

The Difference Between Religion and The Gospel

Hour Two of a Four Hour Seminar by Rev. Tongpan Prometta

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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 rice¹? (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 in 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 becoming 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 Organization². 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 An³. (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 Meeseeah⁵ (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 เอ็ดเซอซัน (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 seiow" 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 Seiow relationships are often based on similar age.