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Evangelism as Contextual and Prophetic: A Chinese Perspective

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A good friend of mine once shared this story with me. When she was in college many years ago, she tried to share the Gospel with a classmate. But the classmate said that her whole family, including herself, were pious Buddhists and there was no way for her to be converted to a religion that was different from what her whole family embraced. My friend did not go any further because she didn't want to follow the earlier missionaries' teaching by implying that Buddhism was "a bad religion" for leading people's souls astray. She knew how to respect people's choice to follow a different religion, and therefore did not have the confidence to convince her. Without much contact with each other after graduation, around ten years later, at a class reunion, to her great surprise, my friend heard that her classmate had become a devoted Christian. During her time studying abroad, she felt so lonely that she desired to find something to meet her spiritual needs, and she happened to pass by a church where she overheard beautiful singing inside. She had a strong feeling that this was a religion that could be trusted because it was once sincerely introduced to her by a classmate who was a trustworthy person. Then she started to visit that church and was later baptized there.

There might be various factors that brought this person into Christianity, but one thing worth mentioning is that the seed of the Gospel was first sown by a trustworthy person. A trustworthy person is someone who practices what s/he preaches. For Chinese people, the practice is often more important than the preaching, as ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius has said: "Judge people by their deeds, not just by their words." Within such a Chinese cultural context, to follow Jesus is to demonstrate our "good works" that can be seen, so that the name of our heavenly Father can be glorified (Matt.5:16), and to bear "good fruits" to witness to who we are (Matt. 7:16-20). The growth of the Chinese church does not rely on any door-to-door evangelism or popular evangelists conducting massive outdoor revival meetings, but on the personal witness of each individual Christian. Chinese Christians are always encouraged to strive to live a life that is transformative, both for our spiritual journey and our daily life. The exciting part is that our good works may unexpectedly bring people to Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, Chinese Christians' good works do not merely serve the purpose of expanding the church. Otherwise, it would represent the lack of a comprehensive understanding of evangelism, and it would be discouraged in the Chinese context. Christians in China, as in most other Asian countries, are a small minority, surrounded by a vast number of people who either have no religious belief or follow other religious traditions. It is quite unlikely that all people would embrace Christianity even if Christians made enough efforts, as envisioned by traditional missiology. At least this is not going to happen in the foreseeable future. Then, what are the Christians' "good works" and "good fruits" for? They exemplify the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. To follow Jesus in the Chinese context is to live out a Christ-like life. It is to let people see Christ in us. As long as the image of Jesus Christ is manifested to people through our love for our neighbors, our care for the strangers, our responsibility for society, and all other kinds of good works, whether or not they will join the church becomes less important. The church is more about quality and less about quantity. It is not about the success in numbers, but about whether it is faithful to Jesus' teaching by truly being the light of the world and the salt on earth. To do evangelism in the Chinese context is to sow the seeds of the Gospel and water them, in a Chinese way, and to pray for the growth with joy.

Evangelism in China, a country with a 5000-year old history, of culture and civilization, without being contextual is impossible. Evangelism in China is prophetic, and in a Chinese way. Prophecy in biblical narratives was about proclaiming the encouraging, liberating and reconciling good news from God, and passing criticism on religious unfaithfulness and social injustice. In the Chinese context, the prophetic good news should address the real concerns and issues of people's daily life more than the eschatological concern of soul-saving for eternity overemphasized by the old missionary movement, which was prevalent in the Chinese church, but is less relevant to the common Chinese people who have always had more concerns about the here and now and "this world" since ancient times. For example, when a pupil of Confucius asked the Master about the meaning of death, the Master replied: "Know the meaning of life first, and then the meaning of death." The prophetic good news is about the transformation of the whole person: the soul, body and mind; it is about transforming people's ways of living and the values they hold. To actively participate and play a constructive role in society is an effective way for the Chinese church to bring good news to people, and to criticize the injustice in society. Criticism usually tends to be in a more negative form to point out the faults and to urge correction. The collective witness of the Chinese church is to serve as a positive form of criticism to show Chinese people, including Christians, what is good, equal and just, what is right to do, and what the Lord requires of us.

In his recent keynote address in CCA, Sri Lankan theologian Wesley Ariarajah pointed out, that most of the prophetic criticisms in the Hebrew Bible and in Jesus' time were directed not only to social issues but also towards the religious institutions of which the prophets were a part. To enable evangelism in the Chinese context to be more prophetic, the churches in China continue to engage in self-criticism and self-reflection to challenge our own belief and practices. These engagements include reflecting on whether we have enough humility to respect the traditional and contemporary Chinese cultures where the Holy Spirit is at work and where the Gospel has been rooted, and to respect other religions and their followers by seeing them as companions on the pilgrimage of seeking wisdom, truth and goodness, instead of condemning them as pagans, as the early fundamentalist missionaries taught. Our self-reflections, among many, also include how to address the issues of the negative influence of consumerism and the ideology of prosperity in our church, and the trouble of proselytism coming from outside.

In conclusion, the endeavors of Christian personal witness, the church's living out a Christ-like life, being content to be a small minority, addressing people's actual concerns and problems, actively participating and playing a constructive role in society; self-criticism and reflection, and many other factors jointly make evangelism both contextual and prophetic in China.