CHALLENGES FACED BY CHRISTIANS IN A SUCCESS-DRIVEN CULTURE AND IMPLICTIONS FOR PULPIT REVERENCE AND RELEVANCE
– A Reflection Paper

Submitted to: The Ordination Council

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Date: 29 Feb. 2008

1. Introduction

1.1 Meritocracy: the chosen way for Singapore. Singapore was once a British colony. Today, she has attained an economic stature that is not only respected in Asia, but also in the world. With only a population of about four million people, and limited land area and hardly any natural resources, Singapore has achieved much economically since her separation from Malaysia in 1965.

Singapore as a society has embraced meritocracy as a national policy toward survival and prosperity—with emphasis on competing and staying ahead of others; on giving the best rewards to the most able. This has instilled in Singaporeans certain drivenness and consequently created a "pressure cooker" environment in Singapore society because of the fear of losing out and missing the good things in life.

When asked if life would always be like that in Singapore while he was still Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, answered:

> It would always be in Singapore. You can't slow down. If I may give an example. Let's take the port of Singapore. Can you slow down? Why do you want to work 365 days a year and 24 hours a day? Slow down. Relax. Tanjung Pelepas will take over. West Port will take over. And then what do we become?
>
> In this game, if you're not No. 1 or No. 2, you are nothing.
>
> So we have to be realistic.[1]

How has this drive to achieve affected life in Singapore society as a whole?

1.2 Narrow view of success. Among other things, Singaporeans generally developed a narrow view of success as a result of the constant push and drive toward economic success. This was publicly acknowledged by the Singapore Government in its official

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[1] *The Straits Times* 24 January 2001. Face To Face With The PM, pH3.

report, *Singapore 21*, which spells out its aspirations for Singapore in the new millennium. It now calls on the people to define success beyond the basic survival level to the higher social and spiritual dimensions.

Explaining the need for this redefinition, the report acknowledges (Government 1999:20):

> There are good historical reasons why Singaporeans view success narrowly. Economics was the imperative when the country first came into being. When we had nothing, having something was success. Education was pursued as the path to a good job.
>
> On the positive side, a narrow definition of success has helped to maintain Singapore's competitive edge by feeding the desire to excel. But it has also had undesirable social effects … [2]

How can the Church and Christians in Singapore respond appropriately to this perspective without devaluing the goodness of success, even material success?

2. View of Two Contemporary Thinkers

2.1 Jon Johnston. He is professor of sociology, anthropology and social psychology at Pepperdine University, and adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary; both of these schools are in California, USA.

According to him (Johnston 1985:30), success is often perceived as the state of "attaining cultural goals that are sure to elevate one's perceived importance within that culture." This perception is unfortunate as it ties success solely to an elevation of power, privilege and wealth.

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[2] Some of the undesirable social effects identified are: an unforgiving society that does not believe in giving a second chance to those who have failed; a risk aversion attitude that avoids trying new grounds for fear of failing; mismatched talents in that some end up like "square pegs in round holes" in life (e.g. a talented violinist chooses to be a banker, even a mediocre one, because of the lure of better material returns). Though the Government is now trying to encourage an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit in people, it has not been easy because a certain mindset has already been embedded in them.

Johnston stresses that success in terms of ascendancy (i.e. having more and more; climbing higher and higher; moving up and up) does not necessarily imply that one is also excelling in life. He (Johnston 1985:33) draws up a list of contrasts between success and excellence:

- Success bases your worth by comparing with others; excellence bases your value by measuring you against your own potential.
- Success is the reward of a few though the dream of many; excellence is available to all though rightly understood only by a few.
- Success focuses on external things; excellence attends to the internal spirit.
- Success entices you to manipulate others; excellence encourages you to value others as the apex of God's creation.

Johnston (1985:49) is of the opinion that Christians are called more to demonstrate excellence than success in life. He sees an inseparable link between excellence and *agape* love. In fact, excellence is the way of *agape* love (1 Cor 12:31). Such excellence is within the potential of everyone because God Himself is the source and supplier of this excellence (Johnston 1985:51). The motive for excellence in life for the Christian is to grow in *agape* love in order to glorify God, and there are some things to note so as to view such growth in proper perspective (Johnston 1985:63-65):

- To grow in *agape* love is not to be enslaved by a "bite-the-bullet" kind of obedience.
- To grow in *agape* love is not an ego-inflating legalism that you use to praise yourself for doing what is necessary to be on God's side.
- To grow in *agape* love is not to try and outdo others so that you can glorify yourself.
- To grow in *agape* love is not to be lopsided in life as a result of focusing on one area while neglecting other important aspects.
- To grow in *agape* love is not to love others just to gain their approval.

