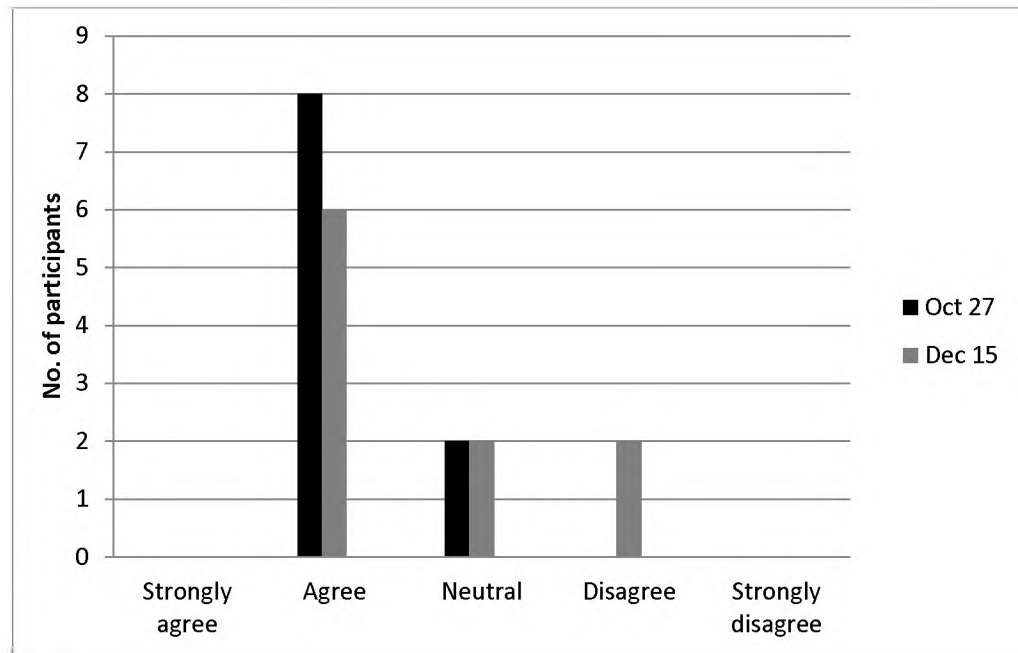


Figure 5. Students’ answers to question number 5: “I clearly know my specific spiritual growth stage according to 1 John 2:12-14.”

Sixth, two out of ten students indicated that their understanding of spiritual growth tasks was weakened during these seven weeks. Perhaps my teaching on 1 John 2:12-14 skewed their previous understanding of spiritual growth tasks. Coincidentally, two students expressed that it was difficult for them to experience all of the spiritual developmental tasks of spiritual children with reference to the passage during one lesson (Cho 2017, Section 10 on lesson 10, November 24, 2016). In addition, the same result was found concerning answers to questions 5 and 6 about understanding spiritual stages and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. This might be because students perceived that ‘stages’ and ‘tasks’ with reference to the passage were the same thing. In fact, spiritual growth tasks are a subset in spiritual growth stages with reference to the passage.

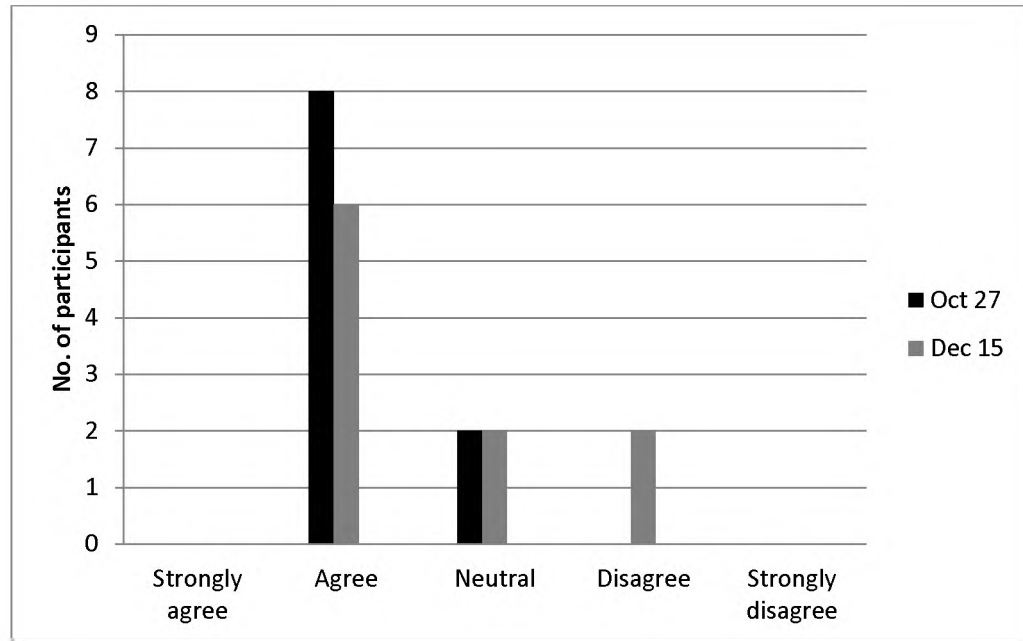


Figure 6. Students’ answers to question number 6: “I clearly know my current spiritual growth task according to 1 John 2:12-14.”

Seventh, concerning the students’ understanding about transitioning between spiritual stages in question 7, two students out of ten showed that they experienced certain improvement during those seven weeks. This might be because transitioning was taught in the last lesson, right before they answered the second questionnaire (Cho 2017, Section 13 on lesson 13, December 15, 2016). However, about one-third of my students showed “neutral” in responding to this question. This portion of the neutral opinion below is difficult to interpret.

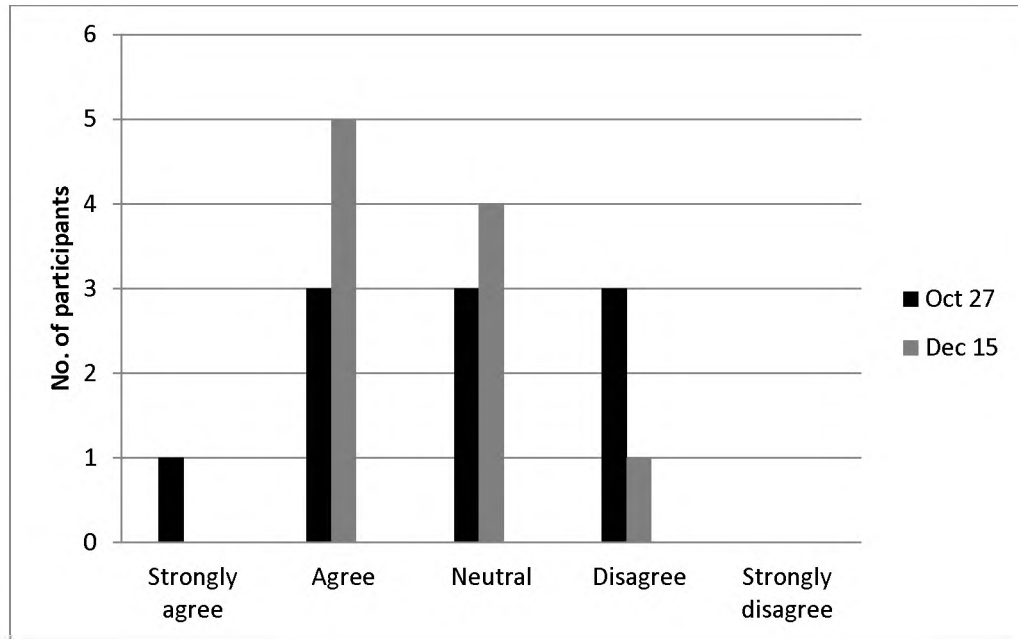


Figure 7. Students’ answers to question number 7: “I understand the transitioning between the different spiritual stages.”

Eighth, concerning my teaching methods in question 9 on the second questionnaire, my students gave their opinions and offered a generally positive comment about them. Eight out of ten students agreed that I had employed appropriate and effective teaching methods in class. There might also be some relationship between the curriculum negotiation I employed in class and the values I upheld toward the students in class, which are discussed in previous sections.

