



insight



Citizens of Two Kingdoms

**Truth and Discipleship
Among Competing Claims**

By Liz Middleton

**Solving the 'Problem' of
Singleness?**

By Penny Wang

**Reflections on
Returnee Ministry**

By Sue Burt

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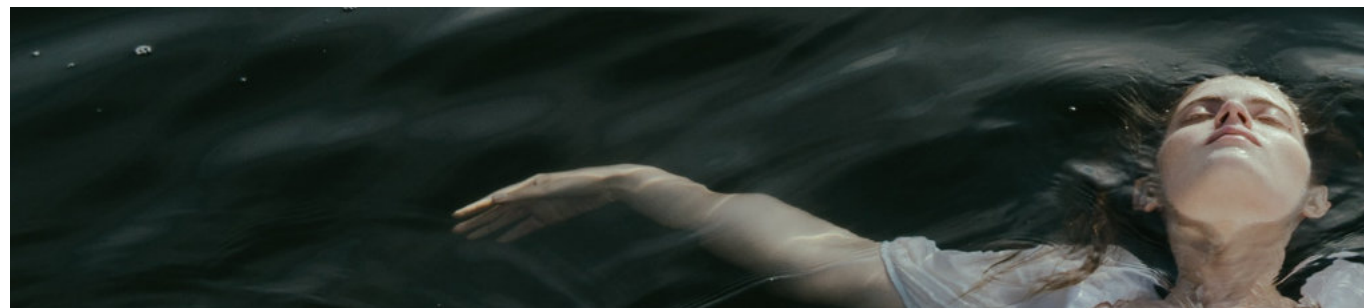
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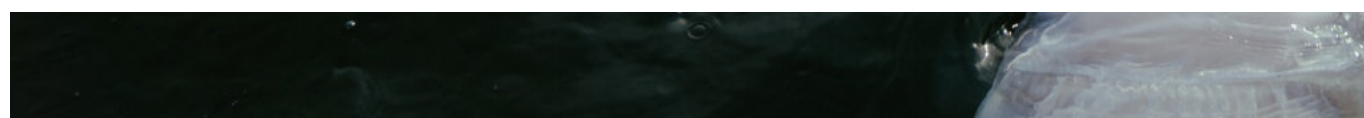
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A Word from the Editor



Sue Burt

Sue is the Head of Returnee Ministry at Friends International, and a chaplain at the University of Bournemouth.

She has a passion to see international students disciplined in a way that ensures their growth continues long after they return home.



I remember the scene well. An informal group was sitting in the chaplaincy eating lunch and chatting. Suddenly a German student looked across at a Chinese student and asked, “How do you cope with your government banning Facebook? Doesn’t it make you angry?” The Chinese student rushed to the defence of her country’s leaders: “It must be for our good; our government always acts for the good of the Chinese people.” The stronger her defence, the more incredulous the German student became. How could she be so unconcerned about restrictions on her freedom?

As I sought to keep peace and respectful dialogue, I marvelled at what I was witnessing. Here was a clash of cultures, one informed by the ideal of the greater good with submission to authority as its base, the other where personal liberty was the over-riding value.

“What is truth?”¹ Pilate famously asked. In a world of fake news, conspiracy theories and spin, coined as a time of

‘post-Truth’, we do well to ask the same question.

As Christians we believe in absolute truth, in one who said He is the Truth². So we’re interested in both sharing truth and using truth as a prism or lens through which we see and evaluate the world. Since the Garden of Eden, truth has always been a casualty in our fallen world.

Jesus reminds us of the essence of Satan: “There is no truth in him... he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). The prophets repeatedly bemoaned the absence of truth: “(t)ruth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found” (Isaiah 59:14-15).

In their article, *Truth and Discipleship*, Liz Middleton and Sally Miller give us an in-depth and challenging overview of where our discipleship needs to interface with the area of truth, adding lots of helpful resources.

Relationships are another area where ‘untruth’ and ungodly values conflict with biblical



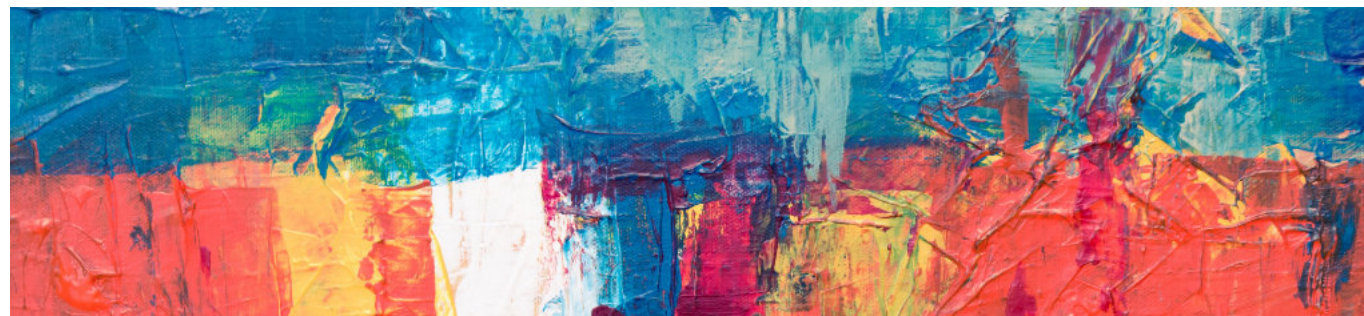
teaching and where many international students will experience personal, cultural and familial pressure. Penny Wang helpfully unpacks cultural and biblical attitudes to singleness and again gives us pointers for our discipleship.

Finally, after a year of increased contacts with returnees for many of us, I revisit what we mean by returnee ministry. In becoming Christians, we and our international friends become citizens of two kingdoms.³ For our returning international students, we long that they be both: “in Colossae (Cairo/Caracas/Chiang Mai/Copenhagen), in Christ...”⁴

We should also bear in mind that as our international students commit to the truth and are being guided by truth, they may also open themselves up to possible suffering. This too needs to be a focus of our discipleship. Tim Stanyon in his book review whets our appetite for a resource that helps us think through the challenges of being “strangers on earth”.⁵

Surely for all of us our goal should be a re-shaping of our worldview: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

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1. John 18:38
 2. John 14:6
 3. Philippians 3:20
 4. Colossians 1:2
 5. Hebrews 11:13



Truth and Discipleship Among Competing Claims



Liz Middleton & Sally Miller

Liz has been a Friends International staff member, based in Nottingham, for over 15 years, having previously lived and worked in China.