The way to grow in Christian excellence and to experience God enabling you is to see life itself as a vocation. You strive to develop your talents and maximise your

strengths so that you can serve others more effectively and with a greater capacity for love in the whole of life (Johnston 1985:71-72). To excel is to push oneself to a greater height, but at the same time, to be more gracious toward others when you are there. As Johnston (1985:163) puts it:

> As God increases our responsibility and prosperity, we must do more than say thanks and hoard. Our task is not barn-building and amassing a fortune. Rather, we must forever realise that we are given more in order to give more. Our tight fists must relax as we allow their contents to slip through our fingers and land on areas of severe need. These areas are close to the heart of God.

Thus, Johnston does not equate success with excellence. Rather, he prefers to view Christian excellence as using the success you have to express *agape* love to others to the end that God Himself be glorified. To Johnston, success cannot be on equal standing with excellence because success is very much externally defined while excellence is very much internally defined. Success enriches you with things while excellence enriches you in your relationships using the things you have. Indeed, he places excellence on a higher plane because it is this, not success, that draws one closer to God and others in life's journey.

2.2 Tom Morris. He is professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, and holds a joint PhD in philosophy and religious studies from Yale University. He asserts that success is very much about "using our talents and following our hearts; true to ourselves and good to others" (Morris 1994:32).

Morris (1994:284) calls on each person to contribute and participate in this life to his/her fullest. And when these become the primary goals in one's life, then things like wealth, power, status, fame and enhanced self-esteem are enjoyed only as secondary consequences of success. Morris (1994:226) contends that success is excellence only if there is a good measure of balance, and he describes his perspective of excellence this way:

> The obligation of excellence ... does not demand unreasonable dedication to superior performance in everything we do. It just requires of us that we make the most of our time and talents in a balanced way as we live our lives. We should care about whatever we are doing. We should invest ourselves wholeheartedly in anything we choose to do, but that investment should be made wisely as well. A healthy human life involves many commitments, many interests, and many values …

Tom Morris terms the excellence that stems from competition as competitive excellence, and this is distinct from personal excellence. Competitive excellence is the "quality of rising out from the crowd" while personal excellence is that "quality rising out from one's own potential" (Morris 1994:224). Morris further stresses that "adversarial win is not the real good—it's the personal win." Put in another way, it is not good to try and win competitively at all costs, even at the price of losing at a personal level (Morris 1994:227).[3]

Morris suggests that each person has the ethical obligation to excel in what he/she is doing. This obligation is not to be better than all others, but to be the best that one personally can be. In this light, he (Morris 1994:226) makes this connection between competitive excellence and personal excellence:

> Any goal of competitive excellence should ultimately be for us just a means to pursue personal excellence. We benchmark against others in competitive situations. We push them to push us to become the best that we're capable of being. But if we're pushing them properly, than they are being pressed to become the best that they're capable of being …

Let's now attempt a brief evaluation of what have been said.

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[3] Examples of such personal losses are sportsmen who were penalised after winning a competition for knowingly taking performance-enhancing drugs. They suffered personal loss not only in terms of having their victory nullified, but also in terms of losing their integrity of true sportsmanship.

2.3 An evaluation. It has been repeatedly stated that success is more than just the attainment of material blessings; it also embraces the responsibility to live for God spiritually and morally in the midst of abundance and opportunities. One expression of this embracement is to regard excellence in terms of growing in *agape* love as asserted by Jon Johnston. His call is worth noting as it challenges one to pursue excellence with an other-centred focus—that is, with the aim of glorifying God and serving others. Indeed, to succeed in excelling, one not only pushes oneself to reach greater heights, but also to be more gracious toward others. However, Johnston needs to be qualified in that this graciousness toward others is not to condescend to them, but to empower them. To condescend to people is really to act in a way that indicates that one considers oneself as superior to them. This is really lording over others in a subtle fashion. On the other hand, to empower others is to share God's *agape* love by giving part of what one has been blessed so that others too can be similarly blessed.