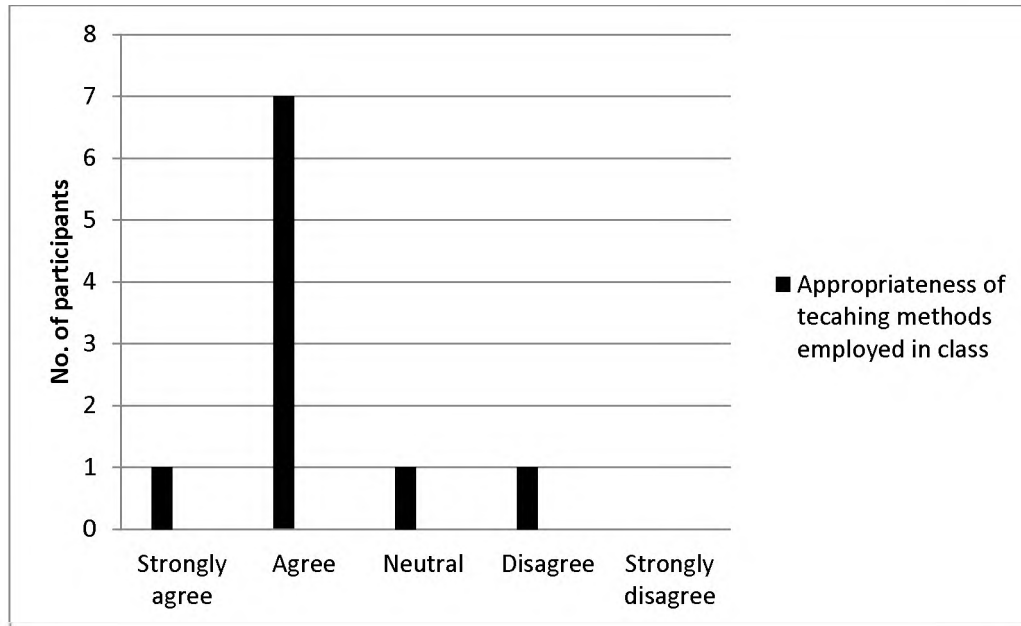


Figure 8. Students’ answers to question number 9: “Teaching methods (lecture, group discussion, and presentation, etc.) are appropriate and effective in the course.”

Ninth, eight students agreed that “The teacher helps me to have a better understanding of spiritual autobiography” in question 10 on the second questionnaire on December 15, 2016. Even though I finished my teaching on spiritual autobiography near the end of October (Cho 2017, Session 7 on lesson 7, October 27, 2016), students still generally had a positive opinion about my teaching on this subject. In fact, I had confidence that what I learned and experienced at Tyndale on this subject I could pass on to my students.

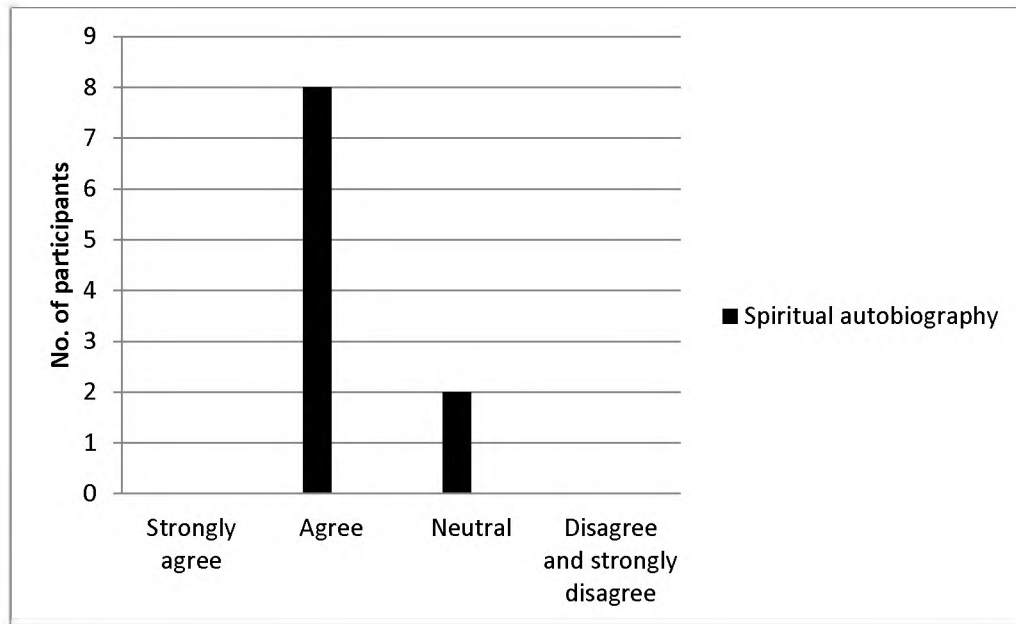


Figure 9. Students’ answers to question number 10 in the second questionnaire: “The teacher helps me to have a better understanding of spiritual autobiography.”

Tenth, six students agreed that “The teacher helps me to have a better understanding of the spiritual growth model in 1 John 2:12-14” in question 11 on the second questionnaire on December 15, 2016. As a matter of fact, I did not take any courses about Christian spiritual growth with reference to 1 John 2:12-14, but I needed to teach it in the second half of the course. Moreover, the problem I encountered was insufficient time for lecturing, especially when explaining some concepts about the spiritual growth stages as mentioned previously (Cho 2017, Section 9 on lesson 9, November 10; and Section 10 on lesson 10, November 24, 2016). I wrote in the second last journal,

However, I felt frustrated because I could not teach the spiritual growth stages with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 in a structured and detailed way. I wondered how the students could grasp the whole content in an understandable way. (Cho 2017, Section 12 on lesson 12, December 8, 2016)

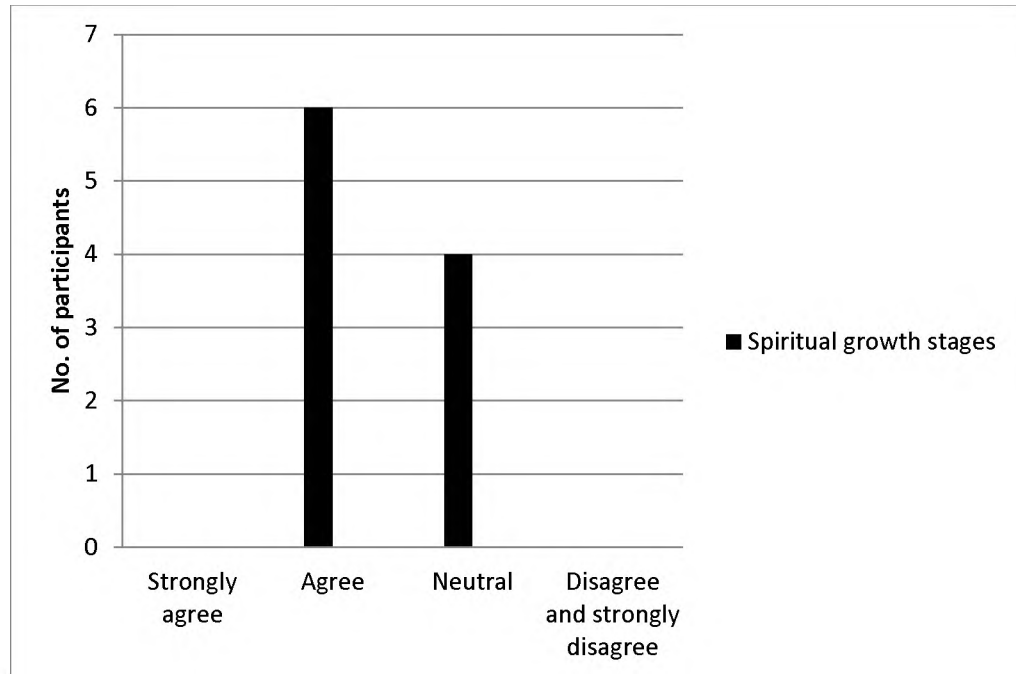


Figure 10. Students’ answers to question number 11 on the second questionnaire: “The teacher helps me to have a better understanding of the spiritual growth model in 1 John 2:12-14.”

Eleventh, the generally good teaching methods that were used in class, and commented on by my students, did not guarantee a better understanding of teaching content, especially on the spiritual growth model with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. The general outcome of the course, especially on the spiritual model, as perceived by students, was not good compared with their expectations. Figures 11 and 12 show different answers to question 1 on the two questionnaires about the expectations for the course and the final outcome perceived by students of the course. Four students changed their positive expectations for the course to a ‘neutral’ or ‘disagree,’ feeling the course did not meet their expectations.

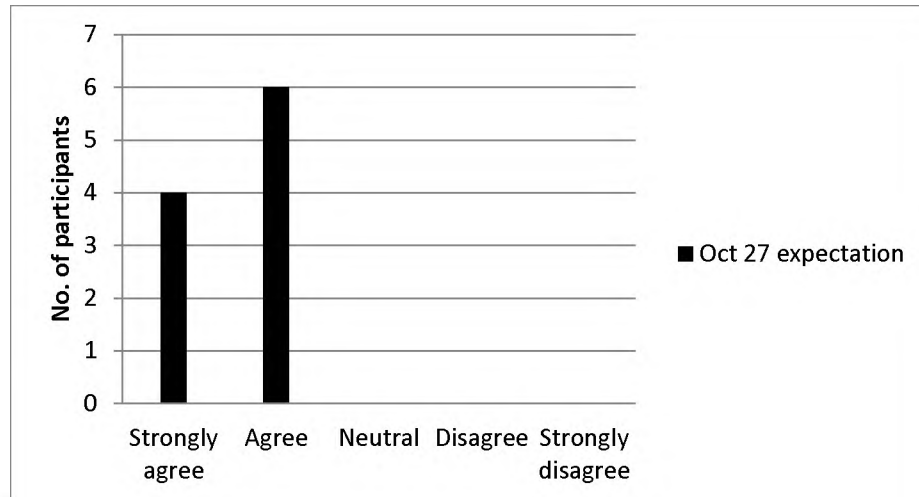


Figure 11. Students’ answers to question number 1 on the first questionnaire: “In general, I expect the Personal Growth course will be helpful for my spiritual growth” (Oct. 27).