In 2003, she was awarded an MBE for services to disadvantaged children in China.

Sally Miller is the Friends International Centre Team Leader in Lancaster, where she has been involved in international student ministry, in various roles, for nine years.



It seems we live in an age where the marketplace is increasingly flooded not just with ideas, but also with competing claims for truth.

Turn on the news or check our social media feeds, and at once we're barraged with claims and counterclaims: each sounding plausible, each with seemingly irrefutable evidence, each articulated passionately and persuasively. Our minds are boggled, assailed, perhaps manipulated as we run through the arguments and we are left wearied, trying to work out who on earth and what on earth to believe. Sound familiar?

How do we help one another and the students with whom we work to navigate through this quagmire of ever-growing decisions about who and what to believe?

Following are many ideas. None of us can incorporate them all, but choose what is helpful for your context and your time constraints. For each main idea, a set of suggested resources is available – a link to these can be found at the end of the article.

1. Prayer and Discernment

The Apostle Paul recognises our utter dependence on the Lord for wisdom and discernment. Only with His knowledge and insight can we choose between what is good/bad/best, false/flawed/true.

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ...” (Philippians 1:9-10, NIV)

Pray with Christian Groups

Perhaps we could look at this prayer and talk about this issue in our Christian student groups, gathering from them a few examples from contemporary life and news, and then bringing these to the Lord in prayer with our students. We could encourage our students to pray daily for greater love, more wisdom, insight and discernment, especially regarding the plethora of news, ‘fake’ news and stories which abound.

Discuss with Non-Christian Groups

In non-Christian groups we might

not be able to pray together, but we could discuss the issues of competing narratives about truth. It might even be an opportunity to say that, “as a Christian, I find it helpful to turn to God and ask Him for help to separate what is true from what is questionable or false.” We could define the meaning of the word ‘discern’ and say that it is a word the Bible uses in a prayer asking God to help us ‘discern’ (separate out) what is best. This is in the context of asking God to help our love for one another grow stronger, wiser and more insightful. We could explain that the only way we have found to navigate life in this world is by constantly turning to God in prayer and reading the Bible for His wisdom and counsel.

2. Biblical Values and Case Studies

How can we help our students steer their way through daily life and stand strong for a whole lifetime? How can we encourage them to hold firmly to biblical truths when they are challenged by counter-claims, counter narratives, accusations of narrow-mindedness and worse?

Use Case Studies

One way is to work with students at understanding biblical values and analysing what these look like when lived out in our own lives today. Case studies can be very helpful, such as those available in the resources linked to at the end of this article. With our students let's imagine some of the real situations that will crop up both in the present and in the future in family, workplace or community when today's students return home or move onto other locations.

Study God's Character and Godly Values

In a group where two students from the same country believe diametrically opposed things about their government and events back home, it may be counterproductive, even explosive to try to work out which version is true and which version is false. Rather, we could study God's character and godly values: love for enemies as well as friends, grace, forgiveness, justice, mercy, integrity, truthfulness, humility, contentment, purity, peace-making. We could discuss possible situations where they could live by these values. We could pray with them about the difficult situations they can foresee they might encounter in the future. We could look at how Jesus and the apostles prayed and then we could encourage one another to pray accordingly.

Contextualise Biblical Values

As far as possible, it is helpful to encourage international students to contextualise Biblical values by thinking of applications in the context of their home cultures. We can stimulate contextualisation by asking questions such as “How would this apply in your home culture?”, or “How might this be challenging in your home culture?” Additionally, we can encourage students to ask questions and not be afraid to do so.

For example, earlier this week a current student who recently became a Christian sent this WhatsApp message to her mentor from within her Bible Study group:

Student:

I have a question – as a Christian are we allowed to read any book that's of interest? I'm currently

reading this book that talks about existentialism, but in a very light-hearted, candid way. I find it to be an intriguing read, but I'm also finding out that existentialism and the Christian faith don't go hand in hand? ...Should us Christians confine ourselves to certain types of books?

Mentor:

Hi, great question and glad you're enjoying your reading!

Firstly... there's definitely a place for being aware and widely read, but to read critically.

Secondly... we should be wise. Paul writes that “everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial” (1 Corinthians 10:23) and “If anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” (Philippians 4:8).

So, I would apply that to my leisure reading, listening and watching material. Hope that gives some food for thought.

Contextualise Illustrations and Applications

If possible, we need to avoid only thinking of illustrations and applications that are rooted in our own cultural context. Having international Christians on our Bible study teams is a great asset here. Also, we can avoid imposing a ‘one size fits all’ application by asking students about their home contexts and then asking them to say what they think would be possible applications. To avoid the opposite extreme of saying nothing for fear of ‘telling students what to do’ we can follow the example just given in the WhatsApp illustration: encourage questions, discussion and prayer for the Holy Spirit to

guide and empower inner change and discernment with critical thinking based on Bible truths.

Share Our Lives

This means, of course, being willing to walk alongside students as they process what it means to live as a follower of Jesus in today’s world. This involves sharing our lives and takes time with patience. There will be mistakes and messiness. Yet Jesus allowed this with His twelve disciples. He has allowed it so many times in our own lives and we can therefore stand alongside our students as they too experience the real ups and downs of following Christ. We can be honest with students about our own struggles, joys and sorrows, so that we encourage and learn together on an equal footing.

3. Identity as Citizens of God’s Eternal Kingdom

Face Reality

What about the real truth and the imagined reality about ourselves? Perhaps we all have an imagined reality of what we wish we were like, and no doubt our students do also. Facing the reality, admitting we’re not as good as we would like to be and letting go of the idealised version of ourselves is difficult because it is so bound up with our sense of personal identity and security.

The kingdom of this world can be so harsh and unforgiving that from a young age we build protective walls around ourselves. Ironically, however, we end up imprisoning ourselves in outward personas that are hard to penetrate and exhausting to keep up.

Receive God’s Grace

When we share the Gospel with

international students, as with ourselves, we are making an invitation to allow God to enter right through all those self-protective layers, to see the “real” person, with all the flaws and inner mess that perhaps has been hiding for years.

