

# On Singapore Church History

By Daniel H. Chew

## **Introduction**

Singapore — a modern city-state at the tip of the Malayan Peninsula, now a First World prosperous nation. Statistically, Singapore Christianity seems vibrant, with many churches and Christians well represented in many sectors of society. What is the history of the Singapore Church, and are there any problems with her?

Bobby E.K. Sng has written a book on the history of the church in Singapore.<sup>1</sup> It is fascinating as it shows God at work. At the same time, once one critically engages it and look beyond the triumphalism in the work, one sees many problems and major flaws within the Singapore church even from her inception.

In this article, I will go through major events in the life of the Singapore church, interacting with Sng's book in the process

## **The beginning**

Singapore is a small city-state that was founded as a modern city by Sir Standard Raffles of the British East India Company in the year 1819. It later became an official British crown colony when the company was dissolved following the events of the Sepoy Mutiny in India in 1857. The indigenous population was a bunch of Malay fishermen. After its founding, migrant workers from places like South China and South India arrived at its shores, seeking to make a living.

The British East India Company was all about business and profits. While Britain was supposed to be a "Christian" country at that time, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of nominalism within the main established churches in Britain. The Evangelical movement officially began with the 18<sup>th</sup> century 1<sup>st</sup> Great Awakening, and it was Evangelicals who brought the Gospel over to Singapore's shores. At that time however, Singapore was treated as a stepping stone unto the big target of Western missionaries: China.<sup>2</sup>

The story of the churches in Singapore began, as most missions do, in Europe. The rise of the Evangelical movement which led to the modern missionary movement resulted in missionaries going across the globe to proclaim the Gospel. A common repeated misconception that Sng repeats in his book shows in his introduction of the Evangelicals, in that, "beginning in Germany, Christians reacted against the deadwood of excessive religious formalism and intellectualism".<sup>3</sup> That is typical pietist propaganda which is partially true, as it applied to the state of the German State Church which has lost its way. The problem outside Germany however is that confessionalism was entering its last gasp, not because it failed, but because men grow tired of it in light of the supposed new

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<sup>1</sup> Bobby E.K. Sng, *In His Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore 1819-2002* (3rd Ed.; Singapore, Bible Society of Singapore & Singapore, Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 1980, 1993, 2003)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

knowledge coming in from the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Within churches that were historically committed to the Reformation, deconfessionalism in Europe eviscerated the Reformed church of its witness, in the name of being "relevant" to the new Enlightenment scene. In the non-confessional churches especially the partially Reformed English church, the via media idea of the Laudians resulted in the arid desert of the Anglican church of that era. In other words, the real problem that formed the background for the growth of the Evangelical movement was not "excessive religious formalism and intellectualism," but rather a lack of strong biblical confessional orthodoxy.

Evangelicalism, as a reaction against nominalism while misdiagnosing the problem, created its own set of problems, and all of these will accompany the missionary enterprise as they moved out in faith to share the Gospel. In the case of Singapore, Evangelicalism has resulted in the disorganized origins of the churches in Singapore at its very beginning, a sign of the generally weak ecclesiology of the Singapore churches that persists up to the present day.

The British East India Company came to Asia to make money not to make converts. They weren't too bothered with Evangelical missionaries, as long as they did not interfere with their profit-making.<sup>5</sup> That said, Raffles became sympathetic to the missionary cause, more because of humanitarian reasons at least at the beginning.<sup>6</sup> Evangelical missionaries began to come to Singapore on their way to China. In the aftermath of the First Opium War, the door to China was opened in 1842 to foreigners, and missionaries departed in droves for China.<sup>7</sup>

Not all missionaries left for China. One prominent missionary who stayed was Benjamin Keasberry and his wife Charlotte. Keasberry began the pioneer work of starting the Presbyterian Church, in the Malay work at the Malay Chapel in 1843 that is today Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church, Singapore's oldest Presbyterian Church.<sup>8</sup> His work was directed primarily to the Malays. The increased number of immigrant Chinese however resulted in him reaching out to Chinese through his preaching in a village in Wayang Satu. The emerging work resulted in a preaching station at Bukit Timah [Central West region] that became Glory Presbyterian Church, the oldest Chinese-speaking Presbyterian Church that began in 1862. Those two churches would become Keasberry's legacy. His Malay work however was mostly a failure, partly because of his failure to recruit from the Malay converts for ministry to the Malays.<sup>9</sup> Straits-born Malay-speaking Chinese slowly replaced the Malay outreach over time.