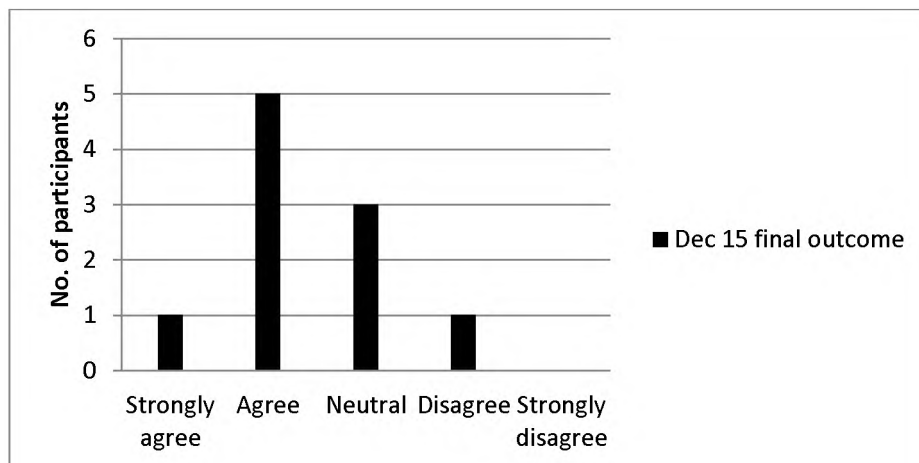


Figure 12. Students’ answers to question number 1 on the second questionnaire: “In general, the Personal and Spiritual Growth course was helpful for my spiritual growth” (Dec. 15).

In fact, during the first lesson on September 8, one student said to me that he or she expected that a personality test, such as the Enneagram, would be included in the course. I replied to the student that a personality test was

suggested in my original plan for the course, but this was excluded because of a better time allocation for the spiritual autobiography as well as for the spiritual growth model with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 (Cho 2017, Section 1 on lesson 1, September 8, 2016). In general, the course did not meet the expectations of some of the students. This may be further explained by some information offered by the dean: some students expected the course to be ‘easy,’ with no essay writing but just some reflection essays following some of the lessons, as some previous lecturers had done. This may have caused an incongruent expectation between the students and me, as suggested by the dean (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017). Students’ overall comment about the whole course on the second questionnaire disappointed me, so I did more study on effective higher education after the course. Some deep reflection upon teaching in higher education, with reference to some books and articles, will be presented in a subsequent part of this chapter. Nonetheless, during the last lesson, after I thanked all the students in my class and said goodbye, two students responded by saying that they were the ones who should really say thank you to me (Cho 2017, Section 13 on lesson 13, December 15, 2016). I found this reassuring; my teaching was appreciated by a few of my students.

Twelfth, some of the most and least useful things for spiritual growth in class were commented on by students through the late mid-course evaluation. Three students agreed that the small group discussion was good, while two students agreed that the entire class discussion was also good. One student reported that suggested readings for lessons were helpful to her learning. One

student reported that she or he treasured the sharing and responses during the lessons. Concerning the least helpful things for spiritual growth in class from the mid-evaluation, three students reported that sometimes the discussion was sidetracked and out of focus, and three agreed that my teaching materials were somewhat irrelevant to them without personal or real-life illustrations. One student commented that there was duplication of testimony of conversion and ministry calling with the admission information required by the seminary, and one complained that some terms were not fully explained in class.

Thirteenth, opinions about the most useful tools for spiritual growth were contained in students' answers on the second questionnaire. Two students commented that prayer is the most useful tool, while one student felt it was Bible reading; another, reading (spiritual) books; another, counseling with spiritual veterans (spiritual direction); another, more reflections; and yet another, knowing and discerning the spiritual growth stages in 1 John 2:12-14. Unexpectedly, not a single student commented on how the writing of a spiritual autobiography could be helpful for spiritual growth. This may have been caused by shallow reflection on spiritual experience due to inadequate teaching instruction and may also be because the so-called 'brief' approach of writing a spiritual autobiography adopted in this course might not work well at all.

Fourteenth, concerning their future plans for spiritual growth, six out of ten answered and shared on the second questionnaire. Four of them mentioned that they would engage in different spiritual disciplines such as prayer, silence, Bible reading, and journal writing. Two of them suggested making plans with

reference to the three stages of 1 John 2:12-14 to grow their spiritual lives. Two of them would like to learn more about Christian spiritual traditions. One reported desire to engage in more reflection on personal spiritual growth.

Fifteenth, concerning the relationship between physical ages and spiritual stages, according to the definition by Philo and Josephus, the relationship was not confirmed in this research.

Philo and Josephus used the word [‘youth’] to describe the twenty-four-year-old to forty-year-old man, when he reaches full development and the height of his vigor and strength (Willett 2012, 101, bracketed word added).

In this research, I followed the definition of Philo and Josephus; however, for instance, from the first questionnaire on October 27, there were seven spiritual parents, but only three students reached the age of forty-one or above. It might seem that the physical age did not have a strong relationship with the spiritual stage, especially in spiritual parents for this research. In addition, more than one student told me they found they were in the stage of spiritual children, but only one student was at the physical age of twenty-three or below. As a result, no evidence was shown in this research to confirm the relationship between physical ages and spiritual stages according to the definition by Philo and Josephus.

Sixteenth, it is believed that ‘spiritual fathers’ in 1 John 2:12-14 would likely engage in a certain form of mentoring ministry (Schaffer 2006, 6, 109, 175; Horsfall 2008, 21). The first questionnaire showed that seven students out of ten were engaging in the ministry of ‘spiritual parenting’ on October 27. However, in lesson eleven, a rigorous discussion on personal experiences in spiritual warfare

showed that many of them were interested in warfare, and hence indicated that they might not be veterans in spiritual warfare. Still, there were a small number of students keeping silence during the discussion (Cho 2017, Section 11 on lesson 11, December 1, 2016). This means the majority of my students might not be in the stage of spiritual parents; however, the reality was that more than half of them were engaging in the service of spiritual parenting or mentoring. One possible situation was that they shouldered the ministry of spiritual parenting while their spiritual life stages were not as mature. This means that some of my students were shouldering a ministerial burden that was too heavy, likely causing them some frustration. Actually, in my understanding, many full- and part-time ministers in Hong Kong face a situation of being under-resourced in ministry.

Seventeenth, from the questionnaires, the late mid-course evaluation, and the interview with the dean, some relevant points about the improvement of my teaching were suggested. I would like to categorize these into two areas: teaching content and teaching methods. Some comments that are not directly relevant to the following interpretations or the discussion were eliminated in this chapter. Firstly, concerning teaching content, the following suggestions were made by students for improvement:

- Topics discussed could be more relevant by offering personal or real-life examples (two opinions on the second questionnaire).

Secondly, concerning teaching methods and/or students' learning experiences,

- Hoping to find some spiritual companionship to facilitate spiritual growth (two opinions on the first questionnaire).
- Small group discussion was most helpful and effective (three opinions on the mid-course evaluation and two opinions on the second questionnaire).

In the following discussion, I would like to address the above suggestions for the improvement of a similar course, with some interpretations and reflections on the findings.

Finally, the dean did not make any comments about my teaching on the spiritual growth stages and the spiritual autobiography in the course on January 11, 2017 (question numbers 5 and 6, Appendix Four) because he stated that it might not be fair for him to comment on an area with which he was unfamiliar (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017).

Interpretations, Reflections, and Discussion

This action research project was designed to measure the effectiveness of several aspects of my teaching. First, one of the goals of the course was to promote reflection and awareness of spiritual experience through teaching about and writing a brief spiritual autobiography. According to Figures 3 and 9, this teaching goal was largely confirmed by my students. Second, the effectiveness of my teaching on spiritual growth and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 was not confirmed by my students (see Figures 5, 6, and 10). Meanwhile, the effectiveness of my teaching on transitioning between the different spiritual growth stages was slightly confirmed by my students (see Figure 7). Students

commented that my teaching about spiritual growth with reference to the passage was only slightly good (Figure 10), and they likely benefited more spiritually from my teaching on spiritual autobiography than on the spiritual growth stages and tasks. Third, given the above information, even though the teaching methods I employed in class were generally appreciated by students (see Figure 8), their overall comment on the entire course was only slightly good. As a result, the effectiveness of my teaching the whole course was partly confirmed by this research.

I would like to introduce some problems I encountered in this research, as well as some in my teaching, and discuss some possible ways to improve any future research I may do and any Personal Growth courses I may teach.