Tom Morris does well to remind that success is only meaningful if it is in terms of attaining goals that are consistent with one's own values and purpose, and not what others have imposed upon him/her. But the big question for the Christian here is: "How do I know my values and purpose are any better than that of others?" Hence, Morris needs to be qualified in that the Christian must choose values and purpose that are in accordance to the teachings of Scripture. Indeed, it is true that God does not fault one for working hard and putting in one's best efforts, but He does fault one for having wrong values and priorities. The right concerns will allow one to enjoy success in gaining wealth and esteem as by-products, and not embrace them as all-consuming goals.

Morris is also right to suggest that competitive excellence is desirable if it is viewed as a way which people employ to bring the best out of one another. After all, Paul does encourage Christians in Heb 10:24 to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

In light of all that have been shared, the pulpit serves as a very crucial and strategic platform to appropriately respond to the challenges and pressures of success. Pastors can intentionally use the pulpit to recover at least four biblical mandates.

3. Pulpit Reverence: Recovering Four Biblical Mandates

3.1 The mandate to fight idolatry. To turn from God is sin. Often, we turn away from God and toward something else. This "something else" then becomes a substitution of God Himself and all that is due to Him. An idol then is anything that occupies the very centre of our attention and devotion when that place rightly belongs to God. Rather then submitting to God, the person submits to the values and priorities that the idol dictates. This is idolatry, and it is attractive because of two reasons:

- Idolatry is attractive because it will not make us stand out like strange people. We have a desire to be accepted and appreciated by others around us. Hence, we are often tempted to adopt the values and priorities of those whom we want to impress. We want to be like them.
- Idolatry is attractive because it is easier to trust in some visible things than in an invisible God. Faith in God is easy to talk about but hard to live by. It is easier to focus our attention on some visible things. Hence, we push ourselves in the workplace, thinking that we are pursuing Christian excellence. But in reality, we are unconsciously adoring and desiring the visible rewards of material success.

But it seems that behind the idolatry of things that are external is the idolatry of something that is very insidious—i.e. the idolatry of self. The desire and need to prop up oneself with every appearance of success is more than an idolatry of things. It is an idolatry of self. That's why there is so much emphasis on having a high self esteem these days. It is not that a healthy self esteem is wrong. But what is more needful is a healthy self acceptance that is rooted not in what we can or cannot do, but in God's grace unto us.

An idolatry of self is very intolerant toward personal failure. Hence, the person is always pushing himself to be successful or to look successful. This is good for self esteem. And failure becomes a bad word in one's vocabulary. However, a healthy self acceptance rooted in God's grace will help us to understand that failure need not be something taboo in our lives. Denis Haack (1989:148) has said it well:

> All sin is failure, but not all that we call failure is sin. We're both fallen and finite … God is never pleased with our fallenness and is never displeased with our finiteness … When our failure is rooted in our fallenness, it is sin. But often we say we've failed when no rebellion against God is present: we have simply come up against our finiteness.

There's pulpit reverence when preaching intentionally calls people to the worship of God, and turns them away from the worship of things and self. It is to exalt God as omni-everything and to admit that we are omni-nothing without Him (Burke 2004:34).

3.2 The mandate to find our significance in God. In Singapore where people are conditioned in many ways by the "fear-of-losing" (*kiasu*) mentality, the desire to outdo, outrank or outperform others creates just that right environment to breed individualism. It is a drivenness that leads a man to think that he is a lesser person if he has failed to be the best or if he has less than another. To counteract this mindset, the example of John the Baptist in Jn 1:19-28 is worth noting.

John the Baptist was true to his calling as the forerunner of Christ. He did so well that people thought he might be the Christ Himself. He could have chosen to be frustrated because God's call for him was to be the forerunner, never the Christ, no matter how faithful and effective he might be.

He could have complained, "God, since I am doing so well, let me be the Christ. I don't want to be nobody. I don't want to be just a voice in the desert. I want to be somebody."

But he didn't because he knew God's call for him was to be the forerunner, never the Christ. He knew that Christ was to be greater than him—Christ was to increase and he himself was to decrease. He was humble enough to submit to this and play his God-given role to the best of his ability.

The lesson for us living in a success-driven culture that stresses so much on comparing and competing is this—we serve God faithfully and fruitfully not so much to be the best—to be somebody, to be the No. 1. But we serve God faithfully and fruitfully because God wants us to be true to His call for us—to do our best, to give our all—never mind if it means we have to play second fiddle to someone else.

For John the Baptist, knowing that he has done his best to fulfill his unique role is good enough for him. He does not regard himself as a lesser man even if he cannot be the Christ; even if he cannot be the No. 1 in spite of his utmost best.

