New Perspectives On
Holiness (I)

Martin Sanders

New life....
New life in Christ....
Holiness....
God’s dream for His children....
God’s dream for you.

These phrases will mean different things to different people. The first three are part of the traditional approach to Christianity and may bring to mind a vague concept of what “putting your faith in Christ” means. The last two invite us to examine new life from a perspective that is somewhat out of the ordinary. God wants us to explore and enjoy all that He has for us as His children.

When we first embrace faith in Jesus Christ, many of us have a fairly clear idea of what we want our life of faith to be like – for awhile, at least. But sometimes when we get to phase two or three or eight or ten in the whole process of faith, our direction becomes less clear. We aren’t quite sure what comes next. It is time to consider this question: “Where do we go from here?”

Believers in the early church struggled with this issue as well, so Paul addressed it in Colossians 3. There we can discover the kind of dreams God has for us so that we can work with Him and with His Spirit to become like Christ.
Too often there is a difference between what God longs for us to be and what we actually are. Since we evangelicals generally maintain the values of the predominant culture, the casual observer notices almost nothing about believers that makes us stand out as distinct from unbelievers in the populace as a whole. For all practical purposes, we blend right in with everyone else.

The time has come for each of us to deal honestly with this question: “How can I as a believer move from where I am now into the next phase of becoming like Christ?” Colossians 3:1-17 shows us how to keep on progressing toward our goal.

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.” (Colossians 3:1)

As Christians, we are in continual conflict. We live in this world, but we are not a part of this world. This is the theme of II Corinthians 5, where we are reminded that we are part of something much bigger than just this life. There is something that takes us far beyond all that is familiar. Paul is saying here in Colossians 3, “Come on. Don’t just look at your life. Don’t just look at your surroundings.” Literally, he tells us, “Look up.”

Set your eyes on something far beyond your current existence. Keep seeking the things that are above. All of this is possible for us as believers because of who we are in Christ. We’ve already read, “You’ve been raised up with Christ,” and now Paul goes on to say,

“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.” (Colossians 3:3-4)

Incredible things are ours, being “in Christ.” We are chosen by God from the foundations of the world. We are empowered by His Spirit. He has so much for us – far beyond anything we’ve dreamed.

Christian, the time has come to move from where you are now into the next phase of the amazing journey you began when you first embraced Christ through faith. You may have been traveling along that road for a long time, or you may be just learning how to take your first steps in the initial phase of the journey. Wherever you are in your walk of faith, God wants to bring you from that point into the next phase – be that phase two, or ten, or eight hundred.

John describes walking in the light. Paul speaks of setting your eyes on Christ. Jesus talks about focusing on things that are above. The psalmist uses various metaphors for the same idea. No matter what words are used, the ultimate truth is clear: Your life is different. Don’t just look at your situation at the moment. Look up. Focus on the things above.

This new perspective is very different from what has so often been presented to us in the church. Past teaching has revolved around a problem orientation. We have concentrated on what’s missing instead of where we’re going. We’ve looked at things as they appear to be instead of as God sees them. We’ve been caught up in how bad things are instead of how they could become better. This shouldn’t surprise us. After all, our whole society operates from that kind of perspective.

Take a routine appointment
with your doctor, for example. The doctor asks, “How are you?” You don’t say, “Fine, just fine” (like you do when someone asks you the same question at church). Instead, you become very insightful about what is wrong. “Well, I have this pain over here, and it hurts up here, and sometimes I feel it really bad here.” If you went to the doctor and he said, “How are you?” and you answered, “Fine,” and he asked, “Well, why are you here?” and you said, “I wanted to keep feeling fine, so I thought I’d come see you,” he would refer you to another kind of doctor.

The same problem-oriented mentality applies to other areas of life as well. Suppose you’ve just taken your car to the mechanic. His first question, as always, is, “What’s wrong?” If you were to say, “Well, nothing. I just wanted to make sure that nothing ever goes wrong, so fix anything that could go wrong,” that mechanic would love you.