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<sup>4</sup> James T. Dennison, Jr., "The Twilight of Scholasticism: Francis Turretin at the Dawn of the Enlightenment," in Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005) 254-5

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (The Pelican History of the Church volume 6; Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1964), 232

<sup>6</sup> Sng, 34-6

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 50

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 52

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 55

On the Anglican side, perhaps the denomination with the greatest support from the State, St. Andrew's Church (now St. Andrew's Cathedral) was built in the 1830s mainly for Europeans.<sup>10</sup> One prominent platform for outreach towards Asians lie in schooling. Chinese Girls' School (as it was then called) was set up in 1842 by LMS (London Missionary Society) Mrs. Samuel Dyer and Ms. Sophia Cooke took over in 1853.<sup>11</sup> The school became a depository for orphans and girls from troubled homes, and Cooke nurtured them into future wives for Chinese men especially pastors.

Cooke was not unconcerned over the plight of Chinese male immigrants either and set up ministries to reach them, as well as a ministry to adult women, which reached out to many.<sup>12</sup> Dying in 1895, her legacy lived on in the school and it was renamed St. Margaret's School later.<sup>13</sup>

The examples of Benjamin Keasberry and Sophia Cooke showed the devotion of Western missionaries to reach Asians for Christ. Certainly, we are thankful for God's working through them. As much as we ought to appreciate their devotion and labor however, we also ought to learn from their mistakes. We see Keasberry's failure to bring in workers from among the Malay converts, such that the Malay work died together with him. Cooke served whole-heartedly and blessed many and brought many to the Gospel, but at her death, no one was found to fill her shoes. Both of them were focused on saving souls, yet both of them did not do much to establish a proper church. It is obvious why Cooke as a woman could not have done so, but then she brought up her girls to serve as Bible women. In other words, from the beginning of the Chinese church, women were enrolled as workers too, which says a lot about the ecclesiology (or lack of one) that has been promoted in the Chinese churches by Western missionaries!

Keasberry was a Presbyterian, yet the two churches he set up had a weak understanding of Reformed theology or Presbyterian polity (Keasberry functioned like a bishop overseeing the Malay work, with no Malay convert elders serving alongside him). The focus was on the Gospel and that only. Similarly, Cooke contributed to the development of traditional Chinese Protestant ecclesiology (i.e. the "Evangelical" ecclesiology that arose in Chinese churches due to the modern missionary movement). Both of these developments show the weakness of the Evangelical missionary movement in Singapore, and in fact, all around the world. Under such a mixed blessing, the churches of Singapore developed and grew.

### **Early growth of denominational indigenous churches**

The various traditional church bodies took root in early Singapore as the modern missionary movement surged throughout the world. Despite its general disorganization

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 62

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-8

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

and lack of ecclesiology, God has been pleased to use it to grow his Church in the midst of pietistic chaos.

### The Presbyterians

We have mentioned about the beginnings of Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church (Central region) and Glory Presbyterian Church (Central West). Orchard Road Presbyterian (Central region) was a church began by Scots who used to worship at St. Andrew's Church but who preferred a church ruled by Presbyterian Church Order. The Scots soon formed their own church which is now known as Orchard Road Presbyterian Church.<sup>14</sup>

Other Presbyterian churches were founded later. Glory Presbyterian ran into problems due to moral failure within the leadership and among the members, and it took Rev. J.A.B. Cook from the English Presbyterian Mission, who was sent in 1882, to discipline those who were sinning.<sup>15</sup> As that church became healthier, a couple of members who lived in the Ponggol area (North-East) decided to branch off and they founded Bethel Presbyterian at Serangoon (North east region). Another group split off and eventually formed a church near Prinsep Street (Central) that became the Singapore Life Church. Lastly, a few Hokkien speakers split off to form a group that became Jubilee Presbyterian Church (Central West).<sup>16</sup>

As it can be seen, God is definitely working to advance His kingdom, yet we also note that the Presbyterians then were functioning like Congregationalists in setting up missions and new church plants.

