

Hour Two of a Four Hour Seminar

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I thank the Lord for this opportunity today. I would like to share about the gospel being reborn in the good things of culture, reborn in local communities, reborn in the heart. Not being simply expressed as external forms but reborn internally, so that when people look they see Jesus Christ alone.

When we think about planting new churches we must begin with the good news that we want to share. We must know it. Lots of Christians are afraid to share about the gospel because they aren't really sure what it is. What is this gospel that we want to share with people? The gospel is the truth. In John 14:6 we read that Jesus is the truth. He is the life. This truth needs to be shared.

But truth, just as words, is something that people cannot see. We have to make it visible. If people can see it, then they can take it in, agree with it and receive it. We have to be clear in our explanation. It is critical to be able to distinguish what the gospel is. We want Jesus, purely Jesus, Jesus alone. Not mixed with religion! That is the essence of the gospel - the truth of Jesus himself. If we don't understand what the really good news is according to Christ we won't be able to share it with others. We'll have nothing to say.

Brothers and Sisters, there is a real problem. Many Christians have lost Jesus to religion. They can't tell the difference.

I knew a missionary who was in Thailand for forty years. He has since gone home. He had a real hard time in Thailand because he found so few people interested in doing good. He told me once, "Tongpan, you can't just preach the gospel. It is not enough. Thai people just won't do what is right." He was so afraid of this that he didn't share the gospel but rather focused on obedience, telling people what they should and should not do. And sure enough, people around him didn't drink or smoke. But they were only working off of religious effort.

We need to understand this. If people ask us we should be able to answer them. We need to help them distinguish the difference. If they ask, "What are these people (Christians) all about?" The answer is, "Jesus Christ." If Jesus Christ is really the truth then we can share him boldly. In this way other people will also come to recognize the truth. How will they notice it? Power. It's the power of God which they

will see. In Romans 1:16, 17 we read that the gospel (Jesus Christ) is the power of God. This power can take the ordinary things in our lives and transform them for his purposes.

Yesterday, the speaker shared that Jesus needs to use the ordinary things that are around us to communicate the gospel. We see this in John chapter 2. What did Jesus use? He used the ordinary water that was there to make grape wine. He used what was there. Are we willing to do this?

One of our churches was born because of this wine. Listen and I'll tell you about it. There was a woman who had had severe labor pains for three days. She was in a remote village far from a hospital. I went to go see her and asked how she was. "It hurts so bad" she answered. I dipped some water out of the rain water jar that was there and said, "This is the water of Jesus Christ." I blew Christ into the water. "We ask in the name of Jesus that you deliver a healthy baby." Then I told her to drink.

Within five minutes the baby was born. That's it. Power - Christ's power. But do you know what happened? A church was born! Last week we held a baptismal service there, eleven - no, twelve people baptized. A church was born because of water - ordinary water from the rainwater jar! Jesus went into that water. Do you believe it? This woman lived far from the nearest hospital and didn't have money to hire a truck to take her there. In the name of Jesus, the power of God was given to the water. She drank it and out came the baby. And because of this a new church was born.

We need to allow Christ to bring the power of God into our lives. God is working and wants to use us. Sometimes we're not brave enough to believe in using that power. We're unsure. We wonder if we'll look like a fool if it doesn't work? If we don't believe we can't do anything. There is no way that God's power can work then. What did Jesus say? If you don't have faith you can't do anything but if you believe you can do all things. Luke 1:37 says there is nothing that God cannot do. God can do all things. Except sin. God cannot sin.

God can do all things. But will we allow him? Will we tap into his power? Our role is to go and use his power. The power has been promised to us. What did Jesus say in Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore: go!" So let's get going! But we're not going out in our own name. Before I go out to serve I ask God for help each time, "Father, don't let me fail for your sake. I don't want to lose face for you. I have no where else to turn except to you." I ask for his power to be real in me.

My suggestion is that when our churches gather for worship in his name we should ask for physical healing each time for all the needy. Ask from God each time for any and every type of ailment.

Brothers and sisters, once we are in the gospel, we're part of a new society that we are building. One that is where people want to be. There is no other society like the new society of those who have

received the good news of Jesus Christ. This is a society of power and of all types of healing. There are a number of people who do not understand our churches. "Oh," they say, "those little groups of Rev. TongPan. They believe anything." That is not true. We believe in the power of God as shown through Jesus Christ as the only power able to change people. We are not the ones who change people. If we believe in this power we will have Jesus Christ reborn in our own lives. In this way God can be expressed outward from us to others.

How did God first come to reveal himself? Through his son Jesus. He died. Three days later he was back to life through the power of God. Satan was defeated through the work of Jesus Christ. That power needs to be realized anew in our lives everyday. For example, if we fail to pray before we go to bed Satan has an opportunity to defeat us all night long. Prayer is tapping into the power of God. If we don't pray we won't have this power. If we claim to be church leaders and fail to pray, any power we have is our own. There is no place for the power of God to work in our lives.

This is especially applicable to church leaders. Some of these church leaders can teach church members day after day and still not know God's power in their lives. When it comes to studying the word they don't where they're headed. They flip open their Bibles and hope that God will give them the verses they should prepare. Actually you could start with Matthew 1:1 and go right on from there. I am teaching from Romans chapter 1. Three years now and we're still not done.

Therefore we need to teach the gospel intentionally and progressively. If we teach something and the church members don't understand but we keep on going anyway it will not be continuous. Sometimes we jump around in our teaching - from here to there and back again. By following God's word we can see the power of God clearly. Clear teaching is critical. If we don't teach, people won't know.

Some of our church leaders are trying a new method for finding a verse to study. Close your eyes and open the Bible and hope for the best. There is no preparation there. Do you know what it is like to eat canned food? Once or twice is okay but if you have to eat it day after day you get so tired of it that the smell sickens you. If we don't get anything out of it ourselves how will our church members? And if we don't prepare we can't expect others to understand. When I was first a Christian I came home and told my family all about my faith in Jesus. I read them verses from all over the Bible. Finally, when I was done I asked my mother, "Do you want to be saved?" She looked at me and said, "What language are you talking? I didn't understand one word of what you said."

Watch out! Christianity is starting to become like Buddhism. You don't have to understand anything when you go to church. Week after week, attending faithfully, doing the rituals so that externally

you appear closer to God. In reality nothing is happening. There is no change, no growth, no understanding.

Would you be happy if your children slept in the hammock like a baby all their life? Ever heard anyone say, "Look at my boy, bigger than dad now, I still feed him every meal and clean and bathe him. Look how he still sleeps so quiet in the cradle." Would you be happy to hear that? No way! In the same way, growing in our understanding of God must also bring growth and change.

It takes time. It means understanding what salvation is really all about. Yes, we were saved from the first day we believed but salvation has three stages. First stage: we are in Jesus Christ; we are justified from our sins. We no longer bear the penalty of our sin. We have a new point of dependence in our lives. The second stage is Jesus Christ in us. When Jesus is in us, this affects the way we act. We act anew because we have been given salvation, new life. We don't act in order to be saved. We are already saved. Now the Holy Spirit helps us to grow. As we grow, we know more, we speak with new intelligence. We grow in maturity.

Unfortunately, most followers of God don't want to grow. We pray like children, "God give me faith. I don't have very much. I feel like I'm going to die today." Do you take in the word every day? How can we grow unless we take in the food? There is no growth without the word of God. The word is our spiritual food, food for our heart and soul. Eat it every day!

Ask yourself - how many times per day do you eat rice? [1] (The group answered Three!). So if we only feed on the word once a week how will we grow? And then is it spoon-feeding? You know how it is feeding your children. Sometimes they keep the food in their mouth and don't swallow it. It never gets to the stomach and so it does no good. Sometimes they aren't willing to eat at all. We're just the same. Spiritual food is necessary every day.

What does a body look like that doesn't get proper nourishment? It's sick! That's how we are sometimes, isn't it? And after we've eaten what is next? It has to come out. That is, we need to share with others. If we take in the word 30 times a day we can share with 30 people. This is the way the church will grow.

The third stage of salvation happens when Jesus returns the second time. This is completed salvation (glorification). Today our spirits await that time in the future. Our spirits have been saved from sin but we're daily being saved from ourselves. We're not there yet. When Jesus returns and changes our earthly bodies for heavenly bodies - that is when we will be fully saved in this third sense (glorification).

This salvation God has given to us without expecting anything in return. Jesus came to give, not expecting anything in return. When we mix up this free gospel with religion then we no longer understand

the truth. There is a misunderstanding in the church that once you are saved you have to start acting better to show you are saved. In reality the truth is that Jesus has given us salvation irregardless of our better behavior. This "behavior" is not to help save us. We're already saved in Christ. This behavior is because God is working his power in us and we are growing in him.