Our whole society breeds and nurtures a problem orientation. We’re constantly told to fix what’s wrong. Many have taken the same approach to faith, but that’s not God’s approach. His way is far better.

God’s approach is based on the fact that He has a dream for your life. It’s a dream of what you could be, and He’s incredibly goal-oriented. The text is very clear. One of the primary purposes of God’s Spirit working in your life is to ultimately conform you to the very image of Jesus Christ. That truth is found at the end of Romans 8. God’s Spirit is preparing all of us as believers corporately to become the spotless bride of Christ.

But look at us. We’re not there yet. The truth is, we have a long way to go. Even so, this is God’s dream for His children, for His Church – for you and me. He looks at what you are becoming – not at what you are still missing. He is inviting you to join Him in this dream, to step forward in the direction He longs for you to go.

Set your eyes on Christ – not on what’s missing in your life.

The text moves on. Put off the old “stuff.” Put off the old things that get in the way of your progress. This part of the passage tells us to deal with our humanity. Deal honestly with your human side, but also with the dark side of your humanity.

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.” (Colossians 3:5)

Paul is describing the sins of the flesh, and he says to put them to death – literally, put them to death. You see, they’re incongruent with the life that is going on in heaven with Christ. As a believer, you have been raised with Christ. He is seated at the right hand of God. Your life is hidden with Christ. Get a good look at the portrait Paul has painted in the previous verses.

Now consider the elements that have been introduced, or rather, reintroduced. Impurity, lust, greed, and so forth – these things don’t fit the picture. The two realities just don’t match. We each have a dark spot in our soul. The text tells us to deal honestly with it. Deep down, you know what issues you’ve allowed to block your progress. In verses 8 and 9, Paul is telling us to get rid of these: “anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.” Furthermore, don’t lie. You are a new person in Christ. The anger and rage, malice and slander don’t fit who you are.
anymore. They just don’t fit.

You’ve all known someone whom you thought was pretty far along spiritually, and then one simple word or a small gesture destroyed your whole concept of that person. It ruined an entire image. But we’re not just talking about an “image” here. We’re talking about who we really are, and these sins of the tongue and of the flesh are inconsistent with our new life in Christ. The text says for us to get rid of them.

Let me give you an example. When I was in high school, I worked on a dairy farm. I milked cows before I went to school. On Saturdays, I worked in the barn all day, from six in the morning until eight at night. At any given time, we had from four hundred to five hundred head of cattle, and I spent fourteen hours straight in that barn with them. When I came out of the barn, I did not look or smell very good. I would come home filthy and smelly at eight o’clock, but I had a date at eight-thirty. So I would use two or three kinds of shampoo, two or three kinds of soap, and at least half a dozen kinds of cologne. I was clean. Now what do you think I put on to wear for that date a half hour later? Did I go back out and put my old coveralls on? Not if I wanted a second date. Once I was clean, it would be ridiculous to go back and put on the same old dirty, smelly clothes that I had worn in the barn.

It’s that strange for you, once your heart has been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, to go back to some of those old patterns that used to characterize your life before you met Him. You’ve been changed. He’s taken you out of the barn and washed you clean. You even smell good to God now. He’s given you a whole new life in Christ. The old habits don’t fit. Be it the lusts of the flesh, be it nastiness of speech, or be it a bitter heart – these things just don’t fit who you are now. Taking them up again is as ridiculous as going and putting on clothes that smell like a barn when you are going someplace you really want to go. It doesn’t fit.

The traditional view of the Christian life makes it a performance issue. Perfection is stressed instead of excellence. We’re constantly checking to see how we are doing – whether it’s in a communion service or a morning time of prayer with God. Instead of continuing to ask yourself, “How am I doing?” all the time, look to God and ask Him what He would like to happen in your life.