### The Anglicans

Official Anglican missions came out of St. Andrew's Church, as the Residency Chaplain Rev. William Humphrey in 1856 was burdened with the "spiritual needs of the Asian population".<sup>17</sup> We have seen how Sophia Cooke was involved in schooling, and schooling became an important part of Anglican missions, alongside gospel meetings.<sup>18</sup> The St. Andrew's Mission was set up, with Rev. William Henry Gomes appointed as its superintendent in 1872.<sup>19</sup> Out of that mission came the Church of St. John, and St. Andrew's school.<sup>20</sup>

While no one can accuse Anglicanism of a weak ecclesiology, Anglicanism has its own problems due to the latitudinarianism in the parent church in England. Thus, while the Singapore Anglican church remained evangelical, its tradition of broad tolerance works against its ability to stand as a strong witness for biblical Christianity.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-1

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-2

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 73

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 75

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 148

## The Brethren

The weak ecclesiology of the Presbyterian mission then can be seen in the beginnings of the Brethren church, where a group of Presbyterians defected to the emerging Brethren church.

The Brethren movement began as a British phenomenon when a group of people broke away from the Anglican State-Church in England because of dead formalism within the latter. As a group that supposedly focuses only on the Gospel and "vital Christianity," the Brethren movement is anti-institutional at its very core and a logical conclusion of the Evangelical minimalism that disregards issues like institutional ecclesiology. Philip Robinson, a Brethren, came to Singapore in 1857 as an assistant in a commercial firm.<sup>21</sup> After some time, he decided to form a brethren gathering and the gathering first met with him and seven believers at Bencoolen Street in 1864 and it was named the Mission Room.

Around the same time, Tan See Boo, a Chinese convert who came from Amoy in China, arrived in Singapore in 1856 to aid the Presbyterian mission.<sup>22</sup> In 1866 however, See Boo and the congregation he was in charge with left the Presbyterian mission for the emerging Brethren mission,<sup>23</sup> which invigorates the Brethren missions which had by then gotten their own church building at Bras Basah (Central) called Bethesda Chapel (later known as Bethesda Gospel Hall).<sup>24</sup> See Boo brought along a lot of Chinese who formed the nucleus for the Chinese Gospel Hall.<sup>25</sup>

The growth of the Gospel everywhere is to be celebrated. Nevertheless, weak and unbiblical doctrines and practices have consequences. In this case, the weak ecclesiology of the Singapore Presbyterian Church at that time was evident in the defection of See Boo and his congregation. The Brethren movement of course, while certainly proclaiming the Gospel, contributed to the problems of Singapore Christianity because of its weak to non-existent ecclesiology.

## The Methodists

The founding of the Methodist Church in Singapore was due to Charles Phillips, who came to Singapore in 1864 upon joining the army.<sup>26</sup> In the beginning, he was involved in generic evangelical mission work through visiting the prison and hospitals and proclaiming the Gospel, partnering with other evangelicals like Sophia Cooke.<sup>27</sup> In 1883 however, he set up a chain reaction that led to the establishing of the Methodist Church in Singapore. Hearing of the Methodist work in India, he wrote to Bishop Thoburn, Methodist missionary in India, to send missionaries over to Singapore. Methodist

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 76

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 71

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 72, 78

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 78

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 84

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 85

missionaries soon arrived in 1885.<sup>28</sup> They began their characteristic Gospel meeting and the converts from that meeting formed the nucleus of the first Methodist church (now Wesley Methodist Church), with Rev. William Oldham remaining as its first resident missionary while the others returned to India.<sup>29</sup>

The Singapore Methodists moved the most into education as outreach, beginning with Anglo-Chinese School, and then founding Methodist Girls School (MGS) and Farfield MGS.<sup>30</sup>

Methodism suffered from the same problems as the Brethren but their ecclesiology was not as anti-institutional. The problems that Methodism brought were the problems inherent to the Evangelical movement as a whole, coupled with John Wesley's focus on the experiential and antipathy towards Calvinism.

## **John Sung and Revival**

The revivalist John Sung is a big name in the early 20th century East Asian (Chinese) Christian scene. A Chinese by ethnicity, Sung was used mightily to reach many Chinese with the Gospel in the East Asian region.