That growth is not easy and sometimes we get discouraged. One person came to me and said, "I'm resigning from the church now." I asked him, "Where's the back door? How do you resign? If you find a way to get out you come and tell me since it's hard work following Christ for me too." He told me he was still going to quit and I said that was fine but just don't stop coming to worship. "Well, that's not going to help anything!" he said.

So study is very important, knowing the word will help people stay with the Lord. We don't want people to stop following the Lord. If they stop showing up go and follow them up and bring them back. Go visit them. Find out what is going on in their life. Pray for them. Encourage them to come back. Don't let people slip away.

If a person moves to another village start a new church there. Every single person is important. The church in my group is not big. It is very small. The members worship in homes. There are only 3000 members is all. We feel that each person is important.

From Udon I traveled several kilometers to the village of Nong Sang to find Uncle Kwan, one person. Today there are many believers in that village. One person is the key to having a second, a third, and a fourth. It is important that we teach that first person how to grow in God, how to allow God to change him to have new life. Uncle Kwan, the one we used to call Uncle Moonshine, was changed from the inside out. Now he is a new person. The word changes people. If we teach the word it will change people's hearts. The word has power to bring salvation. We need to keep following up on those who are interested.

One person is as important as ten, or as one hundred. From one, the word will spread and spread and spread. Don't allow it to stop spreading. And don't get in the way of it spreading! We have a problem in the church that keeps the church from growing. The members are satisfied. The day that we are satisfied with the way things are that is the day the church goes bankrupt. Bankrupt and dead! Don't be satisfied! If there are this many members now, look for more. Keep asking God for more and keep seeking them out. Keep growing and asking and following up. If we do this the church will continue to grow.

Sometimes we don't want the church to grow. If the church grows what happens? It means the leaders have to work harder. We don't want new people to be born. I had been going out to Non Sila village for some time with not much response. It takes an hour and a half to get there. I told the one

interested person I had been visiting, "It's time to close up here. Don't tell any more people here about become believers. This place is just too far for me to travel to on my motorcycle. I'm going home." I just wanted to leave. Mr. Sopa stopped me, "Not so fast, teacher, please! I'm a believer now!" "What? A believer?! But I was just going to close things up here."

You see what I mean? When Mr. Sopa received God's grace he was the only believer in that village. The only one. But thank the Lord, from that one, the word spread and grew to where there are now several village churches in that area today. Sometimes we want to stop; we want to close things down. We as Christians are the reason the church doesn't grow because we want to stop things from happening! Christians have told me, "Stop talking about God everywhere. We don't want so many believers. Our group is enough, isn't it? We're afraid the floorboards of heaven will break."

But if God is allowing his church to be born in some place - let's work with that, not against it. Let it grow and help it to expand. Don't let yourself be a barrier to the growth of the church. It's important to ask yourself, "Am I a barrier to people coming to faith?"

There was a man by the name of Father Wassana from Nong Han district. While I was sharing Christ with him he asked me, "If I become a believer in Jesus, do I have to tell other people about him?" I told him he didn't have to tell a soul. In fact, I told him, "Don't you dare say a word to anyone. If you do, people will just say you're following the foreigner's religion, Christianity. You don't want them to say that. You just go ahead and believe in Jesus Christ and don't say a word about it to anyone."

After he became a follower he began to read and study the Bible every day behind a closed door. He didn't say anything to anyone. You have to understand that this was a shy person with very little courage. Don't start building barriers by telling the interested that once they believe they must do this, that and the other. If the person is going to do anything later let them receive Jesus Christ first to help them do it.

After Wassana became a Christian I continued to visit him daily. I also continued to remind him at each visit not to say anything to anyone. He promised he wouldn't. Finally after Wassana had been a believer for eight days I came to visit and there were four other new Christians there. "I thought you promised you weren't going to tell anybody!" "I couldn't help it!" he cried, "If I didn't say anything I would die!" He said his heart was going to explode. He had been studying the word about the good news, about salvation, about going to heaven. The more he studied the more he felt the need to share. He finally shared with four of his closest friends who wanted what he had. I told him not to share and he said, "I had to let it out!"

A government official came by and said, "What is going on here?" And this shy man boldly declared, "Jesus Christ!" Previously he wasn't willing to say a word so I forbid him to say anything. Don't build barriers by saying that when you believe in God you have to start doing this, that and the other. A person who doesn't have any growth in the word or understand anything about the Lord can't start to do those things.

If the Lord is in that person's life and they are growing in the word, then Jesus will work through them. What did Jesus say to the man he healed? Don't you go and tell anyone what happened to you. If you were given two letters, one says "Read" and the other says "Do Not Read" which one do you think you will want to open first? The forbidden one! This works with lots of people. It just depends on the kind of person. Just don't build any barriers.

If people say they don't want to follow the Christian religion - tell them they don't have to! Believe in Jesus. If they want to start telling others, then let them. Let it be the power of God that motivates them. The good news is powerful. What do you think will happen? This is the principle that we need to understand and use. Once we understand what the gospel is, the power of God is able to work.

Brothers and sisters, I would like you to consider one method of starting a church in a new place. It is not hard to do. When I find the new village to which God is leading me I start talking to people. I ask them to take me to the person who works the hardest at making merit in the whole village - the one who is the most devoted to religious practices.

The villagers said, "Oh, that must be grandma so and so. We'll take you to her." I write down the name. As grandma sees us coming she asks, "What do you want?" "I've come for some advice from you, Grandma. The villagers all say you are the one who is the most devoted to religious practice and is making the most merit of anyone." Grandma is delighted. She finally gets a chance to teach someone! They bring out the mats, some water to drink. I go on, "Today I'd like to learn from you, Grandmother. Everyone says that you work hard to make merit. I want to find out some things from you. I've got just a few questions I would like to ask." "What are they?" "Well, first, I'd like to ask you, Grandma, how much merit have you made so far?" (I am only there to write down her answers. I'm not there to argue with her or disagree. I am just going to write down her words.) So she tells me what she thinks and whatever it is I write it down. My only job is to write it down. "The second question I would like to ask is. Who is the owner of heaven?" Hmmm, she says, "I don't know." So I write that down, "Doesn't know owner of heaven." Then I ask a third question, "How can we get to heaven?" Whatever she says I write it down. This is the way I learn from her.

Then when my questions are over she asks, "What organization do you come from?" I tell her I work for the Heart Development Organization. [2] I explain to her that the heart has to be developed just like the body. "Interesting," says Grandma. "Tell me more." "Interested? So sorry," I tell her, "Today I've got to be moving on to the next place." "Can't you stay and talk a little while?" "Sorry, not today. But I can come back next time and talk more. Can Grandma gather about ten others who are interested?" "Oh, yes!"

You see? This is a way to get people interested and willing to talk. The problem in the past was pushing something on people which they didn't want. We felt it was our duty to teach but no one was listening! We were force-feeding people something they didn't want to swallow. Shoving it down and wondering why no one was responding positively. This method of learning from others opens many opportunities. The next time going to that village there's a large group of grandmothers who are all trying faithfully to follow Buddhist practices waiting for me.

This second time we still aren't revealing anything about Jesus Christ. Don't bring him up yet. We talk about "heart development". We ask them first if they can teach us something. When they are through we take the answers that they have given to illustrate what we are talking about. Grandma said this and I answer that. We dialogue back and forth. Heart development comes from interaction with lots of people. It takes more than one person - two or more to interact and learn together. How can we develop our hearts? How can we help our hearts to improve? Who is going to help us with this?

We need to recognize one characteristic of Thai people. If you ask a Thai person, especially anyone who cares at all about their social position, if they want to receive Jesus Christ in front of a lot of people, they will want to shrink back. They are shy. So, instead of working with the large group I ask, "Is there anyone who would like me to visit your home?" This is a different scenario. There you can talk personally.

But when I'm with the group I can share some of the cultural beliefs that we have such as the tradition of Pra See An. [3] (This is a Buddhist prophecy about a coming reincarnation of Buddha). One part of the prophecy goes like this:

"When Pra See An comes you will touch a post and from it will come fire and the fire will BURN!"

(The last word is shouted so that it makes people jump).

And I share with the group that Pra See An has come! See how you can go to a post and touch a switch and out comes the fire (electric light). The one who was spoken of has already come!

We need to know where our listeners are coming from, what they believe first. I refer to the Pra See An prophecy with those who know it. This prophecy anticipated someone coming. We discuss the

verse which says, "We bathe ourselves to prepare for him but when he comes we'll have nothing to do with him." [4] What does this mean? No one wanted him when he arrived. I share with them the story of the lepers who came to the Healer when the healthy would have nothing to do with him - another reference to how the healthy would not be attracted to Pra See An.