It’s kind of like the Olympics. For all their greatness, the Olympics are a little annoying. Around the world, the greatest people in a particular sport compete on a national level, but it’s only the best two or three that get to go on to the Olympics. The others just didn’t cut it. Only the champions go to the Olympics. There they compete with the best from other nations, and only three win. In the ultimate sense, it’s really the gold that counts. Many athletes don’t feel like they have succeeded unless they set a world record. Incredible people feel like they have failed.

This feeling of failure is not God’s plan for you. He has chosen you and washed you clean. He has raised you with His Son and set you at His right hand in Christ. His goal is excellence. He did not create you to be just like the other believers around you, so don’t compare yourself to them. I am not like anyone else, and God does not want me to try to measure myself by standards I see in someone else. My job is to be, by the grace of God, the absolute best I can be.

The new life in Christ is a
process, not a performance. It’s a process whereby God brings you to wholeness. Yes, you will encounter points of crisis along the way. Very often a new Christian will have a crisis experience sometime after conversion. It is also a developmental process in which you will move from the stage where you are now into a stage that is like Jesus Christ. The secret of the journey is here in our text: Set your hearts and minds on things above, not on yourself. Set your eyes on Christ.

(To Be Continued)

As if it Were Yesterday

Bryan R. Widbin

In the time of Christmas, I often find myself in the Middle East—usually in body but always in heart. My wife is fond of calling these places “[my] other life.” The other day I ran across this little piece I wrote awhile back. It captures the grip that the lands of the Bible have held me in for some time. I called it: “As if it Were Yesterday.” And I thought it might interest you as we approach the season of our Savior’s birth.

I remember it today as if it were yesterday. I had been in Israel little more than a week. And I found myself in Galilee sitting on a hillside that once was a center of regional government during the time of Jesus. Then very little of the city of Sepphoris had been unearthed, so few imagined how significantly this site would change notions about the early life of Jesus and the social landscape of the New Testament. Growing up in Nazareth only 5 miles away, Jesus was surely aware of this highly developed city with a bustling business, intellectual, and social life. Perhaps he even worked there as an apprentice craftsman while the city underwent renovation during the days of Herod Antipas. All of this was far from my mind in the autumn of 1973 as I sat perched atop two millennia of dust settled upon the ruins of Jesus’ world. But I did know even then that this land would forever have a profound influence on my life as I had begun to experience a closeness with my Lord and with the biblical people that I had not known before. One Old City shopkeeper puts it well, “You come to the land once; it gets a mortgage on your soul, and you have to return.” And I have been returning now for more than a quarter of a century.

While much has changed in the lands of the Bible since the days of Jesus and the prophets, much hasn’t. You can still see shepherds watching their flocks...
by night, desert dwellers living the life of Abraham and Sarah, fishermen casting their nets in the Sea of Galilee, valleys of shadows of death, baptismal sites in the Jordan river, and yes, even political tension with neighboring peoples. Time always stands still for me when I walk through the old walled city of Jerusalem and occasionally tread on stones that have survived many changes since the days of Herod. These are stones that perhaps felt the weight of the Master as He walked through the city that made Him weep.

But in the end I have discovered that it is more than the stones and the places they support that draw me back so frequently. It is the people themselves -- people who live everyday with a connectedness to the biblical peoples because they are part of the same physical and cultural environment. And this environment which limits access to many of the things we take for granted, challenges them daily to live a more authentic life than we often know on this side of the globe. I have discovered that more than a third of what is recorded in Scripture of the words of Jesus warned His followers of the traps of living in a predictable, manageable world that can obviate faith. When God mapped out a geography for His kingdom, He chose a strip of land only 150 miles long and 50 miles wide without a significant permanent water source. This is the sort of stuff that makes dependence upon Him a reality and not just the rhetoric of religion. This is what keeps drawing me back: a revitalizing experience of faith in the God who controls every facet of my being. And that is what is always there for me in the land and in its peoples as if it were yesterday.