The “Good News” is that while it may feel very vulnerable to admit and confess our sins to God, He is abundantly loving, gracious, merciful and kind. This might be a total revelation and revolutionary idea to some of our students. They may always have thought that the only way to survive in this world is to hide any weaknesses and to deny the truth about any wrongdoing, unless obviously caught out by a parent, teacher or other authority figure.

So, we might need to spend some time, perhaps repeatedly, explaining that God’s grace means there is an alternative to hiding our true selves. We can be real with God in admitting and confessing our sins. We neither need to be cowed by fear of condemnation, nor crushed by impossible heights of legalism and expectations. The burdens can be lifted, the truth can be faced, and a new life begun in God’s eternal kingdom.

We can encourage students to keep receiving God’s grace and to keep experiencing the joy of being freed from the stress of striving to gain unattainable approval.

God’s kingdom is a realm where there is true love, acceptance, gentleness and conviction of sin for cleansing, rather than the harsh condemnation, rejection and ungracious lack of forgiveness which might be the experience of many, prior to knowing the Lord

Jesus. We are given a new identity as beloved children of God.

Explore the Two Kingdoms

It is really worth taking the time to explore with students the difference between the two kingdoms. This is so that they are prepared as best as possible for living with the daily tension of being permanently beloved children of God, yet simultaneously temporary pilgrims and “strangers” in the kingdom of this world.

This is one reason why it is important that we work together with our students on understanding more deeply what it means to have our identity and security rooted in Christ.

A series of studies in Ephesians, Colossians, Galatians or encounters with Jesus in the Gospels would give opportunity to go deeper into these areas. There may be trauma and fear that admitting the truth about the inner-self will lead to rejection from God and others. Therefore, it’s vital to understand more deeply God’s generous grace, tender mercy, total forgiveness and complete cleansing, all made possible through Jesus.

The same may be the case with idealised patriotism and national identity. With students from countries where national pride is a deeply rooted part of their self-identity, it will be important to discuss the difference between our national identity and the primacy of our identity as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Studies in Daniel could lead to helpful discussions about real situations in the world today. Christians may need to choose

between national loyalty or honouring God as the ultimate authority, if following a government edict would mean denying the Lordship of Christ.

This may lead on to studies and discussions about the key drivers in our decision-making, attitudes, ambitions and the unconscious idols we cherish. Such idols include our self or national image, which might have been superseding the rightful place of God in our hearts.

This is not a one-time Bible study session, but rather a continuous lifetime commitment to asking God through the Holy Spirit to form more Christlikeness in us: in our thinking, our heart attitudes, our speaking, our actions, our treatment of others and our love for God Himself.

What we can do now is nurture our students in establishing this regular habit of asking the Lord to show us the reality, to help us strip off any masks (and deal with the pain that may entail) and to change in those areas where we have a tendency to fall short.

In essence, it’s about working with students in understanding the concept and lifelong process of “sanctification” with God’s gracious help by the work and power of His Holy Spirit.

4. Discipleship and Hard Choices

As messengers of the Good News of Jesus, we are rightly excited to focus on the grace and goodness of God, the joy of His presence with us, the agonising sacrifice of Jesus, forgiveness, the promise of eternal life and the incredible transformation we undergo when we turn from our old way of being

self-centred to our new life of being Christ-centred.

Yet, we also need to share that God’s call on our lives is radical and involves the willingness to make hard choices. These sometimes mean painful rejection from others, facing hardship and forsaking some ways of living we might have pursued before following Jesus.

Readiness to Face Misunderstanding

Turning to Christ might mean a big change in values and relinquishing ambitions, which may not be understood by family and friends. It could mean not climbing the corporate ladder, but instead training and then working with a church or Christian organisation. It will mean taking a stand for integrity in the workplace and relationships.

Perhaps a student’s old life has been focussed on a ruthless determination to get the best possible Masters degree in Finance in order to make the family business back home much more competitive. Yet some of the current business practices in that company are unhealthy. The student is now determined not to be driven by profit at any cost. Rather, the top priority will be to discuss with family members how to establish best practices which exhibit integrity and accountability. This will involve conversations which might lead to rejection, but this student is encouraged by the prayers of those in the group and by confidence that God’s ways are higher and that their life is safe in God’s hands.

Enduring Aggressive Hostility

The experience of

misunderstanding and rejection could, in the most extreme cases, mean enduring violent persecution from people who are not in God’s kingdom. In less extreme situations, it may mean enduring scorn and derision or angry comments.

We and Christian international students can easily feel intimidated and nonplussed if confronted with objections from those who scorn the exclusive claims of the Gospel and who might vociferously select from a vast range of possible accusations that Christians are “narrow-minded”. Those seeking to follow Christ faithfully might face being described as micro-aggressive, judgmental, prudish, sexually repressed, anti-LGBTQ+, homophobic, or anti-feminist. Attempts to talk about God’s standards could wrongly be interpreted as old-fashioned, colonialist, conservative, elitist interpretations of the slavery-approving, empire-building, warmongering, misogynistic, divisive, anti-evolutionary, unscientific, boring, mythical Old and New Testament Bible.

While time probably won’t permit us to go through each of these arguments with our students, it would be helpful at least to raise awareness that it is a normal part of Christian life: we face unjustified accusations from people who have not recognised God’s amazing grace and boundless love, but only feel offended, even threatened by the idea of God’s authority and Christ’s Lordship.

True Freedom

The Lord cuts through this spider’s web of objections and says, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

When reaction is aggressive and hostile, let’s encourage students to hold onto these words of Jesus about true life and true freedom and not to be discouraged by misunderstanding, even if it includes such acerbic accusations. Only in this way can they persevere in being salt and light, holding firmly to the word of life in the face of opposition.

Facing Temptation

We and our international students spend many hours per week exposed to signals and messaging that could easily lead us to wander from God’s ways and the values of His kingdom. The world says, “Go on: it’s ok, be your own master. Do what you feel is right for you. Don’t let anyone oppress you with out-dated inhibiting beliefs.” These messages bring the temptation to believe false promises about temporary pleasures, the lure to blend in with everyone around us and the danger of losing our distinctiveness as followers of Jesus.

It is helpful to look at Jesus’ own experiences of temptation, His words about discipleship and His promises about the true, lasting, pure joy and freedom of eternal life in His kingdom.