John Sung was someone passionately devoted to the Gospel after a disastrous season of studying at the liberal Union Theological Seminary in the US. The liberal attack on the Christian faith nearly destroyed him, until he turned back to the faith of his youth. Union Seminary had him confined to an asylum after he began calling for his professors to repent of their heresy, and he was only released after the intervention of the Chinese consulate.<sup>31</sup>

Sung returned to China in 1927 fired up for God and the Gospel. He was so passionate he threw away most of his academic accolades in his trip back to China, resolving to live only for Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Back in China, Sung threw himself into the work of an evangelist. Almost single-handedly, he brought in the greatest revival historically (a true old-school revival, as opposed to Charles Finney's so-called "revival") within Chinese churches both in China and in the diaspora. His arrival in Singapore resulted in the conversions of many, as Sung preached Law and Gospel calling people to repentance for their sin. To say that Sung turned the Chinese community upside down is probably not too much of a stretch.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 85

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-8

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-5, 149

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 174; Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 138

<sup>32</sup> Sng, 174

As someone who was burned on liberal theology, Sung was most resolutely against liberalism of any sort. Unfortunately, without a viable intellectual alternative, Sung veered towards some form of pietistic anti-intellectualism, which is where conservative Chinese Christianity has been left. As a revivalist, Sung was focused on evangelism, which means other aspects of theology were left undeveloped, leaving the default anti institutionalism of the Chinese churches alone.

These sort of mixed blessings will attend to subsequent renewal movements, namely the New-Evangelical renewal following the emergence of the evangelical parachurch organizations (Youth for Christ, Varsity Christian Fellowship, Navigators, Campus Crusade for Christ in the 1960s)<sup>33</sup> and the Billy Graham crusade in 1978,<sup>34</sup> the Charismatic renewal of the 1980s, and (perhaps) the current wave of revivalism promoted by organizations such as the Love Singapore movement.

### **War, ecumenism, and the emergence of a new world order**

The coming of World War 2 was disastrous for Singapore. The British severely underestimated the might of the Japanese army. The invading Japanese horde swept down south through French Indo-China and down through Malaya, rapidly penetrating British-held territory. Within days, the Japanese army had arrived just across the Straits of Singapore in the Malayan state of Johore, forcing the British to blow up the causeway linking Singapore to the rest of Malaya, and preparing for the worst. The worst came as the Japanese crossed the straits under cover of night and proceeded with their invasion. After desperate pitch battles, the British finally surrendered on February 15, 1942. The next 3 years were a time of darkness under the self-proclaimed "liberators."

The Japanese were cruel, wicked masters. Knowing that the Chinese had supported China against the Japanese invaders, the Japanese engaged in a reign of terror, picking people off at random for mass killings, and committing various atrocities against the majority Chinese inhabitants of Singapore. Seeing a pregnant woman, they would rip open the mother's womb, toss the baby into the air, and impale him on their bayonets, killing both mother and child in a most gruesome manner. Hardly a family exists which did not have a relative missing, gunned down in mass graves, tortured to death or just killed by the Japanese.

It wasn't any better for Prisoners of War, which basically includes many Europeans who could not flee in time from the Japanese, if they weren't sent to work on the Death Railway in Thailand which is almost a sure death sentence that is. The European church leaders, those who remained, by and large were caught as Prisoners of War and interned at Changi gaol.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-3

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-83

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 190

Church activities were generally respected and tolerated, although watched.<sup>36</sup> Fear and uncertainty clouded the environment. In this environment, the first stirrings of ecumenism came into being, with the creation of a proposed albeit short-lived Federation of Christian Churches.<sup>37</sup>

It was during those times among the main denominations that the need to transfer leadership unto locals was pressed unto the European church leaders, instead of treating the Singapore churches as church plants indefinitely.<sup>38</sup> This led to the formation of Trinity Theological College in 1948 with the "initial support of the Methodist, Anglican and Presbyterian Churches".<sup>39</sup> The ecumenical impulse, found all around the world with the cry "dogma divides, service unites" resulted in the formation of national councils of churches in various countries.<sup>40</sup> The Malayan Church Council was formed in 1948 to serve as uniting all churches in Malaya and Singapore,<sup>41</sup> while the National Council of Churches of Singapore was formed after Singapore's split from Malaysia in 1965.