You can use this belief of theirs as a foundation to build on. We aren't trying to reinforce that Pra See An is a real person. We use this oral tradition as a platform to gradually bring in Jesus Christ. Jesus has to gradually come into the hearts and minds of the listener. If we start out saying, "Jesus Christ will save you from your sins; He is the owner of heaven" you won't get anywhere. We need to allow Christ to enter in to the hearts of people from where they are, from what they now believe.

Using this method, people will sit up and take notice. They will be able to figure out for themselves that Jesus is this prophesied one. He is the owner of heaven. Pra See An is just a name, his origin is obscure, there is no evidence of his actual existence. In the past, we explain, people were waiting for one they referred to as Pra Meeseeah [5] (Messiah). But now Jesus has come. We had no interest in him but no matter how much we ignore him or hate him, He still loves us.

"If that's true and he's the one, can I believe in him right now?" they ask. "Don't believe so fast!" I tell them. Really, I do. We need to use the principle that Jesus used. If they believe right away after we have spoken they will simply be doing another religious act (following Christianity - not Jesus). Tell them to go talk to their children and their spouses first. This is because we want whole families to come to Jesus together, you understand. Don't let people come to faith as individuals with no one else knowing, not even family.

In this case that I am sharing about, some of these grandmothers had children who were government employees. Some were teachers, some were members of the police force. I asked them this, "How does this sound? If you really want to accept Jesus go and tell your children to come and talk about it. When they are ready then you can. What do you think?" And Grandma said that would be fine, "I've got good children. They will listen to what their mother says." It appeared that Grandma was really interested, that she really wanted Jesus. So the children, the teacher and the policeman, were consulted and came and said that they all wanted Jesus.

This is the way to develop people's inner hearts so that they are ready. We can learn from them just what they believe and what they are thinking. It is very important not to start from the beginning "teaching" at them. Everyone wants to believe that they "know". Everyone wants to appear intelligent. If we start teaching at them, they don't want anything to do with it. Therefore, it is critical to learn from

them. Use their own words to teach, their own answers to point the direction. We know that Jesus is the owner of heaven. They cannot answer that question.

So when the person finally accepts Christ, study the word together with that person. A church has been born. That first person is the key and others will follow. They start to share and others come, then more and more. This is the method of developing hearts by learning from them. If we try this method of learning from them, people will come. If we go out and start announcing the Christian religion, it will be very difficult. It is time to change, time to try a new methodology.

Satan doesn't want us to do this! "Use the old way", he says, "So you don't get anyone it doesn't matter just keep on trying." So we don't change. We don't think we can change. Lots of Christians fall into this. They are incapable of creating a new way or of trying something new. They are traditionalists, they want to keep up the old ways of doing things. They aren't progressive thinkers. Progressive thinkers are those who are willing to change, to try new methods. Allow Jesus to come to people in many different ways.

It is an important point to be willing to learn from other people. If we express our desire to learn from others, they are so pleased! They get to be our teachers! That is the nature of people. But the truth is, we have something that is even better: the good news of Jesus who can come into their own hearts.

My second point is that there are many different kinds of methods. Father Tun isn't here this morning but I want to share what he does which is different from what others do. He takes one of our cassette tapes of Isaan praise ballads (maw lom) into the temple. He finds the head abbot and asks permission to play a tape which teaches "Tama" (good religious truth). "This is maw lom that teaches tama", he explains.

When the abbot agrees Father Tun turns on the player. He doesn't play very much. He selects a short song. After it is over he shuts it off. "Why'd you turn it off?" asks the monk. "Turn it back on! I want to hear some more." Now the monk really wants to listen! So he plays one more song and shuts it off. "Where can I buy one of those tapes?" asks the monk. "Oh, I can tell you." He doesn't give them out for free. He makes them want to buy one.

This is another way of entering into people's hearts. Sometimes we don't have to speak. You can use a cassette tape which tells the story in song instead. As soon as it is on people are suddenly interested. After people express interest what do they ask next? "Can I believe right now?" (You don't need to make them pay any money at this point!) "Sure," says Father Tun, "But you need to go with me to find my teacher in Udon. He can explain things in detail."

So Father Tun called to tell me he was coming. A policeman drove the head abbot to my house. What happened? The abbot received Christ that day. Now that he was a Christian he could no longer be a Buddhist monk, much less the temple's head abbot! But I never mentioned that. I just told him now that he believed he needed to study the word every day. He believed that he was a sinner. He knew that before he had ever begun to learn about Jesus. Thank the Lord that today he has resigned from the temple and left the monkhood. This year two more monks from this temple have also come to follow Jesus.

If we start by saying you need to do this and that and the other before you can become a Christian, no one will be interested. If we focus on teaching from the word, God will speak to them. He will change them himself. In this case they resigned from the monkhood. We want to make sure people understand clearly what the good news is.

There is already a problem with most monks, most Buddhist temples. They don't like Christians. We recognize this. One day I was driving down a remote road when a monk hailed me to hitch a ride. He was from Bangkok going to a village temple nearby. I gave him a ride. As we were going along I asked him, "Teacher, have you ever heard the story of Jesus?" "Oh, that Jesus story! That makes me so sick. He says he's the only way. Says he owns heaven. Says God created the world. Says all the rest of us are going to hell!" I asked him, "Well, Teacher, if one of those Jesus followers were to give you a ride in a car would that be good?" "Oh that would be so great" he answered.

We went along talking and driving. Finally when we were close to where he was going I confessed, "Teacher, I'm one of those Jesus followers myself." He was so embarrassed he wanted to sink into the seat. I told him, "Jesus loves you Teacher. When you are preaching you can think about that. Today you got to sit in Jesus' car." "Incredible" he said. When he was getting out I said to him, "I'm headed towards one of our churches where I'll be sharing about God. Father, you've got your preaching to do here. When you're done I'll come back and pick you up." He looked at me, "What we were talking about earlier, please forgive me. Don't tell anyone what I said to you! I didn't think Jesus was going to be as nice as this."

This is our role as followers, to show love. That monk believed the common notion that all Christians are anti-Buddhists - that Christians are going to tear down the work of the temple and make all monks become lay people. I told him all those things had nothing to do with it. Jesus came as God to us so that he could take care of our sin problem, to help us in every aspect of our life. So our role is to find those places where Jesus is not yet known and bring him there.

Most of where we work is not in the cities. There are other pastors and teachers working there already. In the city of Udon there are four church groups. We go to places where no one else is working.

We work together in this way, helping other people. Many Christians like to point out what is wrong with other groups. When non-Christians hear about this it just multiplies and comes back worse, about all the bad things that Christians do and say, how narrow they are, etc. When people get angry what happens? Their hearts are closed. You can talk as much as you want but if the heart is closed our words will make no difference. There is no chance for interaction or dialogue.

Therefore it is necessary to find those points of contact where we can connect first. It is a dangerous cliff to try and connect Jesus with religion. There was a monk who came to visit me at my home. He came to find me because I had visited him in the temple several times. In that area he was known as Monk Miserly because he was extremely tight-fisted. He would not even share the overripe mangoes that fell from the tree in the temple grounds with anyone. But he brought some nice mangoes to my house because I had been visiting him and he was interested in talking about Jesus. There were no hard feelings between him and I. There are a lot of people who are easy to criticize. You have to resist this. This person was one of those but instead we were trying to build a relationship.

He came and asked me, "How come I never see you give any donations to the monk's bowls in the morning?"[6] I went to my kitchen and got some rice and said, "Thank the Lord for this chance. Please let me give this donation to you Teacher, in the name of Jesus Christ." What happened? As the monk left he said, "You don't need to worry about making more donations in the future."

Each time we have an opportunity, let what we do be done in the name of Jesus. If I hadn't given in the name of Jesus he would want me to give all the time. In the name of Jesus he was afraid. There were no further complaints from that monk in my village. We have to find ways to learn from others, ways to be friends with people first. Don't make enemies. Find ways to build relationships and not to be distant from others.

Sometimes passing out tracts does this. We see this often. A kid calls his father, "Dad, someone came to give you a pamphlet" "Is it from a politician?" "No, it's from the Jesus followers." "In that case bring it here. I can use it to smoke my tobacco in."

People don't read those. Do you understand that? If you build a relationship first, talk personally with the person, get to know them, then you can build bridges into their life. Then there will be good results. Then people will become children of God. When we share the word it will bring about changes. This is an important point.

Another important way to increase the number of church members is to "Puk seiow"(special bond of friendship).[7] You need to understand Isaan people. This is not a common ordinary thing for the Isaan. This is important! If we make these special ties, deep loving friendships, people will be reborn.