First, if the initial questionnaire could be conducted earlier in the course, then the students' expectations about the course could be thoroughly discussed. For example, two students commented in the first questionnaire on October 27 that they expected some spiritual companions could be found in the course, but they did not voice this expectation at the beginning of the course. I found it was difficult to address this issue because of the time constraint. On October 27, seven lessons had already been taught, and only six lessons were ahead. It was impossible to meet this expectation in class with only six sessions left. Moreover, as the last two lessons did not have small group discussions, there were only four small group discussion sessions after October 27. Eventually, I did not work on their expectation after prayer (Cho 2017, Section 8 on lesson 8, November 3, 2016). Because approval from the Tyndale Ethics Review Board had only been

granted on October 15, it was hard for me to figure out students' expectations about the course at the beginning on the basis of the first questionnaire.

As mentioned earlier, some of the difficulty encountered while attempting to set and meet expectations for the course may have to do with the Confucian influence in Hong Kong students, keeping them from expressing themselves.

An entrenched belief is that teaching is regarded as a sacred profession; and that scholar-teachers are highly respected and valued in Confucian-heritage cultures (Ho and Ho 2008, 76).

When teachers are "highly respected," as I have seen in my teaching experience, students seldom voice their expectations at the beginning of a course. Moreover, students are generally not supposed to alter the course outline set by teachers, especially when students are not acquainted with a teacher. If I had known this situation beforehand, I would have decided to take an informal questionnaire (an open-ended question sheet for students to state their expectations about the course) to clarify students' expectations at the beginning of the course.

Second, I engaged in some self-reflection about my teaching behavior during the course. There are eight aspects of teaching behavior: speech, nonverbal behaviors, explanation in teaching, organization of teaching materials, arousing learning interest, task orientation, rapport, and participation (Murray 1983, 140-141). Evidence showed that I had done well in some of these areas. For example, after lesson four, one student asked me after class for a suggestion about a ministerial problem he or she faced (Cho 2017, Section 4 on lesson 4, October 6, 2016). Rapport had been built between the students and me so that on that particular day, the student felt free to ask me a ministerial question outside the

course. In addition, according to the dean, two students wrote on their seminary evaluation forms that they appreciated the teaching materials I had shared in the course (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017). However, some areas of my teaching behaviors in the course were not clear. For example, since I did not videotape my teaching during the course, my nonverbal behaviors in class were not clear to me. Therefore, I would like to suggest videotaping in the future if I have a second chance to conduct action research in a similar situation.

Third, using the late mid-course evaluation on November 10, 2016, some students expressed that they were unable to fully grasp the ideas and terms related to the content about the spiritual developmental stages and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. Perhaps my lectures were not clear enough for my students to understand the content well. In the subsequent lesson on November 24, most of the students in class expected much small group discussion time in class. As a matter of fact, the extra small group discussion sessions during lessons deprived my lecture time to explain the theme. Were I granted a second chance to teach this course, I would distribute my teaching materials into small group learning to further emphasize the small group while hopefully delivering more content. This means every group would spend several minutes learning different materials and then share with the whole class. In this way, they could learn the material from their group sharing instead of solely through my teaching. Another alternative would be to give my students some pre-lesson readings plus a mini test for the relevant lessons so they might have an opportunity to understand my teaching

materials before class (Bain 2004, 18). Using various methods, I need to be prudent in balancing my students' need for small group discussion time with the presentation of new knowledge.

Fourth, I felt that my previous teaching fell somewhat into the trap of a traditional Chinese teacher's mentality, especially in the second half of the course. At that point I was teaching on the three spiritual stages with eight tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14: "teachers are more accustomed 'to teach on behalf of the study,' that is, teachers substitute their students' learning process with teaching" (Zhang and Zhou 2011, 710). Even though I was committed to helping all of my students learn well at the seminary, I admit that I was not fully equipped to understand my students' learning process and strategies. In the future, I need to adopt a people-centered principle in teaching; this will enable me to understand some learning traits or characteristics of prospective students before I can understand the learning process. As two Chinese scholars wrote,

To implement the people-centered principles of education and to take into account the actual needs of students, it should begin from the student's own characteristics (Zhang and Zhou 2011, 712).

I admit that I did not have an adequate understanding of my students' learning needs and characteristics before and during the course. However, I now realize that my new role as a lecturer at a seminary was not primarily for sharing knowledge, but as a facilitator for students' learning. Therefore, my first goal when I walk into a classroom is to learn from and about my students, especially their learning needs and characteristics. Therefore, I would like to use some relevant questionnaires or tests at the beginning of a course in order to understand

students in a better way. Transmission of knowledge will no longer be the focus of my teaching; a learner-centered approach will be my focus in higher education Christian ministry.

Fifth, I must continue to investigate the seeming obsession of my students toward small group discussion in class. I found a clue while investigating the learning traits of so-called Generation Y, born from the 1980s to the 2000s (Maürtin-Cairncross 2014, 564), during research after the conclusion of the course. Maürtin-Cairncross summarized some traits of different generations related to learning.

Some of the other general learning characteristics of Generation-Y include that ... they have a low threshold for boredom and a short attention span; and they have a desire for adults to act as their peers.... *Baby Boomers* (born between 1946 and 1964) prefer face-to-face delivery of learning material; *Generation-X* (born between 1965 and 1979) prefer independence; while *Generation-Y* have been found to prefer community engagement. (Maürtin-Cairncross 2014, 565-567, italics in original)

This analysis matches my learning and teaching experiences in Hong Kong as well as in Toronto. Generation Y in education is that they expect learning through activities and in community, which can present a challenge, and, from my previous experience, small group discussion was often requested. However, sometimes lecturing is needed in classroom learning to complement small group discussion or other classroom activities. Apart from generational characteristics of learners, there are also different approaches to learning; namely, the deep learning approach, the surface learning approach, and the strategic learning approach in higher educational institutes. According to Katerina Juklová,

The deep learning approach tends to understand the studied material, and is motivated by the interest in a subject. In this process of study, facts are used and thoughts are operated with. **The surface learning approach** prefers mechanical processing and reproduction of the subject matter studied. The primary motive in this approach is to avoid failure and problems. The intention of **the strategic learning approach** is to obtain the best possible grades. Users of this approach try to achieve this aim by means of any adaptation to evaluating requirements. In compliance with these requirements, these individuals plan their time and ways of using intellectual resources. Their primary motive is to compete with others. (Juklová 2013, 156-157, emphases in original)

Students' learning characteristics were a deep mixture of differing generational traits and approaches of learning. Moreover, local context played an important role; Ecclesia Theological Seminary's major demographic is comprised of Generation Y students. The seminary's mission, established by the Assemblies of God, is to educate and train young people. With this in mind, the incorporation of community engagement of Generation Y into teaching ministry presented a challenge for me. This idea is echoed by a Western scholar who taught in Hong Kong and offered the following comment on teaching and students' responsibility:

Teaching is a process of facilitating learning. The student is responsible for learning independently with guidance from the teacher. The role of the student is to reach an understanding of relevant concepts. The outcome is the student transforming knowledge for [her] own purposes and context. (Kember 2001, 215, bracketed word added)

Similarly, according to Isabel Huet *et al.*, teachers in higher education for this current generation should not focus primarily on the transmission of knowledge but help students to construct their own knowledge systems. When

students construct their own system of knowledge, they will hopefully be more open and receptive to new information.

The “new” generation of teachers in HE [higher education] demands a strong commitment in understanding the students’ learning process and strategies aiming to supervise the students’ construction of knowledge. (Huet *et al.* 2009, 159, bracketed words added)

This also matches the following research about good teaching in higher education.

The main point of good teaching is to facilitate the construction of knowledge by the students themselves. Ken Bain studied 63 professors who were nationally renowned as excellent teachers and

... found that the teaching practices of these excellent teachers reflected their understanding that knowledge is actively constructed by students rather than passively received; they deemphasized intrinsic rewards; ... and they confronted students with situations that challenged their existing mental models (Bain 2004, 26-28, 46-47).

This means that a personalized learning process always occurs in higher education, including Christian higher education, whether intentionally or not. As a result, a well-designed lesson plan is required to meet the different needs of students so they all may benefit from teaching, not necessarily from traditional lectures or teaching. Emphasis should be placed on how to help the students build a meaningful and constructive learning process. Questionnaires to determine the students’ approach to learning and small group discussion to introduce some teaching concepts are two ways to facilitate students’ learning in community.

Sixth, Maürtin-Cairncross also states that Generation Y prefers peer input over input from academic staff; often they have poorly developed critical skills

and poor understanding of academic ethics (Maurtin-Cairncross 2014, 567, 578). I shared some materials on critical thinking skills according to Nanez (2005) with my students in class (Cho 2017, Section 6 on lesson 6, October 20, 2016). The dean was surprised about my sharing on that topic because lecturers on Personal Growth have seldom shared about critical thinking in the past. Furthermore, this discussion with the dean about the need to develop seminarians' critical thinking skills resulted was his commitment to raise the issue at the following seminary faculty meeting in February 2017 (Cho 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017). The faculty approved the idea, and a new course that emphasizes critical thinking, along with academic writing, will be launched in the academic year 2017 to 2018. I am so glad that my action research project might contribute not only to any future Personal Growth course, but also to the personal growth of all seminary students by way of sharpening their critical learning skills. In other words, this research has contributed to seminary policy development, especially concerning seminarians' critical thinking skills (Carr and Kemmis 1986, 164-165).