5. Called to be Distinctive

Boundaries

It is known that boundaries keep us safe. The Lord has graciously given us boundaries in His Word. The Kingdom of God, built on the firm, solid foundation of the Word of God, with clear boundaries, is therefore exactly the place where

we can find safety. The irony is that the kingdom of the world claims to be the way of freedom, yet it leads only to confusion, danger and destruction.

If we can draw this contrast between the two kingdoms with students, we can then begin to look at the calling the Lord has on our lives to be distinctive, as salt seasons and cleanses, and as light pierces and dispels the darkness.

True Worth

A message in the world which has a strong magnetic pull is the one about our worth and how we “measure up”. For students, this may seem strongest in the area of academic achievement, but they may also be seeing this in the context of their expected future earning power, particularly having gained a degree from a foreign country. How do we look at this as a discipleship issue? How do we respond distinctively as salt and light?

We can identify with international students in terms of pressure to conform to the norms around us. No matter how long we have been following Jesus, it is still so easy to slip into using the measure of how much we’re earning as the yardstick by which we assess our success and value. When we are aware of the growing wealth of our contemporaries, former classmates and perhaps people much younger than ourselves, it is very enticing to wonder what we might be earning now if we had made different choices at key life stages. We hear people evaluated in the media by their “net worth” as if the amount one has accrued in financial wealth is the top criterion for having lived a successful life.

Allowing our minds to wander down this path is a dangerous enticement to be resisted. Yet, with alertness to it, we can share with international students how we face and deal with these real temptations when they come. Looking together at discipleship passages in the Gospels (for example, Luke 16:10-31) could be a helpful way to discuss these matters.

When these comparisons to others, based on the outer vestiges of wealth, property and possessions, start to invade our thinking, it’s time to remind ourselves firmly that the measure we use in Christ is absolutely different. Jesus clearly teaches us that in the Kingdom of God the true measure of our worth doesn’t even emanate from us, but from God Himself. It is God who defines us as so priceless that only His Son’s life was costly enough for our redemption. There is no achievement, fame or wealth we can strive for in this life that will make us any more valuable to God; no more valuable than if we have a net financial worth of zero. Jesus makes it very clear in the Gospels that kingdom values are the inversion of worldly values.

6. Temptation and Spiritual Warfare

Why is it then, that the amount we earn, and the property and possessions we have to show for it, tug so strongly on our heart strings, even when we are Christians who know the truths about the Kingdom of God?

We have to remember that living as temporary pilgrims in this world while being eternal people of God’s everlasting kingdom is inevitably going to bring us into conflict with

the world’s value system: it measures worth only in terms of fleeting status in the eyes of flawed, finite human beings. We also need to be alert to the ultimate source of every counter-kingdom message. There is an unseen spiritual enemy of the Lord who is waging real, but unseen battles against God’s people. He uses false messaging as a tactic to deceive, divert, distract and destroy. Jesus drew the contrast starkly:

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

Discipleship of international students needs therefore, to include awareness of both of the two kingdoms in which we live, and of spiritual warfare and how this may be experienced and addressed in everyday Christian living. This doesn’t need to be a frightening area of Christian life, but it does need to be recognised and well understood in order that students can discern between what is of the Lord in origin and what is not.

7. Grounded in Essential Doctrines

Another subtle and insidious voice from the world is the one which says we can reinterpret Bible truths so that they resonate more comfortably with today’s progressive culture. We need God’s wisdom to distinguish between our very legitimate desire to be contemporary and relevant, and any reinterpretation of the Bible that would lead to an alternative, false gospel. Here, teaching international students to be familiar with key Bible doctrines (see resources below) and to keep

praying for spiritual discernment is very important. Some studies in Romans could really help in establishing clarity on essential doctrines to hold onto and guard from being abandoned or diluted.

Confidence in the Historicity and Reliability of Bible Texts

Another curve ball which can be used to erode confidence in the Bible as our basis for truth is dismissal of the textual reliability of Bible manuscripts. Students may have grown up being told that the Bible is just a legend, a series of stories passed down, but not really based on fact or real events. Or they might have heard that the manuscripts have been altered over the years and cannot be taken literally. It may be helpful, therefore, at the outset of studying the Bible with students, to clarify that the Bible is a divine revelation and that there is strong historical and archaeological evidence for having full confidence in the veracity of the many manuscripts which form the basis of our modern translations.

Summary

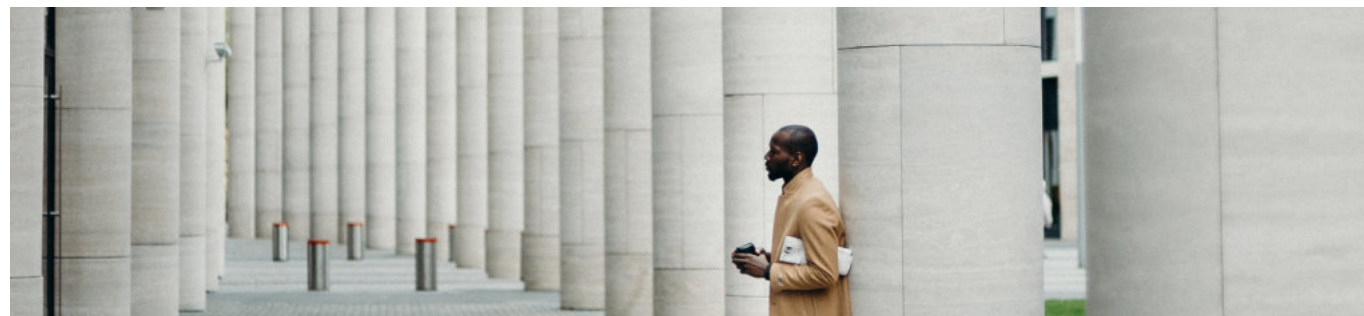
This brief survey of truth and discipleship highlights some key areas in trying to build solid foundations with our international students, standing them in good stead for their future as Christ’s ambassadors back in their home countries or wherever they might live. Hopefully there is at least one section here which could provide a focus for studies with students and help them to think through real-life applications in their home contexts.

Helping students establish foundations in understanding God’s truth and His call to discipleship is a vital part of

‘returnee ministry’, beginning from early conversations when first getting to know students, moving on to our deepening interactions and studies together of God’s Word, right through to the time when students finally complete their studies and move on.

Accompanying this article are practical resources for use with volunteers and students.

You can find these resources here: [friendsinternational.uk/insight2021-resources](https://www.friendsinternational.uk/insight2021-resources)



Solving the 'Problem' of Singleness?