The quest for significance is not wrong. But we need to find it ultimately in who we are as a child of God, and what we do as He has called us. One way to point God's people back to this understanding is to help them regain a biblical sense of significance—to serve God's call in our lives, and to be honest with who we are, not pretending to be who we are not; to play our God-given role to the best we can so as to bring glory to Him.

3.3 The mandate to experience rest in God. One philosophy prevailing today is activism. Basically, it demands that a person fills his life up with activities. It makes a person believe this: "I am what I produce and accomplish. So I better keep on producing and accomplishing. Otherwise, I am nothing." The effect of activism is that it consumes one with a neurotic urge to keep doing, doing and doing. He feels guilty when he relaxes not because he enjoys work, but he is enslaved by it.

Activism has resulted in very traumatic experiences for many people—loss of self-esteem that leads to depression and despair. Activism provides us with a platform to perform. We feel utterly lost when that platform is pulled off from under our feet. We feel trapped not because we have to perform, but we have nothing to perform. This need to prove oneself has resulted in people viewing acceptance and approval as highly conditional. Therein lies the great challenge to the gospel message of God's unconditional love. We think there's a deficiency in divine grace because we look for sufficiency in human greatness.

In a success-driven culture, doing and performing is always the emphasis. The philosophy of activism can subtly lead people to become unbalanced. They see themselves as "servants of God" rather than as "children of God." In other words, they think, feel and live not like a member in God's family, but like a performer in God's work.

David Seamands (1991:23) explains the difference between a "servant" and a "child" this way:

> The servant starts the day anxious and worried, wondering if his work is good enough to please his master. On the other hand, the child rests in the secure love of his family. The servant is accepted because of his workmanship, while the child is accepted because of his relationship. The servant is accepted because of his productivity and performance. The child belongs because of his position as a person. The servant has peace of mind only if he is sure he has proven his worth by his work. The next day, his anxiety begins anew. The child can be secure all day, and know that tomorrow won't change his status. When the servant fails, his whole position is at stake—he might lose his job. When a child fails, he will be grieved because his parents will be hurt, and he will be corrected and disciplined. But he is not afraid of being thrown out. His basic confidence lies in belonging and being loved—his performance does not change the stability of his position.

Human philosophy can tell us that we are only worthy because of our productivity or achievements. But God in Jesus Christ is telling us that we are worthy of His love because we are His children. Yes, He wants us to serve and do well for His glory. But ultimately, God loves us because we are His children created in His image and redeemed by Him in Jesus Christ. He loves us because we are persons, not just performers in His sight.

People in a success-driven culture are characteristically hardworking people. The problem is that they tend to be out of balance—they end up working all for the future but fail to live the present.

In His work of creation, God is teaching us how to live well for the present yet with an eye on better things in the future. After each day of creation, God made it a point to pause and enjoy what He had created, saying, “It is good ... It is good ... It is good …” After the creation of man, He finally exclaimed, “It is very good!”

So, God’s work ethics is this—take time to pause and enjoy the “good” present while working for a “very good” future because life is a journey, not a race. To respond to success as what God has intended for us, we need to realize that faithfulness before God includes trusting Him enough to put aside our work regularly and rest in Him (Haack 1989:129).

Preachers promote pulpit reverence when they call those in the pews who are driven by results to beware of a philosophy according to the tradition of men that pressures them to perform like production machines, and devalues their personhood as members of God’s family.

3.4 The mandate to be a steward. Since God has instructed humankind to “be fruitful and multiply,” stewardship requires that God-given resources be used creatively and productively.

A steward receives simply for the purpose of giving responsibly and generously in God’s name. Such generosity is to bear witness to the love, mercy and grace of God. In this sense, such generosity inherent in stewardship becomes the very antidote against prevalent consumerism today. In fact, our culture of consumerism today is an obstacle in the cultivation of a thankful heart. We are so focused on getting things that life becomes a competition to get more and more. It cultivates in us a desire to have and makes us believe that we will be better if only we have just a little more.

With the affluence that comes from material success, pulpit reverence entails the task of calling God’s people not to neglect one important thing—*be a contributor instead of a consumer; share something with those having less.* By less, it is not just less materially, but also less in terms of lacking in friendship, companionship and guidance in life.