Seventh, to promote better teaching of 1 John 2:12-14 in the future, I would like to introduce some practical illustrations in the lessons. After I finished teaching the previous course, I realized I had put the suggested Christian spiritual growth theory of the Apostle John from 1 John 2:12-14 into modern-day practice. I discovered an issue in my previous teaching: bridging theory and practice. When applying research theory to practice, Randi and Corno propose "to use examples generated in practice to develop, refine, and elaborate theory" (Randi and Corno

2007, 337-338). The Apostle John, of course, did not elaborate on the eight tasks according to 1 John 2:12-14 in an understandable way for contemporary Christians. My students suggested that the eight tasks be illustrated by some real-life examples so they could better understand the concepts. In other words, if the Apostle John described a theory of Christian spiritual growth, believers need to grasp the pattern and rules of growth with contemporary examples relevant to their experience, along with good exegesis of the passage. Martin Stigmar depicts the beginning of bridging theory and practice in the following way:

[T]he advanced beginner would have to consider perceived similarity with prior examples. This leads to a need for practice and support in different learning situations in order to achieve patterns. The patterns are personally developed and thus complicated to express.... They have to concentrate on memorizing the rules they learned. (Stigmar 2010, 8)

Students need to personalize John's theory of spiritual growth accordingly and understand using their own terms, examples, patterns, and interpretations. This means that while rules and patterns are commonly shared, examples and interpretations may be understood in a very personal way. Meanwhile, students should be encouraged to interpret John's theory from different angles and perspectives because various believers could interpret those stages with very unique meanings. For example, a believer from a Chinese Taoist background is likely to have a very different understanding of spiritual warfare compared with a missionary who encounters evil spirits on an African mission field. The Chinese believer may find the evil spirits are closely attached to the Taoist belief system, while the missionary in Africa may find evil spirits are closely related to

dominating witches (Ooi 2006, 150-152). That means some Chinese people experience some ghosts or evil spirits under the influence of the Taoist system. In fact, one student who came from a Taoist family background shared his or her story about encountering spirits and impressed this upon the whole class (Cho 2017, Section 11 on lesson 11, December 1, 2016). Therefore, I must present some relevant life examples when illustrating different spiritual developmental stages and tasks so that students may understand those abstract concepts in a practical manner. As stated by Kember and McNaught, relevance may be established by the application of a theory. The relevance of material may be shown by relating it to real-life examples, to current issues, or to local cases (Kember and McNaught 2007, 75).

Eighth, one thing not accounted for throughout the course was the students' previous knowledge about spiritual stages and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. Contextually, the cell group movement was popular some twenty years ago in Hong Kong. The movement adopted a metaphorical interpretation of 1 John 2:12-14 and always advocated Christian spiritual growth with reference to the passage. So some students may have had some prior understanding and even life applications about this passage; however, their understanding might not be identical to my own understanding and application. This could result in dissonance between the principles learnt. For instance, I observed that some students struggled still with the issue of humility, which is defined as a learning task of 'spiritual children' (Matt. 18:3-4), while in that lesson they should have been learning something about the 'spiritual youth' stage (Cho 2017, Section 12

on lesson 12, December 8, 2016). Actually, humility is a learning task that begins in the stage of spiritual children and extends to all stages of spiritual growth. This means that throughout our entire life span of spiritual growth, Christians need to live in this world and before God in a humble way. As a result, in my understanding, some of my students were frustrated by the course I was teaching. I think it was in part because I did not properly deal with their prior knowledge on 1 John 2:12-14. When I did not explore the ideas and concepts about the spiritual growth stages that were already established in students' minds, my teaching points on that issue were likely confused with what they had already learned (Figures 5 and 6). On the contrary, Daniel Willingham asserts that teachers should understand the importance of the prior knowledge students bring to their classrooms, the need to focus students on big ideas or important details, the power of stories to promote learning among students, the necessity of posing problems for students to solve, and the need to encourage students to elaborate on their thoughts and ideas, and to think about meanings on their own (Willingham 2009, 4, 15-17, 51-53, 63-64, 101).

In the future, if I were invited to teach a course, I would factor in the prior knowledge students held concerning the relevant topics before I taught. I would also seek to understand the differences between the prior knowledge in the minds of the various students—in this case focusing particularly on students' understanding of the three stages of spiritual growth with the eight developmental tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. Then, for example, I would introduce some basic concepts along with some relevant episodes or examples of spiritual

autobiographies that are related to those spiritual tasks. I would like to expand the time spent for students to digest the spiritual growth stages and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 so they may practically apply the passage in a more meaningful way. Important thoughts, key concepts, and central ideas about the topic must be clarified through discussion in class and before application by the students.

Ninth, concerning my students' expectation spiritual companionship, most notably the expectation that they would be assigned a spiritual companion, I would like to figure this out at or before the beginning of the course. If more than half of the class has this expectation, I would introduce a mentorship group in class, providing enough spiritual parents were enrolled. In previous teaching, I encountered two mature students who were also pastors; they were respected by most of the other students. If a similar demographic occurs, I could divide the class into two groups, with a total of six students in each group, and encourage them to help one another on their spiritual journeys. I would like to use the concept and practice of mentorship in some training programs for the Personal Growth course. According to Stigmar, the most effective means of mentoring and of fruitful peer discussion are often those that are least formal (Stigmar 2010, 10). When I taught previously, I randomly divided the class into different groups for the various lessons. In the future, I would consider the concept of mentorship in class so that students might find their spiritual companions, not only for the good of their class but for their lifelong benefit.

Tenth, concerning the brief spiritual autobiography, I admit that what I learned during the one-year course on Spiritual Autobiography at Tyndale for my Doctor of Ministry cannot begin to compare with trying to teach this content to my students in a period of time that allowed for only six lessons. It was a real challenge for me to achieve the same teaching effect in just six weeks. Perhaps I need to adjust my expectations about the teaching content with this time constraint in mind. If I were granted a second chance to teach the same course, I would invite students to read the autobiographies related to the three stages of spiritual growth with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 with a prayerful heart over the whole thirteen-week course. The scriptural passage could serve as a reference point for the students' reflection on their own spiritual autobiographies. In addition, if time allowed, I would invite all of the students to reflect on their entire spiritual life and to write a full-length spiritual autobiography instead of a short one. Some exercises for students' reflection upon their spiritual experiences would be introduced in class. I would also cultivate a spirit of prayer by reading and sharing spiritual episodes (Oakes 2013, 14). Then I would ask the students to integrate their experiences of conversion and ministry calling into the framework of the three stages with eight tasks with reference to the passage. All in all, I think the framework of the spiritual growth model might promote a better understanding of various Christian autobiographies.

I recognize the need to improve personally in many aspects, including research skills as well as finessing the teaching methods used to convey the spiritual autobiography along with the possible spiritual growth model with

reference to 1 John 2:12-14. Nevertheless, the benefits from this action research project are apparent, in the students that enrolled, the ongoing discussion in the seminary regarding critical thinking, and for myself, by learning to be a better teacher in Christian higher education.

Concluding Remarks

The study's intent was to assess the effectiveness of teaching the spiritual autobiography and the spiritual growth stages with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. From the students' point of view, my teaching on the spiritual autobiography was more effective than the teaching on the spiritual growth stages and tasks with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 in the Personal Growth course (Figures 9 and 10). In addition, for half of the students, the most useful tool for spiritual growth was spiritual disciplines, including prayer, (Bible and spiritual) readings, and one-on-one instruction (spiritual direction). Some concrete suggestions for improving the teaching were made in this chapter. Therefore, I would say this research has accomplished its goal. As far as I know, no other researcher has published any report directly related to this teaching content. This makes the research a precious pioneering work for me and perhaps for other teachers and researchers as well.

Nevertheless, some limitations and weaknesses of my questionnaires should be noted. First of all, although some questions were straightforward in asking about the effectiveness of teaching the two components, some aspects relating teaching and learning were missed in the questionnaires. For example, questions about the different learning approaches of students were omitted

(Juklová 2013, 156-157). If different learning approaches of students are closely related to their learning outcomes, I would have incorporated some questions about this into the questionnaires. Furthermore, had I known the importance of small group learning to the students initially, I would have added some questions about the effectiveness of small group discussion and peer influence in learning to the second questionnaire. Second, there is doubt about the relationship of questions 4 and 8 (Figures 1 and 2) to my teaching effectiveness on the two components in the questionnaires. Although some references were quoted in formulating these two questions, the references were not directly related to learning spiritual growth in a higher education context. Therefore, I would like to revise to the two questionnaires in future research.