I have a blood-brother who is a minister in parliament, Mr. Prachuab from Udon. "If I become prime minister what kind of position do you want? I can give you whatever position you'd like, an advisor or whatever." It is very important to have these close relationships. For Isaan people it means you can speak freely, you can get to know each other. You don't have to act unnaturally or pretend you are someone you are not with these friends. I am the kind of person with many of these friendship relationships.

You can even build these special friendships while stopping at a red light. Someone calls out to a motorcyclists and he looks to talk to them, doesn't see the light is red and rams into you. You stop to talk and find out that you were born the same year. "Oh, I guess we are seiow![8] We can't have any problems between us." You resolve the issue and drive away friends.

These new friends all have families. Their mother becomes our mother. We can take the gospel into that new relationship. This kind of special friendship relationship can be used to share what is deep inside of us. For me I find it important to enter into these deep friendships so that Christ can be clearly shared in a significant way.

Don't let these friendships pull us away from the Lord. Don't let these friends get us involved in idolatry. We have to be wise in the way we act - wise as serpents and gentle as doves, as Jesus said. We can use these opportunities to share Christ. For me, I don't like to separate myself from people. I like to act in a friendly relaxed way which is approachable so I can get to know people. I have received a lot from my friends but the real reason I want to make friends is to be able to share Jesus Christ with them.

Endnotes

1. In the Thai language , the phrase to have a meal is stated as "to eat rice".
2. Thai spelling of Tongpan's "Heart-Development" organization
3. Pra See An is a Thai legend prophesying another reincarnation of Buddha who will bring many miraculous signs. Many of these were believed to have happened at the turn of the Buddhist era 2500 (1957 A.D.) when electricity began to be spread to many villages. Another example is see in the prophecy "When Pra See An comes barking dogs will grow horns." Some Thai feel this was fulfilled with the introduction of noisy motorcycles with their long horn-shaped handlebars.
4. This reference to bathing in preparation for Pra See An's arrival is another part of the Pra See An prophecy.
5. Pra Meeseeah is the word used in the Thai Bible for the Messiah.
6. To "sai baht" is when the monks come out in the morning and people are given the opportunity to put something in their bowls as a way to make merit.

7. To "puk sieow" is to bind as friends, a special term in Isaan used among those who wish to build a close, binding relationship, something along the lines of a blood-brother.

8. Sieow relationships are often based on similar age.

Hour Three of a Four Hour Seminar

by Rev. Tongpan Prometta

Isaan Congress II, Khon Kaen, Thailand October 18, 2000

Translated by Paul H. DeNeui

Brothers and Sisters, I would like you to understand that there are things that we need to allow Jesus to do. Those things that we cannot change we must allow him to change in us. Thai Christians have been taught to believe that the ways imported into the church from Europe are the ways of God. These ways had meaning back in the places where they came from. The problem was when they came to us we didn't know the meaning. The meaning didn't transfer. I want you to understand just how important it is for Jesus to come in the cultural forms that our people can understand.

One of the problem areas for the church is death. When outsiders see what happens when a Christian dies they say they don't want to have anything to do with Jesus. They notice that at a Christian funeral there is just a pathetic group of four or five people who show up. This just reinforces the belief that Christians are just a small group of social misfits. Today we want to make those numbers in society grow by helping people understand Jesus Christ.

Let me share with you our experience holding Christian funerals. This is one other opportunity to bring Jesus into our community. Jesus can be reborn through the funeral ceremony. First, we have to understand our culture. If people think that when they die as Christians there will only be a tiny number who show up for their funeral they will have nothing to do with becoming followers of God. Why is this? Because Thai society loves status and they get it by having lots of people show up. It is humiliating to lose face by having only a few show up at a funeral. The dead (and their families) who have poor attendance at a funeral become the neighborhood laughingstock.

There was a church member who died in the village of Ban Dat. When there is a funeral the family wants lots of people to be there - even Christians want this! A funeral is a great opportunity for people to visit together. As soon as the funeral date was arranged I told the man's children, "Go and invite everyone, Christians and non-Christians. You can even put some pressure on them by saying that if they don't come to this funeral you won't go to theirs either!" So they did. Thank God. The villagers came in mass - all of them! It was the biggest funeral gathering that that village had ever had. There was a real crowd.

When we held the ceremony we held it in the name of Jesus. We had our Christian Isaan band play and people sang and danced. There was good teaching from the word about him. There were lots of people who heard all of this. How did the villagers respond? "If that's what happens when Christians die, I want to die!" they said. "Dying that way is great. What a way to go! And heaven must be even more fun than this! Those who die in God are really happy." That is the way to have Jesus be born again in a funeral.

The music was fun and it spoke the good news. I was able to bring in the message of Christ at the funeral and God increased the numbers of his children. When the good news from the Bible was brought into that funeral people sat and listened.

Everyone was there except for the monks from the village temple. They were upset. I found out later that they were saying, "Everyone was invited except us." I told them, "The next time someone dies I will make sure and invite you, Respected Teachers, so you can also listen." They were very disappointed that they had been overlooked. We wouldn't want them to be upset again!

The monks were particularly upset because the person who had died was actually the younger sister of the head abbot. And he had not been invited. So please understand that the next time someone dies we will make sure we invite the Buddhist monks - all of them - to come to the funeral of the Christians. Why? Because it shows that the Christians want to have unity with everyone in their community. This is the way to bring the gospel into our local society.

If a Christian dies and only a handful of people show up it's so discouraging. When my father died there were eight of us at the funeral. We had a walking procession that went right past the main market, full of people. Everyone stared and shook their heads. I heard them say things like, "Oh, look at that! No way am I ever going to be one of them! I wouldn't dare tell anyone I was part of a group like that! Too embarrassing. Pitiful!"

At that moment I told myself that this would never happen to another Christian's funeral if I could help it. Lots of people! That's the way to go. It is absolutely necessary. The more there are, the better the opportunity to share the good news, the story of Jesus, with others. Lots of people together make other people curious. Many have heard and received blessings this way.

It's important to understand that the reason we hold a funeral is distinctly different from the Buddhist reason. The Buddhist way relies upon the living doing something for the dead so that they can work their way to heaven. But for us as children of God, we celebrate because the believer has now gone to heaven! That's why people say, "Dying in Jesus is great!"

And that is how Jesus is reborn, using the cultural forms of a funeral. Use the ceremony as a place to share the good news. Invite everyone. Where there are lots of people, many ears will listen. The problem is we don't believe that others can be influenced or that we can influence them! The majority of Christians have an attitude problem. We've got something already decided deep inside of us that says, "Those people don't believe. We won't invite them!" That's wrong. We can make a difference. We may need to do a little influencing. "Oh, Respected Uncle, Dear Auntie, this friend has just gone to be with God. I'd really appreciate your participation in coming and helping at the funeral." No one can refuse a request like that. Crowds show up. People come to show they are sympathetic. When the ceremony gets started everyone gets quiet. That is your chance. Share the good news with people then. That is the best church planting time.

I am concerned that so many Christians feel inferior about this whole subject. Am I right? We know we are few in the society at large and other groups are bigger. Our group is small because we invite so few. A good three-day funeral will include many opportunities to share: songs, testimonies, dance, Bible teaching, music playing. I want you to understand that you can influence your society. Your influence may involve applying a little tactful pressure such as; "If you come to this gathering I will never forget it. I won't abandon you when your time comes."

Yesterday someone asked the question, "Can we still wai the corpse of our mother or father or relative at a funeral?" Yesterday the speaker touched on this. When our father and mother were alive we wai-ed them didn't we? Why can we not wai them after they die? You can wai them. You can wai them as your parents or relatives.

But you must understand that we do not wai them as other people wai corpses. My older brother passed away recently. I said to him, "Thank you God, Elder Brother you are now with God." When we wai we don't speak as others do. Other people cry or complain or curse the dead when they wai. We, as followers of Christ, give thanks to God. We thank God that our loved one is now with Him. At my brother's funeral I said, "Elder brother, you're with God now. You're enjoying all of the blessings of God. Thank God that you are happy in heaven now. You got there ahead of me but just wait. I'm looking forward to joining with you one of these days."

When people hear that what do they say? "How can he talk like that?!" Buddhists are afraid to die. When someone is dead they believe that that is the end, they'll never see that person again. The dead are no longer a brother or a sister. What is worse is the fear that the dead may come back to haunt them. They're afraid that the spirit of the dead might be angry and try to come back and seek revenge. They're so afraid that they attempt to confuse the spirit so that it gets lost trying to find its way home. They take the

bed and turn it upside down. They turn the mats over. Anything that can be moved is rearranged. The possessions of the deceased that can be burned are laid on the funeral pyre to be disposed of with the body so that the angry spirits will get lost and never be able to return. Thai people are afraid of death of the dead!

But for those of us who are children of God, we believe differently. Death is something we look forward to. We believe that one day we will meet again. We have salvation and others can have it as well. That is a great hope.