Pastoring International Students Struggling with Singleness



Penny Wang

Originally from China, Penny came to the UK as an international student.

She has lived in both the north (Newcastle) and the south (Oxford) of England, but is now based in the middle of England (Leicester).

Penny has been a staff worker with Friends International since 2017.



Where I grew up, when you reach a certain age, people start asking you, “Have you solved your personal problem yet?”

Though a strange question, every Chinese person knows what the question is really asking: “Have you found the right person to marry?” This is a classic example of Chinese directness asked in a seemingly indirect way! Yet it is an accurate reflection of people’s attitude towards singleness – singleness is a problem, and you need to solve it. Perhaps this attitude is not only deeply rooted among the Chinese. In Asia and Africa, family is a big part of life, and singleness might mean failure. Conversely, in societies where sex may be a highly visible preoccupation, such as in Western countries, singleness is simply unimaginable. When our international student friends are faced with the pressure to get married, a distorted understanding of singleness often causes them to stumble. Therefore, it is important that we address this issue early in the discipleship process.

What Does the Bible Say About Singleness?

1) The world tells us that singleness is a problem, but the Bible says the opposite – singleness is not a problem but a blessing:

“I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that” (1 Corinthians 7:7).

Paul wishes that all were single as he was. But each person has his own gift from God, that is, some have the gift of singleness while others have the gift of marriage. According to Paul, singleness is a gift from God, equally as good as the gift of marriage. Why is singleness a gift? Paul points out one important advantage of singleness – single people can be “free from concern” (1 Corinthians 7:32). Couples need to take each other’s needs into consideration; when conflicts happen, lots of energy and effort is needed to seek resolution. When children come, life gets much busier and

sacrifice is always needed. However, single Christians can be more flexible with their time. The life of a single person can be much more straightforward. Yet all these advantages are not to be used for selfish reasons. Single people are freed up for pleasing God, and this is why it is a gift from God.

2) There is a right and wrong understanding of the gift of singleness.

In my early 20s I heard a pastor say, “Most of you are worried in case you have the gift of singleness. Well, if you have a desire for marriage, then you do not have the gift of singleness.” How relieved I was to hear that message! I comforted myself by thinking that one day I would get married because my desire showed that I did not have the gift of singleness. But so far that day has never arrived, and I started doubting God’s goodness in withholding marriage from me. This teaching wrongly understands the gift of singleness as a supernatural empowerment to endure singleness, and it treats your feelings and emotions as the marker to decide if you have this gift or not.¹ The implication seems to be that singleness is a bad thing because you need to ‘endure’ it with God’s superpower.

As discussed earlier, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:7 that some people have the gift of singleness while others have the gift of marriage. This verse suggests that the gift of singleness and the gift of marriage are mutually

exclusive, and a person is either given the gift of singleness or the gift of marriage². Rather than seeing the gift of singleness as a supernatural empowerment, it is more helpful to view it as a description of our status. So if you are single, you have the gift of singleness; if you are married, you have the gift of marriage.³ Both are good gifts from God. At some point in our life, we might swap these two gifts. When we get married, we swap our previous gift of singleness for the gift of marriage. When our spouse passes away, we swap again our gift of marriage for the gift of singleness. When discipling international students, we need to remind them that God does not make a mistake in giving us either one of the two gifts.

Marriage as an Idol?

I used to think, “If only I were married, I would be happy.” Like me, when faced with pressure and unhappiness in singleness, many international students unthinkingly turn marriage into an idol, and see it as the only solution.

An idol is a false god. Marriage is good, but if we think we cannot live without it, marriage becomes an idol, a false god. An idol tells us, “Come to me, worship me, and I will give you satisfaction.” The marriage idol tells us that all our contentment can be found in marriage. However, our contentment in life can only be fulfilled by the true God alone, and Him alone. We need, therefore, to urge our international student friends to find joy and fulfilment in God Himself, while warning them

not to chase after marriage and other potential idols which cannot ultimately satisfy.

In Genesis 3 God told Adam and Eve that they could eat the fruit from any tree in the garden, but they must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God’s command was not to restrict them but to protect them. However, they believed the serpent’s lie, thinking that God’s rule is bad. Similarly, I believe that where marriage has become an idol, common beliefs in society and social media can tempt us to worship marriage itself, rather than worshipping the Creator. We are probably familiar with some of the following ways of thinking, but international students might need help to discern the falsehood in them:

Lie 1: Marriage completes me.

In Asian culture, some older aunties often make this comment about single people who are doing well in many aspects: “What a shame! If only she/he were married, life would be perfect.” Such words hint that marriage is the most important indicator of a complete life, which is a big lie that many international students believe.

Marriage cannot complete us. A spouse cannot complete us. No one can complete us except Jesus, because only Jesus promised a life “to the full” (John 10:10). In fact, if we put all our hope in marriage or our future spouse, they will not be able to bear that burden, and we will end up with disappointment.

Lie 2: Singleness means loneliness.

People imagine that single people spend all their time by themselves. If that were the case, singleness would indeed be dreadful, since we are created for relationships. But there is a difference between being alone and being lonely, according to Al Hsu:

Aloneness: the physical separation from others.

Loneliness: the emotional disconnection from others.⁴

Based on this definition, single people might be alone, but they might not necessarily be lonely. If they are emotionally connected with others, they don't live a lonely life. Similarly, married people are not alone, but they can still be lonely, especially when their marriages do not go well because they are not connected emotionally. Therefore, marriage cannot guarantee the absence of loneliness; nor does singleness equal loneliness if one chooses to invest in different relationships.

Lie 3: Marriage gives security in life.

When urging their children to get married, worried Asian parents often say: "If you are single, who will take care of you when you are old?" This sounds like a very convincing argument, but it carries an implied assumption that your spouse and your children will live longer than you. Yet we all know that life might not turn out the way we plan or hope. Our spouse and our children might become ill, and we might be the one to take care of them in the end! Marriage cannot provide us with the security

and certainty we want. Our security only comes from God the Shepherd because of whom, "I lack nothing" (Psalm 23:1).

Lie 4: Sex is a must in life.

The world tells us that sex is essential in our life, just like food and water. Based on this thinking, since sex is only allowed in marriage, single people who choose abstinence live an unhealthy life. This again is a lie, with our greatest example in Jesus, who did not have a sexual relationship.