At the time of writing, I have decided not to incorporate spiritual disciplines or practices in the coming course, although it was suggested by half of the students in the course. The reason for this decision is that I need to confirm the program plans of the seminary with the dean. In the 2016-2017 students' handbook for Ecclesia Theological Seminary, another course exists entitled Theology of Spirituality and Practice (Ecclesia Theological Seminary 2016, 23, 28, 54). Because of this, I hesitated to introduce spiritual disciplines in the Personal Growth course.

In the future, I would like to adopt reflective practice as a way for me to serve in Christian higher education. Ghaye and Ghaye suggest ten principles of critical and reflective practice, which I have concisely organized and quoted in three points below (1998, 16-18):

Firstly, reflective practice needs to be understood as a set of meanings which produce a version of events within certain environments and human relations, fueled and energized by experience. It is about learning to describe, explain, and justify the way practitioners go about things, and doing something positive and constructive through the knowledge we create which is purposeful. There is also a linkage between theoretical knowledge and practical application, enabling practitioners to create meaningful theories of action that are lively and real. Secondly, reflective practice means applying critical thinking in returning to look again at our taken-for-granted values, professional understandings and practices, and in considering what we do “problematically”—by constantly inquiring or questioning what we do systematically so that transformation can take place. This reflective discourse is at the heart of the improvement process. Thirdly, it is eclectic, and is comfortable with drawing on different ways of knowing.

I have practiced the first and the third principles in this research and demonstrated them in this chapter. However, I admit that much attention must be paid to educational research so that transformation through my teaching may emerge in the future. Particularly, some taken-for-granted teaching values and practices at Ecclesia Theological Seminary were not challenged when I taught previously. This was because I cautiously accommodated the teaching environment and the requirements of the seminary in the course. One area in which I am still learning is that of how to teach effectively amid such diverse student learning needs. For instance, the dean told me they treated associate bachelor degree seminarians as first-year bachelor students. I strongly disagreed with him on this, presenting some evidence about the learning discrepancies between these two groups of students (Cho, 2017, Section 14, an interview record with the dean on January 11, 2017). I suspected that the seminary somehow ignored the learning differences

between associate bachelor students, bachelor students, and master's students.

This may be one of my research problems in the future, so additional transformation in my prospective teaching could well take place.

Finally, understanding the characteristics of different generations, learning approaches, teaching methods, and the Hong Kong context mentioned in this chapter will surely not only benefit my future teaching at the seminary, but also as I teach within the church. Research is my ministry when God calls me, and I am going to proceed in a prudent way with a sensitive mind and a caring heart. The teaching suggestions and methods mentioned in this chapter need to be reflected on and refined for any new context in the future; however, my quest to become a better teacher is far from nearing its end. I trust the research project I have presented here will place me at an appropriate starting point for the teaching profession in Christian higher education. Surely this research project will play a positive role in developing my teaching ministry in Christian higher education.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

As stated in chapter two, I was attracted by Jesus' words and deeds in 1986 before my conversion, and his words still draw me in many ways. God's Word has profound meaning for me. Through the writing of my spiritual autobiography with a prayerful heart, I sensed that God spoke to me, saying that he wants my life to be healed further. For example, I discovered that he wants me to be healed from some long-ago as well as recent life hurts by my significant others. By his grace, I also discovered that God calls me to live by a radical faith in him and to appreciate his work in all circumstances.

Next, through the writing of the spiritual growth model, God granted me a vision for promoting Christian spiritual growth with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. The key to growing a church is to grow every Christian according to the Word of God. This is a common path that many Christians may travel.

Finally, through the research on my teaching, I sensed that God spoke to me, equipping me for the service of future teaching ministry in seminary. He gave me a burden for Christian higher education, and he also sharpened my understanding of teaching ministry as well as enhancing my teaching ability through the project.

During the past three and a half years with Tyndale, through learning and praying, I have found a clear direction in my ministerial life. I have received four main focuses for my future ministry; namely, to be conscientious, believing, growing, and serving. To all non-believers in my context, I am going to preach: be conscientious. Not only is this a way to prepare people to receive Jesus Christ in their lives, but it is also a main theme against many social injustices within Hong Kong society. To all new believers and the church congregation, I preach wholehearted belief in God. To all committed Christians, I preach and teach the message of growing with reference to the Bible and serving in a unique way that God has prescribed for every individual. For me, the message of growing remains as the most complicated among the four, but I was well equipped through my learning at Tyndale. Through the assignments at Tyndale, a detailed investigation about how Christians could grow with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 and research on teaching Hong Kong seminarians using the passage and a spiritual autobiography were conducted. This experience was wonderful for me; the guidance and sound advice of various professors benefitted me immensely. I am so thankful for all of the support and help they offered. All in all, my experience of learning at Tyndale has been a profound blessing in my life.

I believe that one of the most appropriate ways to facilitate Christian spiritual formation is with reference to the Bible. In chapter three, I chose 1 John 2:12-14 as one possible model for promoting Christian spiritual growth with my brief elaboration. However, after reading thirteen Christian biographies and autobiographies, I found that only the sketches of two Christians almost matched

the description of spiritual growth with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. These two books are the autobiography of Reinhard Bonnke (Bonnke 2010) and a biography of Rees Howells (Grubb 1952), two Christians who, coincidentally, also share in or are close to the Pentecostal faith. The other eleven accounts included their own unique accounts of growing into maturity or at least have some spiritual impact to Christian communities (Chan 1999; Choy 2004; du Plessis 1977; Frodsham 1948; Hasler 2002; St. Therese 2012; Skinner 1974; Steer 1997; Thompson 1992; Wessel 1977; Yun and Hattaway 2002). For months I pondered the question, *Why do so many Christians grow into maturity, or even go into ministry, without following the guidelines of this passage?* Eventually, I found that the Apostle John, the supposed the writer of the Epistle of First John, was casting a vision for the church (Willett 2012, 339): that every Christian could consider serving as a spiritual parent the end point of spiritual maturity. But the reality may be that only a few Christians will grow and enter into the service of spiritual parenting.

I recognize that my own spiritual growth is quite similar to the description in 1 John 2:12-14. During my spiritual childhood from 1986 to 1998, I experienced the sweetness of the Father's embrace; I also deeply experienced his forgiveness for my sins. From 1999 to 2008, since the time of my ministry in S., to the toddlerhood of my daughter near 2008, I experienced a raging and unusual spiritual warfare (87, 105-111). Nonetheless, starting from 2010 until the time of my writing I furthered my study in Hong Kong, then in Canada. I believe these studies have contributed heavily to the strengthening of my spiritual life, not because of some obvious spiritual warfare but because of my settled mind,

learnings, and reflections beyond 2010. Thus, the period of my spiritual youth was in the past decades. Then, when my daughter reached the age of eight (when I turned forty-one) in 2013, I realized that God was leading me to be a spiritual father; first of all, of course, to be a spiritual father to my own daughter. All of a sudden, I realized that she had come to an age where she was able to understand spiritual truth intellectually and experience God in a vivid way. I felt that God was personally commissioning me to be a spiritual parent complimentary to my role as a biological parent. In reality, every Christian may have a different understanding from the Lord to confirm their calling to be a good spiritual parent (DePriest 2005, 110). In my opinion, unless God directs otherwise, every Christian could set the goal of becoming a godly spiritual parent as a realization of spiritual maturity in their Christian life. I share the understanding of Willett's vision derived from the passage that every Christian could consider growing his or her spiritual life with reference to 1 John 2:12-14 (Willett 2012, 168). One hallmark of a mature Christian in ministry could be the delightful spiritual parenting of others. However, some Christians may not enter into the ministry of spiritual parenting because of their callings elsewhere or their less advanced physical age, despite experiences of God in a very deep and special ways (St. Therese 2012; Thompson 1992).

There is a great need for spiritual parents who are competent in guiding Christians into spiritual maturity in churches all around the world (Willett 2012, 341). After months of meditation and prayer, I caught a vision of God's church, which was filled with spiritual parents so that many new believers, and even non-

believers, were nurtured through relationships with them. They passed on wisdom, caring, and support to the surrounding people who were in line with the heavenly Father. Meanwhile, spiritual parents learn a lot from their children because God turns our hearts to our children (Mal. 4:6). As a parent, I personally learned some vital lessons from my daughter even when she was a toddler. Therefore, this vision paints more than a picture of church growth; this could impact societies all around the world. Needless to say, the growth of Christians into spiritual parents may guarantee that there are sufficient spiritual leaders in a church, minimizing the number of spiritual orphans in the church. A sustainable and growing church is a likely vision for Christians who practice the eight tasks for spiritual growth; the prerequisite of such a church is growing Christians.