Dr. Bryan Widbin is Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at Alliance Theological Seminary. Dr. Widbin is a former resident of Israel and is fluent in the languages and culture of the Middle East. He frequently brings groups to Israel, to learn the world and culture of the biblical people.
Israel Trip

Keith Loo
Class of 2009

Over 14 days and 13 nights, I traveled with Dr. Widbin and fellow ATS students to Israel in January of this year. Despite minor adjustments to our schedule to stay away from the war in the Gaza Strip, we still had a very packed schedule and visited many different places in Israel. Dr. Widbin was serving as our in-house archaeologist, historian, theologian, pastor, and tour guide, and blessed us throughout the trip.

Traveling through the land of Israel, I saw firsthand how the landscape plays an important part in our understanding of the Bible. Dr. Widbin’s teaching on the land of milk and honey raised our awareness of the difference in the landscape between Israel’s north and south. The lifestyle and the culture of the people living in the north’s agriculturally rich land were vastly different from those living in the desert in the south. The differences were reflected in both the ways that people experienced God and in how God revealed Himself to them. The hilly landscape in the south, created by wadis that carved out big troughs in the mountains, presented new insight into David’s environment as he escaped from Saul’s pursuit. Our new and different perspective about how shepherds led their sheep through the landscape and provided food and water for them provided a different approach for reading the book of Psalms. By being in the land, I have greater appreciation for the distances between places and the geographic relationships of the land. Seeing the two mile long road between the Garden of Gethsemane and Caiaphas’ house helped me to visualize how Jesus was being dragged along the hilly stone paved road from one place to another after His arrest. Seeing the cell where Jesus was kept for the night was one of the most touching moments of the trip. Unlike other holy sites that had been built over and filled with incense and decorations, the empty stone room was much like the way it was in Jesus’ time. In this room we stopped to be quiet and meditate on what Jesus went through for the sake of our salvation. As we meditated on Psalm 88 in that space, we began to understand differently the depth of Jesus’ struggles.

New cultural insights that I gained are now helping me to understand the Bible. When we arrived at Caesarea Philippi where Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, Dr. Widbin showed us the backdrop where the discussion occurred—a place where shrines were set up for many gods. The question Jesus posed was a very poignant question to reveal His messianic identity and highlight His uniqueness from the many gods at that famous place. From the metropolitan Bet Shean, we saw how the wealthy lived at the time. The theaters, bathhouse, business area, etc. of this typical Greco-Roman town were all part of a culture that
pursued an indulgent, materialistic life. The engagement in sexual and other immoral activities was as intense as it is in today’s society. Through these similarities, I began to understand that while times have changed, we in many ways pursue the same things as people during Jesus’ time. Therefore, the teaching of Jesus is as applicable to us nowadays.

Dr. Widbin’s explanation of ancient Jewish marriage practices was another highlight. As he told us the steps people followed at the time, we began to understand more how Jesus sees us as His bride. I now realize how John 14:1-3 fits into the marriage procedure and that Rev. 3:20 was actually what the groom had to do to enter into the couple’s new residence on the wedding night. This realization brought out a fresh understanding of how precious God considers each of us to be.

Traveling during a time of war caused us to consider Israel’s millennia long conflict. The old city of Jerusalem is divided into four quarters – the Jewish quarter, the Muslim quarter, the Christian quarter, and the Armenian quarter. The hustle and bustle of the marketplace with its variety of shops and haggling with vendors reminded me in many ways of street markets in Asia. Behind the commercial activities, we realized that there was still much tension underneath, whether racially, politically, economically, or spiritually. In reading Jerusalem’s history, we read about the tension and hostility that have developed among the different groups. We also saw that some of the conflicts have been instigated by Christians in the name of Christ. On our last day there, all the Palestinian stores were closed for the afternoon to protest the Israeli government invasion of Gaza. It saddened me to see that the city where the Prince of Peace was killed continues to be a place of conflict and hostility. It reminded me that our salvation can only be based on the grace of God through the work of Christ on the cross. Commemorating historical places does not impact those who visit the place without open hearts that invite Jesus to change from within.