Whatever we do, if there is someone who asks us why we are doing it we should be able to answer that person. If there is something you do but have no answer to those who ask you why you are doing it, then you shouldn't do it. If you can answer, go ahead and do it. In this instance, we clearly understand that the person whom we wai is our father or our mother or our beloved relative. If the deceased is a believer we thank God for the fact that they are now in the presence of God. We are thankful that they are now experiencing great happiness and will not have to be troubled with the things of this life anymore.

That is the way we can allow Christ to come into the funeral ceremony. In other words, we shouldn't just let these opportunities go by. Give the funeral to Jesus. Let Jesus transform the ceremony into a means of sharing the gospel. This will have a positive affect on our churches.

In order to communicate effectively, it is imperative that every time we have a Christian funeral we explain what is happening. Explain to those gathered where the dead in Christ has gone. People will ask questions, such as, Why don't you put a coin in the mouth of the corpse? We explain that no money is able to buy heaven for the dead. This person has already reached heaven now! Declare it to those gathered. Other questions arise, Why don't you turn the mats upside down? Why don't you have a ceremony the same way everyone else does it? We answer clearly that this person is in heaven now, he is not an evil spirit who will return to haunt us. He is God's child so he is with God now. The dead will not come back to be reincarnated on this earth again. We need to have answers when people ask.

We're not trying to explain things in a Buddhist way. We're explaining the truth that we know. People may ask, "Why don't you tie a string to the corpse and have the monks lead the body to the funeral pyre (and on to heaven)?" We explain that God has led this person's spirit to heaven already. We explain clearly and simply. People listen and the gospel is being shared right there through the funeral ceremony.

That is how we celebrate a Christian funeral. We do it this way to allow Christ to be reborn in the midst of the ceremony. When we have these opportunities we need to take advantage of them in the best way possible. Does anyone have any questions regarding funerals?

One woman asked, "Where do you bury the bodies?"

Excuse me, I forgot to say that in our church we have only cremations. In our denomination, The Church of the Grace of God, we don't have burials. We've studied this and concluded that the body, this temporary temple, can be burned. It is more sanitary. It kills any germs. Burials or cremations are both fine but in our group we only practice cremation.

Another woman asked, "Where do you have the cremation?"

In the crematorium in the temple. In our churches we don't separate from society. We teach that we are not trying to separate ourselves from people in our community. We have our cremations in the temples. I first held a Christian funeral in a Buddhist temple in Nong Han amphur (Udon Thani province). All the Buddhist abbots and monks gathered for the ceremony. They had prepared the chairs for everyone to sit but they did not lead the ceremony. We were the ones who had asked if we could use their facilities.

There was no problem. Our desire is that Jesus Christ be reborn in that situation. We held a Christian funeral ceremony right there in the temple and it was not a problem. But be sensitive! If you're in that situation don't start badmouthing Buddhism. Usually when Christians are in a setting like that they want to separate themselves from Buddhists.

Someone from the audience asked for clarification, "Did you hold a Christian ceremony in the Buddhist temple?"

Yes, it was our own Isaan Christian ceremony.

"But you used the Buddhist temple and facilities?"

Yes, that is correct. We used their facilities. And we invited them to come as well.

"And were you able to share about Christ freely?"

Yes, we were able to share. It was not a problem. When we held the ceremony we did not do it in a spooky way or with a lot of spiritual mumbo-jumbo. We brought Jesus into the ceremony - in the singing, in the ritual, in all we did in the temple.

Further question, "Suppose the temple doesn't allow us there? Or they won't let us have a Christian ceremony there, then what?"

It is most important that you talk with the temple leadership beforehand and come to some agreement. If they don't allow it, then you can have a funeral elsewhere (for example, hold the cremation in a field). However, since I have been doing this I have never heard of a Buddhist temple official not allowing a Christian funeral ceremony to take place in their grounds. Other villagers have talked and wondered about it. We've heard them say, "Don't let Jesus come back here again!" But no temple official has ever refused us.

Don't forget. After we have the cremation what do we do? We pay them! Three hundred baht . Don't be stingy. It's true that they don't have to do anything but we're using their place. If you don't pay they won't want you to come back, will they? Don't start building up unnecessary barriers. Don't start saying, "You're a Buddhist, I'm a Christian. Christians and Buddhists can't be together so I'm not going to pay." If we pay we've got a right to use the facility just as much as anyone.

A man stood to ask, "If a relative of ours dies who is not a believer should we participate in the funeral?"

Do you mean "participate" in regards to the ceremony or personally? (Personally, was the reply). In that case, let me share what our church does. Our churches are divided into eight districts. If a relative of any believer dies in any of our districts we have an offering that goes to that family whether or not they are believers. This is to show the love of God that we want to demonstrate to everyone.

When my other brother died the church in Udon contributed towards his funeral expenses. This brother was the only one in my family who had not believed in God. All my other siblings have. The church came and gave this gift to my brother's family. They were so glad to get it and gave thanks to God for us!

But when it comes to doing a Christian ceremony for someone who was not a follower of God - we have done that also. Who do we do a funeral for anyway? For the living. We don't do it so we can help send the dead to heaven. Followers of Christ are already in heaven when they die. So we have a ceremony for the living - for the relatives and family who are still here.

A man from the audience asked, "What if we give a donation to the family of the deceased and they announce it to others? Won't it look like we're just trying to make merit that way?"

For myself, I'm not upset if they announce my gift. We gave the gift and if people want to say something they will. We've helped as we were able. If you put a lot of stipulations on a donation it becomes a problem for both the giver and the receiver. If we give a gift and then tell people, "I don't want you to tell anyone about this" I think that would create an awkward situation. That's not really helping freely. Deep in our hearts, when we help others we're not thinking we're only going to help those who are fellow children of God. We want to help all but we can't dictate what other people's reaction is going to be to what we do.

It is most important that we ourselves understand what we are doing. We're not giving money to a spirit. We're not giving gifts to an idol. We're giving money to help a family in their time of need. That is not wrong.

If I don't help my neighbors in their time of need I am useless. People will label me as selfish. I must help. This is a good principle to follow. No matter what kind of gathering it is, Christian or Buddhist, if we're afraid of what other people might say about us there is very little we would be willing to do. Fear can tie us up to the point of immobilizing us.

One of the basic principles of grace is that of helping one another. Forgive one another, give to one another. These are important fruit that grow out of our having received salvation already through Jesus Christ. Now is our chance to share with others. How they are going to use what we give will depend upon them. No matter what their reaction is we should be prepared to help.

For example, after every Christmas gathering our church groups decide to do something for their community before they all go back home. In the past it has included cleaning up trash and digging new latrines for the schools. These are the kinds of activities that break down social barriers. There are no complaints about Christians in those villages. The followers of God are one with the local community. Actions are a better way to share Christ than words.

A woman from the audience asked, "Teacher, what is your opinion of donating your body to a medical school for research purposes?"

Good question. I thank God that I have had the opportunity to tell my family that when I die I want to donate my body to the Khon Kaen Hospital. I have told my children and my wife that when I die not to worry about my body. My spirit will have gone to heaven to be with God. Donate my body to the hospital. You can have a worship service, have fun singing and dancing and some teaching from the word, whatever. But I will be with God.

I've already taped my message about going to heaven and being with God. I'm not going to have anyone else preach at my funeral. I'm going to speak myself. I've taped it now on three cassettes. One of my sons listened to it and said he laughed until his sides ached. My second son said, "I'm not going to listen to it now. I'm afraid it won't be funny anymore by the time you die."

Actually, I told my sons they really don't need to have a funeral ceremony for me when I die but they were upset about that. I wanted to challenge the cultural norm! I'm going to be with God at that time anyway. But if they have a worship service that glorifies God that is fine with me. I have told them in advance. It is important to give your instructions beforehand. I told them I wanted my body donated to the hospital. If it is simply burned up it has no use for anyone. But if my body goes to the hospital then I will be the professor! Medical students will address me as, "Respected Professor" before they cut me up and learn all about the body. That is useful. This doesn't mean you have to do as I do. This is a personal decision.

Another question came from a woman in the audience, "What should we do at a Buddhist funeral when it comes to the time when people listen to the monks chant? Should we put our hands together and wai as everyone else does or not?"

The question is should we, as Christians, put our hands together when monks are chanting. I don't think we should. I have been to funerals and not done it. Some of those who don't believe in God, or Buddhists, not all of them put their hands together either.

There was one time when I went to a funeral and they invited me to come and give a robe to the monks. When they called my name I went forward and gave the robe but I did not wai the monks. The next funeral they didn't ask me to do it again. The host was more concerned about what others would see but I was more concerned about the other Christians who were there. Jesus talked about not doing things just so others could see us.