Moreover, spiritual parents are surely not constrained by the boundary of 'church,' so they will likely exert their spiritual influence upon the societies in which they reside. In the new millennium, some Christians believe there will be restoration, in Christian terms, in seven important segments of social structure in any society; namely, media, government, education, economy, religion, arts and entertainment, and family and social services (Enlow 2008, 44). This could echo the restoration of an end-time Elijah mission (Matt. 17:11). But I sense that the coming Elijah restoration, if there really is one, will cover more than those seven arenas of social structure. Spiritual parents are full of wisdom; they have various resources which are experienced through time and seasons and are derived from a deep understanding of the eternal God (1 John 2:13-14), but they are still fallible (1 John 2:15-16). As a consequence, societies are expected to be transformed by

them in the near future, as some Christians anticipated (Cannistraci 1996, 116-128). As a result, I am expecting a spiritual parenting movement in churches all around the world, and this is the vision I have following my study of the passage. I plan to write a book in Chinese based on the possible spiritual growth model with reference to the passage to further this vision.

Concerning my next step in ministry, I give thanks to God that Hong Kong Ecclesia Theological Seminary invited me to teach the Personal Growth course for the second time in the fall of 2017. Therefore, I have used this opportunity to share my vision of Christian spiritual growth as well as spiritual parenting with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. Many of the suggestions in chapter four were implemented to improve my teaching. I have designed another questionnaire for clarification of the students' expectations for the course, which will be used at the beginning of the course. I hope the questionnaire will enable me to better meet the expectations of my students in the future. Apart from the spiritual growth framework of the Apostle John, God's unique leading and direction for the individual Christian is extremely important. In my future teaching, I am going to acknowledge some other methods of spiritual growth apart from 1 John 2:12-14 in my lessons. As with the previous teaching experience, I would continue to address some issues related to Confucianism through informal discussion with the whole class. My second opportunity to teach was in the fall of 2017 with another thirteen students in the same seminary.

I would like to propose the progression of eight Christian virtues according to 2 Peter 1:5-7 (NIV)—namely, faith, goodness, knowledge, self-

control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love—as an alternative biblical model for Christian spiritual growth. This passage sheds light on the character-building aspect of Christian formation in a step-by-step fashion. If it is the Lord’s will, I would like to investigate how to turn this passage into a substantial experience for Christians who desire this growth in the near future. In addition, I would like to propose a new course for Ecclesia Theological Seminary in Hong Kong, Introduction to Spiritual Direction, to emphasize both the individuality and importance of Christian spiritual growth.

I acknowledge that there are variations in Christian spiritual growth and maturity because a significant proportion of Christians are not structuring their spiritual growth with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. One obvious challenge for me in the church where I serve, as well as in my teaching ministry, is how to help Christians who are not growing along the strict line of this model. In fact, the Bible mentions that God may guide some people to walk in “a way that they knew not” (Isa. 42:16 AV). After reading some additional Christian autobiographies and biographies, even though those Christians were not growing with reference to the 1 John 2:12-14 passage, I found that God was still present and had directed their lives in a very obvious way (e.g., Chan 1999; du Plessis 1977; Frodsham 1948; St. Therese 2012; Steer 1997; Thompson 1992; Yun and Hattaway 2002). It seems that no common growth model applied to them all. Nevertheless, it is good for all Christians to have some understanding of 1 John 2’s scheme for how Christians grow spiritually, as the increased exposure of this passage will mean increased connection and resulting growth according to its truths. In my opinion, the

Apostle John articulated some common stages of Christian spiritual growth tied to a metaphor of human growth in order to build possible common ground for organizing and developing Christian communities.

I found that one common stumbling block to spiritual growth is the lack of motivation. Many Christians around me in my youth did not prioritize spiritual growth at all. They seldom experienced spiritual warfare, because of this, let alone pursuing and becoming spiritual parents. The issue of motivation resurfaced during the time I taught the dozen seminarians in the fall of 2016. There were only a few students who had a problem with low motivation to learn, but it is an increasingly common dilemma among many Hong Kong Christians at the time of my writing, and many other Christians worldwide. I would continue to study the art and discipline of motivation that I may teach it. I trust that my Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit will make a way, not only for me but also for my students, because he is gracious and helpful to all who seek him.

The core passage of Scripture in this portfolio is 1 John 2:12-14, and becoming a spiritual parent is the goal for Christian spiritual maturity as well as ministry. In my opinion, this goal fits well in the Hong Kong Pentecostal context as well as in Asian Confucian culture. This is because the Bible has supreme authority among Hong Kong Pentecostals as well as evangelicals. Meanwhile, elders are widely respected, not only in Hong Kong but also in most Asian countries. The model of spiritual parenthood according to the Bible will likely be workable in Hong Kong as well as in Chinese Christian communities in East Asian countries. The only requirements for reaching this goal in a believer's life

are determination, persistence, hard work, and, most importantly, the leading of the gracious Holy Spirit. Meanwhile, Pentecostal spiritual formation emphasizes relying on the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit and has proved successful in changing many lives spiritually around the world in the last century. My prayer and hope is that my coming research and teaching ministry will flourish with help from the Holy Spirit in a culturally relevant manner and lead many Christians into the ministry of spiritual parenting. If this approach succeeds, it would impact many in Chinese Christian communities.

Last but not least, I wish to express my profound gratitude toward Tyndale, for my education which provided a precious learning experience in spiritual formation from both individual and collective perspectives (i.e., spiritual autobiography and the spiritual growth model). I gained many insights on my past by preparing and writing my spiritual autobiography. The program also emphasized building competent ministerial skills to promote Christian spiritual formation in an effective way through the research project. Moreover, I feel that my comprehension skills and my reading speed have improved during the past four years. As my journey in Tyndale's Doctor of Ministry program comes to an end, I pray that God will bless the reader through this portfolio in some personal and spiritual way.

APPENDICES

Appendix One: Consent Form for Students Research Study Consent Form (English translation)

Introduction: My name is Daniel Hung-fai CHO (Tel. no.: [852] 96530651). I am a student at Tyndale University and Seminary (Toronto) conducting a study on the course Personal Growth for a Doctor of Ministry in Spiritual Formation.

Project Title: The Effect of Teaching Spiritual Autobiography and Spiritual Growth Stages with Reference to 1 John 2:12-14 on Seminarians' Personal and Spiritual Growth, Ecclesia Theological Seminary, Hong Kong

Purpose: The purpose of the research is to study the effect of lessons on spiritual autobiography and a three-stage spiritual growth model (with reference to 1 John 2:12-14) on students' personal and spiritual growth. This course will be conducted with lectures, group discussion, and individual presentations, etc. This is a single-site project and receives no sponsorship or funding.

Research Procedure: This research has been reviewed and received ethics approval through the Tyndale University College and Seminary Research Ethics Board. Meanwhile, this research has been reported in the faculty meeting of Hong Kong Ecclesia Theological Seminary by the dean and has been approved. If you consent, you will be asked to participate in three items; namely, the first questionnaire (on October 6), a midway evaluation (on October 27), and a questionnaire after the course (on December 15). Apart from these three items, I will observe the class and take notes for the purpose of research. Conversation and informal interview related to research will also be recorded and presented in the research report. The participants may express their opinions during lessons as they wish.

Time Required: The questionnaires and midway evaluation will each take approximately ten to fifteen minutes of your time.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate, you will not receive any questionnaires. However, according to Ecclesia Theological Seminary, your attendance and final evaluation form are still required. In addition, if you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

Risks: There are no known risks associated with these questionnaires. However, it is possible that you might feel troubled in filling out the questionnaires or

giving suggestions, etc. If this happens, please inform me. Meanwhile, if you choose not to participate, or withdraw partway through, this will not influence classroom participation or the grading of your assignments; i.e., no specific loss or deduction of marks or changed relationship with the professor or the school. Similarly, if you choose to participate, it will not influence classroom participation or the grading of your assignments; i.e., no specific gain or increase of marks, improved relationships, etc.

Benefits: This research is intended to benefit the students, the teaching, and the school by vitalizing the theories and practices of spiritual autobiography and spiritual growth stages with reference to 1 John 2:12-14. There is the potential to be positively changed after these thirteen lessons are finished. In addition, your completed questionnaires may help the teacher and the seminary to improve the teaching for any similar courses in the future.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: Your name will not be recorded or collected. Your attendance, completed questionnaires, course evaluations (including group discussion and presentations, but not including written assignments) will be collected, preserved, and analyzed only if you grant me permission to use them. If your opinion is cited in my report, 'Student A' or another alphabetical substitute will be used. After my final DMin project is finalized and graded, all personal data collected during the lessons will be destroyed. There will be no second usage of the data collected.

All procedures of collecting and processing personal information will comply with Hong Kong ordinance chapter 486, Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance, and Canadian Law 38(2), Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. Participants who wish to inquire or modify your personal data, please contact me personally or via email: siuyan.hungfai@gmail.com.

Sharing the Results and Publication: All information collected in this course will be analyzed and placed in my final research report. The report will then be submitted to my professor at the end of term and will eventually appear in my doctoral portfolio. This portfolio will be kept in Tyndale's library, the Tyndale Doctor of Ministry Reading Room (3377 Bayview Avenue, Toronto, CANADA) and may be kept in Ecclesia's library as well.