I was thankful for the opportunity to visit Israel and enjoyed tremendously the fellowship I had with brothers and sisters during the trip. It definitely opened my eyes to look at the Bible from a different perspective. I will continue to incorporate what I have learned through the trip into my theological framework and allow God to use it to shape and mold my ministry.

Keith Loo graduated last year. He is now serving at Queens Herald Church as an intern.
“It’s in the middle of the desert!” screamed my wife when she turned the first page of a travel guide about Phoenix. I had a sense that this new ministry opportunity would not fly. This may be just too hot and dry for us who are so used to living in New York City with four distinct seasons. We have so many friends and relatives in New York, and we knew nobody in Phoenix. On and on, a list of excuses went through my mind. We would shelve the idea of relocating. But God wouldn’t allow it.

That evening, as we were doing our devotions, I had this urge to ask my then 7-year old daughter to join us. She had been reading her own NIV Bible (i.e. reader’s version of NIV for children.) We turned to what she was reading – Genesis 12!

I assured myself that this could just be a coincidence and we shouldn’t get too excited (or upset.) Anyway, we decided to read her version of the Bible together. As we read towards verse 9, we noticed that this particular version elaborates the verse by saying, “Then Abram left and continued toward the Negev Desert.” The last word of the verse popped out – “desert!”

We knew then that we needed to open our eyes wider and our hearts further. We had closed the door ourselves because it seemed like it was a place out of our own preferences. God intervened and was speaking to us through His words. I quickly searched other Bible translations at our hands that evening and couldn’t find any mention of the word “desert” in verse 9 anywhere else. This is the only version we could find that contains the word, and we had stumbled upon it on the same day that we found out about the “hot” ministry opportunity in Phoenix. And the rest is history.

While we were planning for the move, we were so busy saying goodbyes, making new contacts, packing and giving away possessions, that the adrenaline actually covered our uneasiness, uncertainty, and fear. However, this was a place where we did not know anyone. There would be no one to rely on, no one nearby to talk to but God Himself. Supposedly, this is a blessing. But we are only human. Fear sank in when we finally sat comfortably on the plane. Is that it? Is that how to say goodbye to a city where we lived for twenty-three years? Say goodbye to a church where we grew up? Goodbye to numerous coworkers, fellow pastors, and sweet memories? Not to mention saying goodbye to immediate family members? It was not an easy feeling. If it were not the busyness and the demand of the new responsibilities and adjustments, I

Life in the Desert

Alan Kwong
Class of 2006
am afraid we may have drowned in our emotions.

In the past year, God has shown us that He indeed was leading our way and that He was alongside us. Too many surprises happened to our family that almost caused us to doubt our decision at times. Two family members passed away; one got a back injury; we were dragged into a frivolous lawsuit and had to fly back to New York two times; I was also diagnosed with diabetes; our new church was recovering from losing a pastor and adjusting to a new one (i.e. me!); and all of a sudden, we were informed that we had to move out of the church that had hosted us for the past nine years! It was a rocky and meandering road for us and the church. Yet the peace and assurance from His words and the support from our new friends and members of the church humbled and comforted us from time to time.

We thank God that these challenges took place one at a time like a wave, not all at once like a tsunami. With amazing support and understanding from the congregation and the leaders of the church, we never had any fear that we were facing these obstacles alone. Above all, God was with us one incident at a time. For with every death in the family, there came a salvation testimony, praises to be sung. For each injury or health issue, a turnaround of heart and a renewal of determination to stay healthy is ensured. For the loss of a sanctuary to worship, the church immediately recognized the urgent need and the right economic environment to consider purchasing a permanent place.

God is working at full speed, at a pace that even a fast-paced veteran New Yorker like me is astounded. Within the first six months, our church moved twice. With the latest move to a non-traditional church setting, we are finally worshipping in the morning, bypassing the dull and scorching afternoon heat of Phoenix. Brothers and sisters are finding new use of their Sunday afternoon time – more time to hang out, to fellowship. With the new location and new meeting time, we have become a bit more appealing to newcomers as well. What a bonus!