Like marriage, sex is good, but it is only a foretaste of what is to come when Jesus returns. Sex helps us understand the joy of that ultimate union between God and His people.⁵ A helpful approach to this might be Ed Shaw's example of a trailer and a movie to explain why we can live without sex. He compares sex to a trailer, and our ultimate union with God in the new creation to the film itself. The purpose of the trailer is to attract people to see the film. Sex trails the new creation, attracting people to go and enjoy that ultimate intimacy with God. According to Ed Shaw, "...if sex is just a foretaste of the real thing, it doesn't matter so much if we miss out on it now. No-one who gets to enjoy a really good film in its entirety kicks themselves for having missed seeing the enticing short trailer."⁶

Lie 5: Marriage is easy, but singleness is hard.

How do most fairy tales end? "And they lived happily ever after..." This sentence, which we read from a young age or heard from others, gives a false

“When we have God already, why should we desert Him for something far less good?”

idea that married life is trouble-free. However, this is not how the Bible depicts married life.

“But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this” (1 Corinthians 7:28b).

Paul here clearly says that married people have worldly troubles, so he would prefer Christians to stay single to avoid them. Marriage is not full of sunshine without rain. In marriage, husband and wife are both commanded to sacrifice themselves for the other. Our sinful selfish nature makes it hard to do so. The world is tainted by sin, and hardship has become a reality of life. Singleness can be hard, but marriage is not easy either.

Some Pastoral Suggestions

Singleness is a gift, but that does not mean that it is devoid of challenges. Here are some suggestions for ways in which we can address the topic when discipling international students.

1. Parental Pressure

A large proportion of the international students in our ministry are from cultures where they face pressure to get married by their parents upon returning home. Respecting and obeying parents is a big thing. When pressure comes, it is tempting to please parents by marrying a non-Christian. It is right to honour earthly parents, but honouring them does not mean absolute obedience in every situation. Just as marriage can become an idol, some international students might also inadvertently turn

their parents into 'idols' by placing the latter's wishes above all else. When what their parents want is clearly against what our Heavenly Father wants, we need to urge them to place obedience to God as their highest priority, pointing out that they should respect and obey their Heavenly Father, because the Bible says: "To fear anyone will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe" (Proverbs 29:25).

2. Sexual Temptation

As mentioned above, many people wrongly think that their problems – including their struggles with sexual temptation – will disappear when they are married. This is clearly not the case. Sexual sin is an 'internal condition', and marriage does not cure it.⁷ The temptation to sin sexually is an everyday struggle in our sex-obsessed world. How do we help them deal with it?

- As discussed earlier, sex is meant to point to the ultimate union between God and His people. When talking about sexual temptation, we can help international students see it as a chance to thank God for His love and for the heaven to which we are heading.

- Remind them that Jesus understands their struggle. It is too easy to minimise sin by thinking sexual temptation is too great to overcome. Jesus was tempted in every way, including sexually, but He did not sin. This gives the hope that people can be tempted, but choose not to sin.

- We need to tell international students the truth that God is

much bigger and better.⁸ It is easy to give them a list of rules to obey, but rules are bound to fail because they rely on human effort. Sin cannot satisfy us – only God can. When we have God already, why should we desert Him for something far less good?

- Help them to think through the sources of sexual temptation. You may want to suggest practical steps for fleeing from temptation, such as limiting online viewing or setting up accountability relationships.

3. Longing for Family Life

As a single person I find it helpful that my friends Angela and Paul have 'adopted' me as their family member. It is not only me who benefits from this! They always appreciate it when I stay with them. It is like a holiday for them when I play with their child and help with the housework. This is something we could help our international student friends with, encouraging them to be proactive in being 'adopted' into church families. We could also encourage families at church to take the initiative in adopting single people.

4. Desiring Children

I love children and I too want to have my own children one day. For single people this is simply not possible. Some students have asked: "If God commands us to be fruitful and increase in number in Genesis 1:28, why doesn't He give me marriage to fulfil this command?" This command should be read together with the Great Commission.⁹

“...churches teach from the pulpit that both marriage and singleness are gifts, but in practice, only marriage is glorified.”

In other words, it is more important to bear and raise spiritual children than biological ones. The Apostle Paul was not married, but he called Timothy and others his sons. When we share the Good News of Jesus, and when we disciple others, we are bearing and raising spiritual children.

5. Creating a Single-friendly Church Culture

Many of the idols surrounding marriage are not only held by single people, but also by married people. Personally, I feel that the church should repent of wrong views which can be so damaging to single people. When I visited returnee students in Singapore, I stayed with my friend’s family. Her father is an elder in a local church, and he is very worried about my friend who is a single Christian in her 30s. When I asked him, “Doesn’t the Bible say that singleness is also a gift?”, he replied, “Yes, but only in theory.”

Often many Bible-believing churches teach from the pulpit that both marriage and singleness are gifts, but in practice, only marriage is glorified. For example, I cannot count the number of times I have been asked by Christians, “When is it your turn? Are your standards (for a husband) too high?” Well-meaning couples might invite a single sister for a meal, and always deliberately invite along another single brother, instead of using the meal as an opportunity just to get to know her for herself. In China, churches sometimes launch campaigns to encourage single Christians to pray for their future spouses, leaving

single people to feel that they are still single because they have not prayed hard enough! We should seriously reflect on practices in our churches that are stopping single Christians from enjoying their God-given gift and finding contentment in their present circumstances.

Conclusion

When walking with international students struggling with singleness, we need to understand that singleness *per se* is not the problem. The real problem is a non-biblical understanding of singleness, and some unhelpful practices in the church, which make singleness unwanted. In addition to correct teaching on singleness, the whole church family needs to come together to create an environment where single Christians can truly thrive.

1. Hsu, Al. *The Single Issue*. Leicester: IVP, 1997. Page 50.

2. Hsu, Al. *The Single Issue*. Leicester: IVP, 1997. Page 61.

3. Hsu, Al. *The Single Issue*. Leicester: IVP, 1997. Page 61.

4. Hsu, Al. *The Single Issue*. Leicester: IVP, 1997. Page 110.

5. Shaw, Ed. *The Plausibility Problem: The Church and Same-Sex Attraction*. London: IVP. Page 24.

6. Shaw, Ed. *Purposeful Sexuality: A Short Christian Introduction*. London: IVP, 2021. Page 33.

7. Hsu, Al. *The Single Issue*. Leicester: IVP, 1997. Page 174.

8. Chester, Tim. *You Can Change: God’s transforming power for our sinful behavior and negative emotions*. IVP, 2008. Page 104.