But we don't act in an obnoxious way. We don't take a seat in the front row where everyone will notice we are not wai-ing. We can sit in the back, in a corner or wherever you want to. There is freedom to think what you want. Thai people are free.

At this point Tongpan read a written question which had been turned in, "Please tell me, if a relative or friend becomes a monk should we be involved in the ceremony or should we tell them we can't be involved?" I have experienced this. Remember we have freedom. We can choose to be involved or not. We can choose the good areas in which we will participate. If they asked me to go and buy the saffron robes, I would decline. But if it is to help in other ways, to give a donation to help the family, I have done that.

What feels right in your heart? We need to decide which areas are those with which we will be involved. What is right and what isn't? What is idolatry and what isn't? We have to have a spirit of discernment. If we tell people, "I'm not going to help you with that!" what is going to be the effect? Sometimes we can give money so that food is provided when needed. People appreciate being helped.

We'll have nothing to do with idolatry. If they ask you to go buy a big idol to donate to the temple - that is wrong. There was a member in one of our churches who won the lottery on the first of the month: three million baht. He bought a huge Buddha statue for over 10,000 baht and donated it to a local temple. Today, he has drifted from the Lord. As soon as he no longer followed Jesus all that money, all three million baht, was all gone. His new truck is gone. He walks around on foot now. I had told him, "Don't ignore God." But he did. He didn't honor God. He was addicted to the lottery every month. I gave him this reminder many times before he finally won. Whatever gives God glory is what we should be doing. What does not we should not be involved with.

A woman stood up to say she agreed that it is okay for Christians to attend a Buddhist funeral in order to demonstrate compassion and show God's love. "In fact", she said, "we should hurry to go since we do it not for the dead but for the living. This will also cause people to ask, "Can Christians really join with us in this?" But just a moment ago you shared with us your experience where you were asked to give a saffron robe to the monks. You didn't refuse but went ahead and did it. Suppose that a new believer was there and he felt it was wrong. If he saw you doing this he might be confused. At that point you are involved in Buddhist religious practice (this is my opinion, she added). What I think is that we should separate ourselves and not be the one to give robes to monks. It's okay to be there, attend, but not participate in the religious activities. As for me I wouldn't do it. There was man in our church who was a highly respected schoolteacher who was asked to take the robes to the monks. He came and asked me what he should do. I told him he should separate himself from the old practices so that his reputation would be clear. If he did not other church members would not be able to distinguish him (from Buddhists). So this respected teacher declined. He was one who clearly differentiated between the two."

Thank you very much, said Tongpan. I think what you said is good. Next time I won't do it. I'd like you to understand that the time this happened to me I didn't consider myself someone of importance to do that. I did not wai the monks, I just gave the robes and left.

Another woman came up to the mike and shared an experience in order to get some advice, "One day we were having a gathering of our women's group at our church. A missionary was teaching the word to us. While we were meeting a Chinese person came into our meeting and asked us to give donations towards their work to provide funerals for people who die who have no relatives . The group of us looked at each other. We didn't know what to say. The farang missionary might not have really understood the tradition of this Chinese group so he said, "Sorry, right now we are studying. We don't have time right now." The Chinese replied, "You're Christians aren't you?" "Yes, we are Christians." At that point we figured the Chinese would leave but no, he went on, "Christians have a responsibility to help others, isn't that right? Our project also helps poor children and orphans as well. Please donate towards this worthy cause - whatever you are able." We still didn't know what to do. Since we just sat there without doing anything the Chinese person finally left. What do you think we should have done as Christians in this situation?"

A simple answer to this question is to say that as Christians we will not be involved in other religion's practices and in those instances we will not give a donation. However, if, for example, there is a village project to build a sala for the mutual benefit of everyone in the village, we should donate to its

construction. We should do what benefits society. I believe that we can differentiate the kind of assistance we give between that which is religious and that which is social. That is the principle that we follow.

A man asked the question, "After the funeral do you practice collection of the bones and ashes? And if so, where do you put them? Do you take them to the temple and bury them?"

Good question. Some people have wondered about this. Some people have buried the ashes in the temple grounds, some in their fields; it just depends. But in my opinion if people are going to keep the ashes at home, high up on a sacred shelf, because people say they miss their deceased loved ones, I don't agree with that. The reason is that if they leave them there or in any other special place they tend to become objects of worship. If you leave the ashes at the temple, that is fine. There is no problem in the temple because there are already lots of people buried there. This has not been a problem in our churches. Ashes are simply ashes and are scattered or buried wherever people want.

Yes, we do practice collection of ashes and we make it into a special celebrative event. We have worship, singing, and a short Bible Study before we bury the remains. This is an external ceremony to help the living, not the dead.

Are there any other questions? Thank you for your questions and comments. If you have listened today and have some helpful suggestions please write me at P.O. Box 1, Udon Thani and I will thank you. We don't do it for ourselves but so that others can receive salvation.

Let us close in prayer.

Endnotes

1. To "wai" is to raise the hands before the face with palms together. It is the normal greeting used throughout Thai society. The higher the hands are raised, the more respect is being shown.

2. Many Thais commonly believe that Christians bury and Buddhists cremate.

3. The Church of the Grace of God is the Thai name for the Thailand Covenant Church.

4. Most Buddhist temples in Thailand have a special facility on their grounds specifically for cremations.

5. 300 baht is standard payment to have a cremation. More is usually paid if monks are involved in the ceremony to do chanting or other roles.

6. Public announcement is usually expected by donors as a way of giving status to the meritorious act. This is to make merit-making more appealing to the Buddhist public.

7. The primarily role of the Buddhist monks at a funeral is to do all they can to help send the dead to heaven - including the chanting of mantras in Bali or Sanskrit, the Buddhist sacred languages. They

also hold the string, which is tied to the corpse, and lead the person symbolically to heaven. It is felt that a person cannot get to heaven without a monk leading them.

8. Donating robes to monks at the funeral is another form of merit making for the dead as well as a status symbol for the family hosting the event. It is considered an honor to be asked on behalf of the family to give the robes since only persons of high social standing are usually requested to do this.

9. There are well-known Chinese Buddhist foundations all around Thailand which collect the bodies of the dead (so that the family's vehicle is not haunted by the spirit of the dead) as well as provide coffins for the destitute.

10. "Farang" is the Thai term referring to any white foreigner.

11. Urns are commonly available at Buddhist artifact stores throughout Thailand for the specific purpose of storing ashes of the deceased to be placed on a sacred shelf (also available at the same store) located high on the wall in the home for veneration.

12. In Buddhist tradition, the collection of ashes is held three days following the funeral

Hour Four of a Four Hour Seminar by Rev. Tongpan Prometta
Isaan Congress II, Khon Kaen, Thailand October 18, 2000

Translated by Paul H. DeNeui

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Today we're talking about communicating the gospel by using the best things found in local culture. It is important to be able to share in a way people understand. As I shared earlier, we are not using local language or tradition or cultural forms simply to preserve them but we use them because they clearly express the gospel in ways people can understand it. When we are reborn in Jesus Christ we are given a new set of values from God. We have been changed from the old to the new. The new set of values are explained in the Bible and come from God.

I would like to focus on one of our cultural traditions in which we need to allow the gospel to speak. This is the wedding ceremony. We need to understand that this is a holy union which was ordained by God. The Bible tells us how God created Eve to be one with Adam. For us as God's children, some of the traditional rituals related to the Thai wedding ceremony do not express the new values we have in Christ. There is one particular part of the ceremony which we, as God's children in Thailand, need to change starting today.

What am I talking about? The very expensive dowry.[1] This is a problem in our churches in the Udon area. In the past we used to hear the saying, "The only daughter requires the most expensive fields and a son-in-law who is a teacher." [2] In other words, an only daughter demanded a high bride price. Today it is not that way anymore. Today it has nothing to do with only daughter or one of twenty daughters. They're all expensive! Minimum 100,000 baht.[3] I've wondered how my son is ever going to get the money to get married. Actually I would like him to get married. We are seeing this too often now. Two young people, each from Christian families, are interested in each other and want to get married but the parents can't agree about the money.

I would like to have us change this. Those of us who have eligible sons and daughters should look at what is best for them and not say, "If you don't have money, don't come talking to us." When this happens two young Christians can't get married! Brothers and sisters, children of God marrying fellow children of God is something that is glorifying to God. Take a look at the days of Noah. People had stopped thinking about God. People who followed God and those who did not follow God married each other. These were signs of the depravity of those times. We should encourage our children to marry other Christians.

Look at what is best for our sons and daughters. Look for that which would help our child, and be best for them in a prospective spouse. Don't just allow money to be the deciding factor. This has happened too much among Christian families in Udon. They ask to marry but don't have enough to pay the high bride price. In the end a wife is found from a family who are not believers.