God indeed cares and moves among individuals. More and more members have sensed the urgency to wake up, grow up, and help out. Overall, the church became very sensitive and responsive to the needs of others. Many experienced the joy of seeing others connected with the faith. Participation in the discipleship program is beyond expectation. Praise God!

On a personal front, we began to know the local pastors and pastors in our C&MA district at Los Angeles. In both groups, we are warmly welcomed and accepted, enjoying fellowship and prayer meetings with them. My wife and I have prayed for many years to have the opportunity to serve together. With her job previously in NYC, this dream seemed to be drifting away further and further. Now, the needs of the congregation and a few clear interventions from God to block the opportunities for my wife to return to the work force ultimately affirmed our decision to surrender and learn to rely on His providence. Our dream of serving together, more time to pray together, and more time to study the Scriptures together, to exercise together became not just a possibility, but a reality.

As a solo pastor, I found the workload sometimes overwhelming—preaching every week, teaching Sunday school, leading prayer meetings, Bible studies, joining fellowships, visitations, phone calls, and discipleship. But I thank
God for equipping a group of committed and dedicated deacons to so willingly share the load.

It has been an extraordinary journey. It is a move that we never planned or even thought about. Lacking much in faith and insisting in our own ways, we sometimes wonder how we managed to make it so far. The only answer I can offer is - it’s entirely the grace of God. Sola Dei Gloria.

Alan Kwong completed his theological education in 2006. After that, he served as an extern at Queens Herald Church for two years. In 2008, Alan and his family started serving full-time at Metro-Phoenix Chinese Alliance Church.

DATE: June 11-12, 2010
TIME: Friday 6:30 pm to Saturday 8:30 pm
PLACE: Alliance Theological Seminary at Nyack
PURPOSE: To provide opportunity, counsel, and help for those who are searching God's guidance and God's will for His services
TARGET GROUP: For those who have a calling for ministry and for those who are still seeking God's calling for life
LANGUAGE USED: Chinese, with English translation
REGISTRATION FEE: $50 (includes overnight accommodation and meals, does not include transportation)
REGISTRATION DEADLINE: May 20, 2010
INFORMATION:
ATS Chinese Studies Program
845-770-5723
csp@nyack.edu

Dedication Camp 2010
"Life, Ministry, and Commitment"
Alumni Update

New Ministry

David Herling (December 2008) has joined a mission organization. He is now getting ready for his future overseas mission work. His passion is to spread the gospel among the Chinese people in Asia.

James Feng-Chin Len (1999) returned to the States from Taiwan last year. He is now serving full-time at Rutgers Community Christian Church, NJ. He was sent by Rutgers Community Christian Church to Taiwan for several years to develop the campus ministry there.

Ordination

James Yuan-Tai Chang’s (May 2005) ordination was held on October 17, 2009 at Madison Chinese Christian Church, WI, where he started serving last year.

William Hu (December 2006) was ordained on September 27, 2009 at Danbury Chinese Alliance Church, CT. William has been serving at this church since he graduated from the Seminary.

Xiang Tian Zhong (current student) will have his ordination ceremony held on May 23, 2010. Xiang Tian has been serving at New Haven Chinese Alliance Church, CT for eight years.

Courses Offered in Fall 2010

Rockland Campus

Leadership and Pastoral Ministry in the Chinese Churches
Instructor: Dr. John Ng
Date and Time: September 14 - December 21, Tuesdays, 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm

Theological and Cultural Issues in the Chinese Church
Instructor: Dr. Paul Siu
Date and Time: September 9 - December 26, Thursdays, 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm

For information, please contact:
Chinese Studies Program at Alliance Theological Seminary
350 North Highland Ave., Nyack, NY 10960 Tel: (845) 770-5723 or (845) 353-2020 www.nyack.edu