9. Allberry, Sam. *7 Myths about Singleness*. Crossway, 2019. Page 191.

Further Reading

Allberry, Sam. *Is God anti-gay?*. The Good Book Company, 2015.

Berry, Jonathan. *Satisfaction Guaranteed, A Future and A Hope for Same-Sex Attracted Christians*. London: IVP, 2016.

Roberts, Vaughan. *Transgender*. The Good Book Company, 2016.

Trevenna, Andrea. *The Heart of Singleness: How to Be Single and Satisfied*. The Good Book Company, 2013.



Reflections on Returnee Ministry



Sue Burt

Sue is the Head of Returnee Ministry at Friends International, and a chaplain at the University of Bournemouth.

She has a passion to see international students disciplined in a way that ensures their growth continues long after they return home.



Returnee Ministry... We all know what that is now, don't we? Or do we?

One of the unexpected joys of 16 months of lockdowns around the world has been increased contact with returnees. Students and ex-students from many different continents have 'zoomed in' to join our activities. That may be students whose return has been hastened by a premature departure from the UK, some who have been home for months or even years, and even some we have never met but who like the thought of connecting with the UK. Staff and volunteers have even adjusted the times of online activities to allow for differing time zones.

So does that mean we're all doing more returnee ministry? Well, yes, but also, no, not necessarily!

Such contact with returnees is hugely valuable and important for at least two reasons. Firstly, we demonstrate genuine friendship and care when we

keep in touch with returned students. Many may be isolated, facing family pressure or only able to enjoy irregular local fellowship. Secondly, it is as we engage with returnees, and understand the issues they face, that our discipleship of current students is informed and enhanced.

And there's the crux of the matter. Primarily, returnee ministry is about our discipleship of current students to prepare them for life back home. Once our students return, we become much more limited in the input we can give. Work, family and societal pressure, plus different time zones, will all make contact more piecemeal and unpredictable. Plus, ideally, we want returnees to connect with a local body of believers and draw their teaching, encouragement and challenge from there, alongside others living in the same culture. Our key opportunity to disciple them for what may lie ahead is while they are here.

The chart opposite beautifully illustrates our task with current students.

Of course, discipleship is a continuum and people don't fit neatly into what we consider ideal. For some students, much of their Christian growth will occur after return, sometimes many years after. So please go on connecting with returnee students. Encourage them and learn from them. One Friends International Centre has organised Alumni Reunions with different year groups – brilliant! But also, let's all encourage each other in a returnee focus to 'think home from the beginning'.

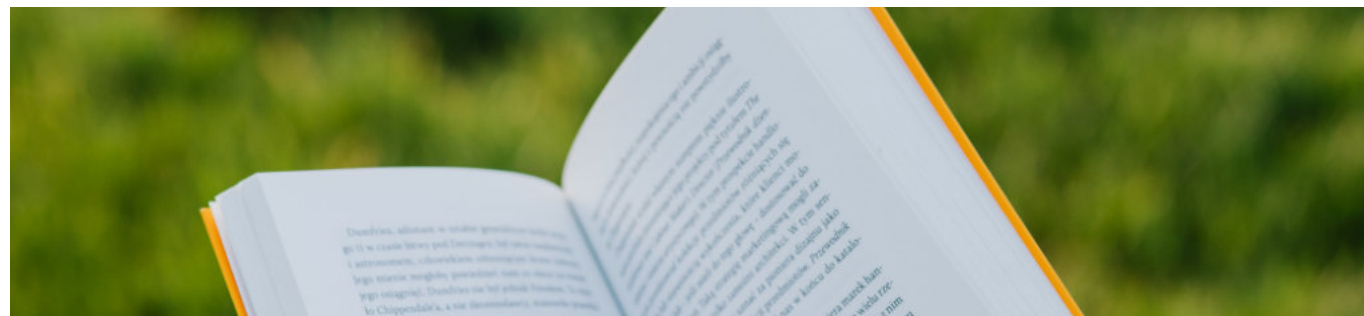
Finally, let me remind you of our document giving pointers and follow-up contacts around the world:

[friendsinternational.uk/followup-contacts](https://www.friendsinternational.uk/followup-contacts)

1. Stuart Bullington as quoted in *Insight* Issue 11, Winter 2013/14: Walking the Second Mile with International Students', P2. Used with permission.

The Second Mile Principle¹

The 1 st Mile	The 2 nd mile
Welcoming students to the host country	Preparing students to have an impact back home
Meeting their current felt needs	Meeting their not-yet-felt future needs
Hospitality focus	Discipleship and missional focus
Broad – includes everyone	Narrow – new Christians and serious seekers only
Emphasis on adjusting to life in the host country	Emphasis on finding God's vision for discipleship and mission back home
UK is the destination	UK is the training ground; home is the destination



Book Review



Tim Stanyon

Tim is the Friends International Centre Team Leader in Loughborough, and Co-Cluster Leader for the East Midlands.



BEING THE BAD GUYS: How to Live for Jesus in a World That Says You Shouldn't

By Stephen McAlpine

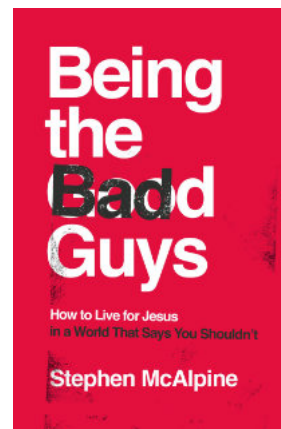
The Good Book
Company, 2021, 144pp

From the beginning of the Christian movement, there have always been people who have told us not to follow Jesus. Christians have been accused of being both irrational and immoral. Jesus Himself was accused of being possessed by Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Mark 3:22) and in the immediately preceding verse His own family thought that He was out of His mind (Mark 3:21). It should come as no surprise then, when Jesus teaches His followers that they can expect the same kind of treatment (John 15:18-25).

Yet, for those of us in the West, while we might be used to the intellectual derision of the New Atheists, being considered

‘immoral’ has come as a surprise. According to the world, those committed to biblical ethics and a biblical sexual ethic, in particular, are now ‘the baddies’, despite Christianity having been associated with ‘the goodies’ for a thousand years. It’s this surprising new reality that Stephen McAlpine seeks to address in his book *Being the Bad Guys: How To Live For Jesus in a World That Says You Shouldn't*.