If it was me, I would not allow this to happen. I have two sons. One son is already married to a Christian. I've told the second, "If you don't find a Christian girl, I won't have her. We're children of God and we should find you a spouse who is also a child of God." "Are there any?" my son asked. I told him, "You just wait and I'll take you where you can meet some of them." He can meet them as friends, get to know them. If he doesn't like anyone there, no problem. There are many out there. We not getting engaged at this point! Wait until my son finds the right one. I'm not trying to advertise my son here, today. I'm just saying we should encourage our children to find Christian spouses.

A Christian Wedding is a beautiful experience. If you have a son-in-law or a daughter-in-law who is also a follower of Jesus you have real happiness. If you are a Christian and the first thing you think about is money you have not changed from the world's point of view. This is not living as a child of God according to what the scripture teaches.

Farangs [4] don't have this bridal price tradition. None at all. According to their tradition, the father of the bride has to find the money to have the wedding and do everything. We don't have to go as

far as that. But don't go overboard with a price of 100,000 baht cash and a solid gold necklace weighing 75 grams.[5] Don't set prices that way. Talk with the groom's family and ask, "What can you afford?" and negotiate in a friendly way. I'd like us to see people as more important than money. As Christians we should be able to talk things through.

In regards to the ceremony we should not let society dictate everything that we do. We do not need to have alcohol or tobacco involved. When my son married there was no alcohol. We just had an ordinary service. Some people say, "But that's what is expected." Expected or not, I don't do it. We need to remember we are doing this for the Lord and to be able to clearly communicate Christ to others. Some people complain that if you are going to have a party with good Isaan food you've got to have alcohol there. I say drinking Pepsi or Cola is enough.

Some people don't think about it and have an expensive wedding – even up to 100,000 baht. When it's all over they have a huge debt. Some couples who are starting to send their kids to school are still paying off their wedding! That is no good. That is the kind of worldly value that we as Christians need to counter. I want you to recognize and understand this.

Whenever we have a Christian youth gathering we should send out letters of invitation all around. Our denomination has an annual youth camp. The purpose of this gathering is that our Christian young people can meet each other, fellowship together, study the word and give glory to God in choosing a Christian life partner. If we don't do this our young people will all go their separate ways. Don't expect your young people to bring others into your own church and marry them. It doesn't happen.

Some people say, "Well, if they get married to a non-believer they can share their faith with them later." That is extremely difficult. If it does happen it is rare.

The marriage ceremonies that most churches practice are held in a church building but in our group we use the traditional forms. We meet in homes. People sit on the floor mats around the bride and groom. We use the Isaan cultural traditions. However we use the scripture as the teaching tool. I would like to share a portion of this service with you. The bride and groom are seated and hold their hands in the wai[6] position.

(At this point Tongpa chanted the first few lines from the Isaan Christian wedding ceremony and everyone applauded).

When there is a break in the teaching everyone is to call out, "Thanks be to God!" We want to give God the glory during this ceremony. Now the bride and groom are to give thanks to their parents. (Tongpan started to chant the next section of the ceremony where the young people thank their parents for raising them).

At this point the bride and groom bow down to their parents and the parents give their children some words of wisdom and blessing. This is a Thai ceremony but we take what is good from it and use it. We don't want to make it farang style.

Now comes the scriptural teaching about being a good daughter in-law or a son in-law. (Tongpan chants the next section starting with Genesis – again to loud applause).

Brothers and sisters, what do you think of that? Most people who are raised in a westernized form of Christianity will not want to have anything to do with this. They will say it isn't Christian. However, the scriptural teaching is very easy to understand this way. Most people who have seen a ceremony like this ask to have theirs done in the same way. Even those who are not believers ask! In the past, no Thai Buddhist would ever want to do a wedding in a westernized Christian way. But they are interested in doing their ceremony this way because the meaning is so clear. I want you to understand that we do the wedding this way so that we can clearly communicate the gospel, so that the good news of Jesus can be easily understood.

When we hold a ceremony this way we can share about God. 1) There is no alcohol involved. 2) We talk about God. People who come say it is terrific. Those who are not Christians want us to do a ceremony for them the same way. Whoever has a daughter or son who want to be married in this Isaan traditional way to glorify God please write to me. I will be happy to come. However, the young couple must have some teaching from the scriptures beforehand.

This way is very Thai not like a foreigner's wedding. We've done this many times. What I am sharing today is not theoretical. We have done it. If you would like help in doing a Thai wedding for God's glory please write me and I would be happy to help.

Now I would like to share with you another part of the ceremony which includes scriptural teachings directed towards the husband and wife. (More chanting and applause). This is the way the ceremony prepares the way for the listeners coming to the wedding to understand and welcome Jesus in their life. Without knowing it they have started to learn about Jesus. He is reborn in their forms so they don't have any complaints against following Christ.

This allows the church to grow. We need to understand that the church is not something material. It is not the building. It is the people. Many times this is not understood. People think that putting up a building will build a church. However, in our group all of our churches worship in homes – no church buildings. We do have two places where there are multi-purpose salas [7] which have been built – just a roofed area. These were built in the villages so that when the church is having worship others could come.

If we build a church building people will not go in them. We don't call these "churches" but we call the structures "salas". Other than these two places all other churches in our group meet to worship in homes.

What would it be like to have a church in every village? Lots of churches? Lots of children of God? Many! In the future we may need to use the Buddhist temples for our places of worship (applause). We need to think of the people who will come – not just the structures.

I know of two places in Udon where church groups were given funds and built a church building but they have no people. I've seen them. There is nothing in there but termites. I call them Termite Churches. Not the people's church. There is no worship happening there.

We need to understand something else about Isaan people. When Isaan people come to follow God they feel they must change religions. As the speaker said yesterday, Thai people revere their religion. Therefore, when we think of a church building, it makes us think of "religion". It means going in there and doing religious practices. That is the reason our group does not build church buildings. When we have ceremonies (such as a wedding) we hold them in homes or in the village sala. We use the local cultural forms. We do not put the focus on the location, nor on building structures.

Once again, what I am sharing is what we do. If you do not agree that is fine. What we do is done so that people can come to God. If you would like to have a wedding ceremony in this way contact me and I will do it for you. Does anyone have any questions about weddings?

One woman asked, "Do you throw rice at the wedding?"

No. We do not. We use strings to tie on the wrists.[8] Please understand that the string-tying ceremony is one more tradition in which we need to allow Jesus Christ to enter in and redeem it for the sake of the gospel. It is not related to evil spirits. We chase the spirits out of it. We make our own flower arrangements and use ordinary strings. We explain that love is something we cannot see. It is something felt inside. But the string-tying is something that is visible externally. So we use the strings in the name of Jesus Christ. Any other questions?

Another woman stood and said, "Teacher, I haven't heard you say anything related to central Thai. If you were invited to come and do a wedding ceremony in central Thai would you come?"

I don't think that would be problem if you let me know ahead of time. I would have to translate the ceremony to central Thai and study central Thai tradition. It takes time to do this. We've been working on these things for twenty years. We have people who can make instruments, some who write, and some who do paintings. We work together as a team. Many people have gone overseas where this topic of contextualization is popular but when they return they still do things in the western ways. They feel that

the religious forms cannot be changed. However, if you do want help doing a Thai service I can help. I am happy to help.

If there are no questions about weddings, then I would like to move on to the next topic. Isaan people have a long history. Have you heard this saying, "12 Lunar Festivals, 14 Legal Codes"[9] Those who are older Isaan will remember this phrase. There are twelve months and each month has its own specific merit-making festivals traditionally associated with it. We have taken those 12 ceremonies and studied them. Isaan people have ceremonies for everything. We need to look at these and decide how Jesus Christ can be brought into that ceremony. We make every effort to bring the gospel into the traditional ceremonies.

Bible pictures that we draw we want to do in our own local style. This is done so that they will be attractive to Isaan people. Have you noticed that Isaan people love to learn their philosophy from maw lom[10] songs? We use them to teach the gospel. We don't want them to miss out on the things they desire. We use the local tunes from the culture with the message of Jesus put right there in the ballad.

One time I went to go sell Christian books in the Buddhist temple. As soon as people found out that they were books about Jesus they wouldn't buy them. They didn't want anything to do with them. Pass them out for free and still no one would take them. So I started to sing a ballad of Noah (of which Tongpan now sang a few lines) and a crowd started to gather. They wanted to hear it this way. That is what they wanted. Before, I said the name Jesus and no one wanted anything to do with it. Then, when I sang it in the lom style people crowd around saying, "I want more, sing more! I want to hear more."