Pulpit reverence is not just mouthing hard truths that people need to hear. Otherwise, most people will feel intimidated or indifferent. Not many will feel inspired. Hence, pulpit reverence needs to be complemented by pulpit relevance.

4. Practicing Pulpit Relevance in Contemporary Preaching

4.1 Show how truth is translated into a true or true-to-life event. Many have confused application with relevance. While application deals with what to do with truths in real life, relevance deals with how truths are connected to real life. Donald Sunukjian (2007:106) puts it this way, "Relevancy is broader than application. Application implies something for the listener to do. Relevancy simply shows how the message connects to life." The goal of preaching from the Bible must include that of showing people how biblical truths fit into real life. True spiritual growth is …

- not merely knowledge but godly behaviour;
- not merely information but Christlikeness;
- not merely learning meanings but using Scripture in practical ways.

However, for relevance to take place, efforts must be made to visualize real-life scenarios. These could be in one's own life, or that of different age groups and genders. The preacher exercises due diligence in discovering and presenting what it looks in real life by concretizing images, creating conversations, dramatizing actions, and sounding out loud the inner thoughts and reasons.

Fil Anderson (2004:20) points out that one reason why people prefer busyness is because it "drowns the voice of the deeper issues that haunt us." It is a kind of escapism. Moreover, society misleads us to believe that God's acceptance, love and care for us are directly proportional to our level of busyness for Him (Anderson 2004:37). The danger of this thinking is that it can lead us to outward conformity with no inner joy. All that we do in the name of God is really to want to earn His love, and not to love Him.

Hence, spiritual direction can be given relevantly from the pulpit when preachers voice out deep-seated issues openly and loudly, and help people to deal with them honestly. Indeed, relevance at the pulpit is not so much telling people what God wants them to do, but leading them to better listen to God themselves in their own situations. This can be done by creating space for meditation and reflection so that the person is made to face his/her significant personal issues in life.

For example, we can have shorter sermons and leave more time for silence and solitude before God. This helps people to practice soul care by intentionally taking time to listen to God, creating space to be in communion with Him. To facilitate this, the preacher can ask deep questions rather than offer easy answers, coming alongside those in the pews not to meet all their needs but encouraging them to take personal responsibility.

4.2 Soften objections to biblical alternatives. Today's culture of success is one that discourages a person from admitting that he/she is wrong. So, it is wise to show listeners that their experiences are not necessarily contrary to the truth. What they need may be more time to work out their experiences so that God's truth can be revealed and validated. Avoid coming across as judgmental and condemning.

Also, the preacher needs to talk through the dangers of certain life choices, and show how these can lead to bad consequences. This implies that the preacher is aware of the real-life struggles of people, and the many complexities that they face. People in the pews can then hear the questions they are asking in their heart being echoed at the pulpit. So, the preacher brings out real-life choices and acknowledges the struggles of people. As the preacher surfaces these potential conflicts and walks with people through them, he/she needs to go beyond—shows the dangers of certain choices and articulates the benefits/blessings of choosing biblical options (Sunukjian 2007:103). This helps people to be honest with their deep struggles such that they will be open to pray and consider the ways of God in their lives.

The preacher can demonstrate that he/she is no stranger to these struggles and complexities by sharing his/her life openly yet prudently with others. Without this vulnerability, the distance between the pulpit and those in the front pews can be very

far. When the preacher does not come across as human and authentic, the people cannot identify with “flesh and blood.” Indeed, the preacher’s own struggles and inadequacies can be encouraging and edifying if healed wounds are shared as God’s gifts and sign of His working and presence in one’s life (Anderson 2004:149).

5. Conclusion

In Num 21, Moses made a bronze serpent at God’s command when the camp was stricken by snakes as a result of God’s judgment. Those who looked at the bronze snake were healed.

Years later, we read of King Hezekiah destroying the same metal object because the people were offering incense to it (2 Kg 18:4). The metal snake had been deified and worshipped as if it was God Himself. What was once good had become ungodly. It did not happen overnight, but over time in small innocuous degrees.

There is validity in saying that success, even material success, is one way in which God blesses us. But if we are not careful, success can be worshipped like God Himself when the gifts are desired more than the Giver. Indeed, in our success-driven culture, let us beware that very often the greatest enemy of what is godly is not what is bad or ugly. Very often, the greatest enemy of what is godly is what is good.

May the Lord help us to respond biblically to the voices of our success-driven culture, and may His voice to His people be heard loud and clear from His mouthpiece at the sacred pulpit.

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