McAlpine’s strategy isn’t about changing what orthodox Christians believe in order to appear good in the eyes of the world. Rather “...it’s about how to be the bad guys. It’s about



how to be the best bad guy you can be – to refuse to be surprised, confused, despairing and mad about it, and to find a way to be calm, clear-sighted, confident and even joyful in it” (p11).

So, over the course of the next one hundred and forty pages, McAlpine helps us to understand how Western culture has reached this point, and how we should respond. He does so with particular reference to how our culture has come to view sexuality and gender. He traces the cultural and intellectual trends of the last few centuries drawing on the insightful work of thinkers like Charles Taylor. Taylor is famous for his writing on the rise and growth of secularism. In the ‘secular age’ in which we live, individualism and freedom of expression are prized above all else. But it would be a mistake to think that secularism is a religiously neutral movement. McAlpine draws out the clear spiritual and theological conflict that is currently taking place in our culture. “We are being offered a rival gospel: a narrative that seeks first to expose the Christian gospel as bad news, and then to replace it with much-needed good news” (p18).

How do we respond? Having laid out a brief overview of where we find ourselves, McAlpine begins with Scripture. He introduces and briefly develops a biblical theology of suffering and persecution by drawing on numerous texts from the Old and New Testaments. He points to biblical examples of hardship

and persecution, and places them within the big picture of the biblical story. By drawing the reader’s attention to the hope of a new heaven and new earth, and by anchoring Christian identity in the person of Christ, he manages to place our current hardships in perspective. He points out that the Bible is clear that we should not be surprised when people think of us as ‘the bad guys’.

Having established some key biblical truths, McAlpine moves on to outlining what current cultural hostility looks like. He reels off recent examples of widespread public outrage and legal action against those who might question the LGBT+ agenda (both Christians and non-Christians alike) and seeks to understand the religious zeal of its proponents. One valuable aspect of his writing is his willingness to think through these challenges with fairness and humility. Christians haven’t always addressed issues of sexuality and gender in the way that they should have. Neither should an appropriate Christian response to the ‘progressive’ agenda hinge entirely upon endless legal action, even though legal action can be helpful. An appropriate Christian response to current culture is more complex than that.

He draws out the complexities in the final section of the book where he offers strategies for the church and for those in the workplace. These strategies are based upon the stories of Haggai and Daniel. By thinking carefully through the teaching of Scripture, McAlpine is able to help Christians navigate their

way through a hostile culture, and is able to do so without going to the extreme of pinning all our hopes on the political or cultural power we might have, or the extreme of total withdrawal from the world. Rather, he offers practical biblical advice on how to be ‘in the world but not of it’ and he does so by continually pointing us to the work of Jesus Christ. Rather than leading to despair, such an approach leads to new confidence and hope in the power of the Gospel.

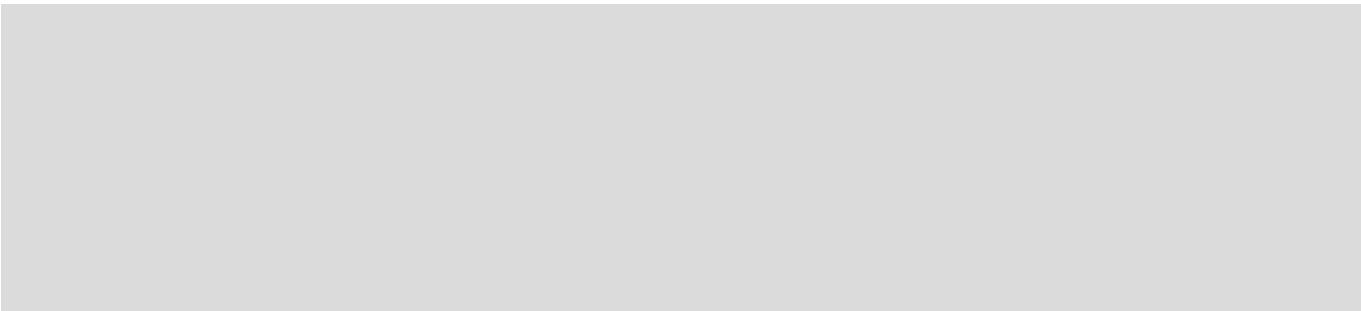
McAlpine has done the church a great service in giving us *Being the Bad Guys*. It’s a book of insightful and biblically faithful cultural analysis. Not only that, it’s accessible and short, which makes it ideal for lay people. It also models well how we might go about thinking about culture and its influence. In international student ministry we talk about culture all the time, but sometimes for those of us in the West, we’re liable to assume that everyone else is influenced by culture and we aren’t.

Truth be told, we often struggle to relate to the pressures and stresses particular cultures may place on returning Christian students. But it would be a mistake to think that this book only addresses the current mood in the West regarding the LGBTQ+ movement and has no value for working with non-Western cultures. Indeed, the principles are eminently transferable, because the bottom-line message is that the Gospel is as countercultural as it is contextually relevant. In our ministry, we have rightly had to emphasise the latter

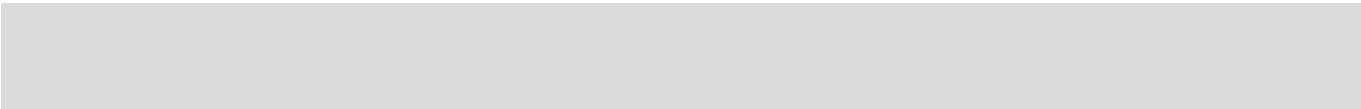
because of the natural gradient towards western thinking and assumptions in the UK. Yet, if we only teach students that they “can still be [insert culture here] and also a Christian”, we may be missing a crucial part of their discipleship, setting them up for disappointment and doubt when they encounter difficulty on going home.

McAlpine offers us an example of how being culturally self-aware and biblically rooted can help us to live lives of powerful witness to the Good News of Jesus. As he asserts, “Sticking to this message may make you a friend. It may make you an enemy. But fearlessness, in the context of faithfulness and faultlessness, will certainly make you intriguing. People will be unable to categorise you. And that’s the way it should be” (p121).

Being the Bad Guys is available from Amazon.co.uk and 10ofthose.com



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