Before You Sign: By signing below, you are agreeing to participate in this research study. Be sure that you are satisfied with your responses to any questions you may have answered. In addition, the researcher understands that your signature on this consent form does not mean that you abandon any legal right to pursue any loss directly or indirectly caused by this research. You have the right to ask any questions concerning this research in the future.

If you have any inquiries, please contact: DMin Office, Tyndale Seminary, 3377 Bayview Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, CANADA; email address: dmin@tyndale.ca; phone no.: 1-416-226-6620 or 1-416-226-6380. If you wish to

contact the Tyndale Research Ethics Board, please send your email to reb@tyndale.ca.

I understand all of the above terms and items, and I am willing to participate in this research voluntarily.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____
(MM/DD/YY)

Participant's full name _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____
(MM/DD/YY)

Researcher's full name _____

(Adapted from Appendix 1: Sample Consent Form for Interviews [Sensing 2011, 235-236])

Appendix Two: Two Questionnaires in Personal Growth Course

First Questionnaire in Personal Growth Course

Date: _____

Dear student, thank you for your participation in this research and for answering the following questions. Your answers will contribute to the improvement of the future Personal Growth course. This questionnaire is similar to the questionnaire used after the course. All personal data collected here will be used only for research analysis and will be kept confidential.

- * Be sure that any questions you may have answered are to your satisfaction. You may skip any question you like and are not obligated to return this questionnaire to the researcher.
- * Please circle the appropriate answer, tick the appropriate box, or fill in words wherever appropriate.
- * Except when specified otherwise, write only one answer for each question.
- * Please answer based on your understanding, opinion, or facts that you know, but not according to an ideal situation or projection.

1. In general, I expect the Personal Growth course will be helpful for my spiritual growth.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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2. I understand my personal experience with God from various angles.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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3. I believe that writing a spiritual autobiography could make Christians more spiritually oriented.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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4. I am often aware of God's activity in my daily life.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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5. I clearly know my specific spiritual growth stage according to 1 John 2:12-14.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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6. I clearly know my current spiritual growth task according to 1 John 2:12-14.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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7. I understand the transitioning between different spiritual stages.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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8. I eagerly long for spiritual growth.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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9. My expectation, opinion, or suggestion about the course:

Personal Particulars:

I am currently engaged in a mentoring ministry or more (you may choose more than one):

One-on-one informal mentoring Group Mentor Spiritual Parent

Other: _____ (Please specify) None

Age: Below 23 24-40 41 or above

In this course, I am taking compulsory credits
 taking credits as an elective
 an audit student

Second Questionnaire in Personal Growth Course

Date: _____

Dear student, thank you for your participation in this research and for answering the following questions. Your answers will contribute to the improvement of the future Personal Growth Course. This questionnaire is similar to the questionnaire used before. All personal data collected here will be used only for research analysis and will be kept confidential.

- * Be sure that any questions you may have answered are to your satisfaction. You may skip any question you like and are not obligated to return this questionnaire to the researcher.
- * Please circle the appropriate answer, tick the appropriate box, or fill in words wherever appropriate.
- * Except when specified otherwise, write only one answer for each question.
- * Please answer based on your understanding, opinion, or facts that you know, but not according to an ideal situation or projection.

1. In general, the Personal and Spiritual Growth course was helpful for my spiritual growth.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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2. I understand my personal experience with God from various angles.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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3. I believe that writing a spiritual autobiography could make Christians more spiritually oriented.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	---------	----------	-------------------

4. I am often aware of God's activity in my daily life.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	---------	----------	-------------------

5. I clearly know my specific spiritual growth stage according to 1 John 2:12-14.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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6. I clearly know my current spiritual growth task according to 1 John 2:12-14.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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7. I understand the transitioning between different spiritual stages.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	---------	----------	-------------------

8. I eagerly long for spiritual growth.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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9. The teaching methods in the course (lecture, group discussion, and presentation, etc.) are appropriate and effective.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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10. The teacher helps me to have a better understanding of spiritual autobiography.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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11. The teacher helps me to have a better understanding of the 1 John 2:12-14 spiritual growth model.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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12. I've found that the tool(s) _____
is/are the most helpful for my spiritual growth.

13. I have the following idea(s) or plan(s) to promote my spiritual growth in the
near future:

14. Apart from this course, I have attended the following personal and spiritual
course(s) _____ in the past four months.

15. My expectation, opinion, or suggestion about the course:

Personal Particulars:

I am currently engaged in a mentoring ministry or more (you may choose more
than one):

One-on-one informal mentoring Group Mentor Spiritual Parent

Other: _____ (Please specify) None

Age: Below 23 24-40 41 or above

In this course, I am taking compulsory credits
 taking credits as an elective
 an audit student

Appendix Three: Research Questions for Students in Mid-course Evaluation

The following questions will be asked in class on October 27, 2016. The purpose of this evaluation is to encourage students to offer comments freely.

1. Which aspect of the course is most helpful to you?
2. Which aspect of the course is least helpful to you?
3. In what way is my teaching of spiritual autobiography helpful or irrelevant to you?
4. What suggestions do you have for improving the course?

Appendix Four: Research Questions for the Dean after the Course

After the completion of the course, I would ask the dean to comment on the following four areas: the teacher, the teaching, the reading and assignments, and the students' participation and learning. He is free to offer any comments to me; however, some areas will be the focus if he does not give me any feedback.

1. I, as the teacher of the course (general communication skills, respect for students, response to students' questions in a timely manner).
2. My teaching competence (knowledgeable about the course content, illustration and clarification skills, providing useful responses to questions, motivating students to learn).
3. Reading and assignments (helpful for their learning, whether the workload is reasonable or not, presentations receiving appropriate feedback from teacher).
4. Students' participation and learning (acquiring teacher's feedback after group discussion, students benefiting from other students' sharing, overall learning is fruitful).
5. Effects of teaching on spiritual autobiography.
6. Effects of teaching on spiritual growth model according to 1 John 2:12-14.
7. Overall comments (helpful in achieving the course objective, good teaching or not).

**Appendix Five: A Copy of Confirmation Emails
from the Dean of Ecclesia Theological Seminary
about Teaching the Personal Growth Course**

From: Solomon Wong <solomon@hk-ebc.edu>
Date: 2016/02/18 23:20 (GMT+08:00)
To: LTGC Pastor Cho <ltgchurch@yahoo.com.hk>
Subject: ETS_Solomon_Course Teaching in the coming semester

Dear Daniel,

Good evening. How are you?
I called you but no one answered.
And I would like to know how is the progress on your title as doctor candidacy?
I am planning the Fall semester now and will you be able to teach Personal Growth Course for us?
Talk to you later or you may write to me first.
We will have a whole-day meeting outside tomorrow and I am off on Monday.
Keep in touch.
In Christ,

--

Solomon Wong
Acting Dean
EBC

Solomon Wong <solomon@hk-ebc.edu> on March 19, 2016 (Sat) 10:50 PM wrote:

Dear brother Daniel Cho,

Thank you very much for teaching at ETS in Fall 2016.
You will teach: Personal Growth Course.
Here you will find some dates (the 13 sessions in Sept-Dec 2016) and an assignment guideline and instructions for your information to facilitate scheduling the classes.
A thank-you letter in PDF format will be sent to you later.
It would be nice if you would send us your course outline before April so that students may have a brief idea about your course(s).

If you find anything that I typed wrong in the timetables, please feel free to let me know.
Thank you.

--

Solomon Wong
Acting Dean
EBC

**Appendix Six: A Copy of the Email from the
Dean of Ecclesia Theological Seminary about
Permission for Me to Conduct Research in the
Personal Growth Course**

Solomon Wong <solomon@hk-ebc.edu>

Recipient: mchapman@tyndale.ca

CC: LTGC Pastor Cho

September 30, 2016 5:02 PM

To: Tyndale Seminary

Hi Professor Mark Chapman,

I am writing to confirm that Mr. Daniel Cho has been granted permission by the school, Ecclesia Theological Seminary (ETS), to teach a course and to do his research project on the Personal Growth Course in the autumn semester (September to December) 2016. The course is a weekly one with 13 sessions, taking place on Thursday in the afternoon.

The teaching of Mr. Daniel Cho at ETS was initiated by our president, Dr. Rev. Edmund Tak-ming Cheung, who invited Mr. Daniel Cho to teach a course on Personal Growth in November 2013 and to do his research project on the course. I, as the dean of ETS, contacted Mr. Daniel Cho early this year and began to plan with him about the course. And now he is teaching the course at our school.

ETS does not have an 'Ethics Review Board of Research Concerning Human Participants,' nor do we have any regulations, policies, or formal review procedures for research that takes place at ETS, but it is still possible to reconfirm that Mr. Daniel Cho is now permitted to teach at ETS on the topic Personal Growth, which is also related to part of his research project at Tyndale Seminary.

For any further inquiry on this, please feel free to write to me or call me at ETS. Thank you for your attention.

In Christ,

Solomon Wong (ThD)
Dean

cc: Mr. Daniel Cho

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