The pictures are the same. When they are done in the Isaan style people can't get enough of them. One monk saw these pictures of Noah done in Isaan style and he said, "I want you to come and sing the story with these pictures in my temple." "Isn't that going to be strange having a story about God's work in your temple?" I asked. "No problem. Come and share with us." He opened his heart when he heard the story in a way that was appealing to him.

I am sure that every region of Thailand is open to the gospel when it is presented in that region's own cultural forms. They will want to hear. They will want us to come.

The next thing I would like to share with you is the way we celebrate communion. When we have communion in our worship we use khao jee. [11] We want to represent again that if Jesus had been reborn into Isaan culture he would eat sticky rice. We don't use bread. Many Christians don't think this is right. That is up to them. We use khao jee because we understand that sticky rice is the staple of life for Isaan people. Many Isaan people are like my father who could eat bowls of white rice and then ask, "When are

we really going to eat?" The real rice is sticky rice. It is the life of Isaan people. If Jesus were here he would eat it all the time. That is why we use it for the communion service.

In Jesus' time people ate bread as the staple of their life. When we are trying to have Jesus be reborn in Isaan we use what is the staple of life for us here – sticky rice – when we celebrate communion. We don't have to look all over for bread which is hard to find in Isaan villages but we use what is common and familiar to all. We use the ordinary things of life which are available to bring Jesus into our village. The meaning is the same but externally we use what is familiar to us.

As far as the wine we use nam krachiap. [12] We don't have any grape wine available so we use what we have which is nam krachiap. It is nice and red, easy to find and easy to make. We use the common things available to Isaan people to convey the meaning of communion to Isaan people. The khao jee has a hard crust that breaks when bent in half which clearly shows the meaning of Christ's body breaking for us. The nam krachiap reminds us of his death by the shedding of his blood. This is the first time I have shared this with other groups. If you have a question, go ahead.

A man stood and smiled,[13] "Teacher, how big of a ball do you make your khao jee?" (Lots of laughter)

That depends on how many people you have. If there are lots of people we make a big one. If there are a small number of people worshipping together we make a small ball. Each person takes a small piece, not a handful. Each person takes a small piece of the rice and a small sip of the nam krachiap to remind them of what Christ has done. Any other questions other than how big the balls are? (More laughter)

"Do you put egg on the outside, Teacher?" (Roar of laughter)

No, we don't brush egg on the outside. We used to and then the rice wouldn't make it past the first four or five people (they took too much). We had to explain the meaning again that this was not the time to fill our stomachs but to worship the Lord by remembering what he had done for us. The meaning of bread and rice is the same but what we use has meaning for Isaan people.

A woman asked, "Some people might think that using khao jee instead of bread is not following what the Bible says to do, wouldn't they?"

We are not trying to be different just for the sake of being different. Everything we do we need to have a reason for it and be able to explain what we are doing. We have a book that explains the Biblical basis for the procedures we are following in these contextualized Isaan ceremonies (he raised the Worship handbook produced by ISD). This is based on a study of the scriptures, Greek and Hebrew, as well as a

study of the cultural meaning. We have staff on our team who are knowledgeable in these areas who help us research these issues.

This is also true regarding the songs that we use. The tunes are well known in our culture but we put the scripture message to them. Teaching something not following the Bible would mean finding some other way to be saved other than Jesus Christ. That would be wrong. But the reason we use these cultural forms is so that people will be able to receive salvation from God. We want people to clearly understand that Jesus alone can save people from their sins. That is not wrong.

We need to understand something about the Bible we use. Excuse me, I don't like to use foreign words but we need to understand the difference between 'Classic Greek' and 'Koine Greek'. Classic Greek was the high, written language, but Koine Greek was the common language. When it was read it was easy to understand. It was what people spoke in their homes and what they used in the market. The Bible was written in Koine Greek. The problem came when they translated it into Thai. They had to use the high language, the big words.[14] Our God is Supreme so all the words used to describe him were the big ones. The problem is that when we try to read it now we don't understand it. We need to go back to the Koine Greek so people can understand the meaning again. One example is the word "Prasiri" [15] (the glory of God). What does it mean? It makes us think of rays of light coming out of the head. Actually, in Thai, there is a very clear meaning of this term, "Jesus Christ Fully God". When we read the classic Greek we need to translate it into Koine Greek.

It is important to study the original texts to get to the meaning. Even our term for God needs to be studied. If God intended for us to use fancy words then there was no need for Jesus to be born in this world as a commoner. God could have simply told us his words. The reason God sent Jesus to be born was so that mankind would come to understand Him through Jesus. Jesus came as a person so that people could understand him. If we wanted red ants to understand us we would have to become a red ant. That is the only way we could communicate with red ants. It is the same with Jesus Christ. God wanted us to know him so he had to come down into our form.

Look in Hebrews 1, in the past God spoke through prophets but in the end he revealed himself through Jesus Christ. This is very important. If we want Jesus to speak to us today but force him to speak another high language we can't understand – that is wrong. It is so important that Jesus speak our language.

I can't speak English like so many Thai. If I go anywhere I need a translator because my brain is so full of Isaan. If we are going to really know the word we need to study or find those who can help us

study the word from the original. I have some friends who have helped me in this area. They have explained to me the meaning in Greek.

Any other questions? If not, then I would just like to mention that the things that we use in our worship, songbooks, worship books, study material, are available. We are not trying to sell things but if they can be used by you or your church they are available. There are some samples up here that you can look at. There is an order form for you to fill out and send. There are tapes, sheets, lessons, many things. But before you use anything study it! If you use something you should be able to answer any questions people have about what you are using. If you don't understand it yourself don't start using it. Are there any more questions?

A woman stood to ask, "Teacher, what is your opinion of Thai Christians making floats to sell at Loy Crating?"[16]

What is your opinion, brothers and sisters. As far as myself, I have not studied this ceremony so I do not have a Biblical basis for answering this question.

(Several people responded and all agreed that selling floats or participating in the ceremony was inappropriate for Thai Christians because it bordered too closely upon idolatry).

If it is idolatry we have nothing to do with it. If we can give glory to God and worship God through this ceremony it is okay to do. However, it needs to be studied. The origin of the ceremony needs to be studied. The good parts of cultural ceremonies that can be used as a means of allowing Jesus Christ to enter into people's hearts should be retained. The things that cannot be redeemed this way should not be practiced.

Thank you all for listening today. Please let us know if you have something with which you can help us. Thank you for this opportunity.

Endnotes

1. Thai tradition demands that the groom's family pay the dowry to the bride's parents. In the past this would include livestock and gold jewelry. Today it is mostly cash.

2. [Thai word translated in text]

3. About \$2,500 US dollars (as of this writing). Laborers earn the equivalent of about \$2.50 per day in Isaan with farmers having a disposable income of even less.

4. Farang is the Thai word for Caucasian foreigners.

5. In Thailand 1 baht of gold equals 15 grams. Here he mentioned a necklace of 5 baht which means not money but weight of gold.

6. The wai position are raised hands with palms together.

7. Sala is the Thai word for a roofed structure, usually with paved flooring. There are no walls, just open space under the shade of the roof.

8. String tying is used in Laotian and Isaan culture as well as much of Thai culture in Buddhist ceremonies to gain protection from evil-spirits.

9. "12 14" refers to the 12 monthly merit-making festivals (from the Thai word referring to the unwritten oral traditions) and 14 categories to the written civil code.

10. Maw lom is a particular style of ballad found in Northeast Thailand.

11. Khao jee is sticky rice rolled into a tube shape and roasted over a fire until a crust is formed. It is usually made with egg brushed on the outside as a fragrant and delicious breakfast.

12. Nam Krachiap is the juice made of the sepals of the seed pod of the rose sorrel plant, a wild herb which grows throughout Isaan. When boiled it makes a dark red juice which has medicinal values and is bitter to the taste.

13. Khao Jee is usually considered the food of little children. The man asking the questions was trying to make a joke.

14. The Thai language has a whole realm of high vocabulary used in reference to the monarchy. It was this vocabulary which was used in Bible translation when referring to God or any member of the Trinity.

15. [Thai word translated in text]

16. Loy Kratong, held at the end of the rainy season, is an annual event on the twelfth full moon of the year which has been celebrated in Siamese culture since the Sukothai period (going back over 600 years ago). Decorated floats (kratongs) are made of banana leaves in which a candle and stick of incense are placed. In the evening the floats are taken to the water's edge, the candle and incense lit, a prayer is offered and the float is pushed off into the water - to hopefully float far away. A kratong that sinks or returns is bad luck. It was originally intended as an offering to the goddess of the water to express gratitude for the use of water, so important for Thai life, as well as asking forgiveness for polluting the water. Today, while it is very much a social event, the spiritual significance, and praying to the water that wishes be fulfilled (especially for the young wanting to marry) is still very prevalent.