War is a severe type of trial, and it tests the churches and Christians. Indigenous Christians in their trials began to wonder if their prior differences were worth dividing over. Why should they conform to Western denominational differences, especially if said Western denominations don't even believe their distinctives anyway (like for example Reformed Theology in the Westminster Confession of Faith). Is what divides Christians the fault of foreigners, who impose their distant doctrinal disputes onto the inhabitants of an unsuspecting populace who have no ball in the fight? Lastly, the zeitgeist around the world after the war was one of independence from colonial masters, with the Europeans tired of maintaining their empires anyway. Around the world, the first inkling of the rejection of Western thought was put forward forcefully, and with it the impetus to de-Westernize the church and her theology. The West's slightly patronizing tone towards her "children" didn't exactly help matters also.

The Singapore churches were spared the worst of such anti-imperialism, although liberals moved headlong into so-called "Third World theologies." But the very fact that these questions arise show the poverty of theological understanding throughout the world, not to mention on ecclesiology. It speaks volumes that after more than a hundred years of church planting, most church plants were bereft of basic theological understanding.

The sad fact is that things have improved only slightly since the independence of Singapore. Singapore Christianity continues to be lured by the siren calls of pragmatism and anti-intellectualism. Sadly, few learn from history and history repeats itself, all over again.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 189

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 191

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 201

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 202

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 203

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 219

## Liberalism, Fundamentalism and New Evangelicalism

Meanwhile, a serious theological storm was brewing. The Singapore Life Church was a part of the Synod of the Chinese Presbyterian Church which in turn was affiliated to the Malayan Christian Council. Rev. Timothy Tow, Elder Quek Kiok Chiang and Deacon Hsu Chiang Tai, as commissioners from Life Church, sought to get the Synod to dissociate itself from the MCC because "not a few of the promoters and leaders of the MCC are modernists who do not accept the fundamentals of the faith, including the infallibility of the Holy Scriptures, the virgin birth of Christ, his bodily resurrection and personal second coming." Further, it was alleged that the "MCC is a part of the one world church movement promoted by the IMC and WCC which include in their membership the idolatrous Greek Orthodox and Unitarians who deny the deity of Christ. Membership in the MCC would thus make this Synod unequally yoked with such unbelievers in disobedience to the word of God" and "the MCC is part of the ecumenical movement promoted by the IMC and the WCC which are seeking a union of Protestants and Roman Catholics. This is undoing the Protestant Reformation and betraying the very martyrs of the Reformation."<sup>42</sup>

The debate raged back and forth. Each time the motion for disaffiliation was presented at the Synod, it was defeated. The last battle was waged in January 1955 when commissioners from all parts of Singapore and Malaya met at Muar. Again the motion was defeated. Life Church English Service therefore decided to withdraw from the Synod. ...<sup>43</sup>

The opening of the Singapore Bible College — then called the Singapore Theological Seminary—climaxed one-and-a-half years of heart-searching discussions among leaders of Chinese-speaking pastors, now that their hitherto main source of supply from mainland China had been cut off. But the majority of the members in the Singapore Chinese Christian Inter-Church Union, the prime movers of the College, belonged to the larger denomination churches. At that time, these churches had already formed the Trinity Theological College. ... The question, therefore, that many Union members had to face was to what extent they should proceed to establish a new college without references to their own denominational leaders.

Superficially, it would appear that these Union members desired to have a college directly under their control rather than to depend upon the Western-dominated Trinity College. But in fact, the matter went deeper and it represented a part of the subtle theological tension that existed between the theologically conservative Chinese churches and a liberal Western leadership. Traditionally, the Chinese churches had always been conservative. ...<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 231

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 231-2

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 233

The visits of Dr. Chia Yu Ming and leaders of the ICCC movement further reinforced the awareness of Chinese pastors to the issues at stake. They were bluntly told: liberal theology had engulfed many theological institutions in the West; many Western missionaries were liberals including some who were teaching at Trinity College; to send students to that college would be to have their faith destroyed; even with a Chinese department setup, they could not control the appointment of lecturers.<sup>45</sup>

Across the world, the evangelical-liberal controversy affected not only the churches and theological institutions, but also the student world.<sup>46</sup>

The various evangelical institutions that arose in the 50s shared a common feature: a strong commitment to the historic fundamental beliefs of the church a readiness to part way with liberal pastors and missionaries. But, on one important issue they disagreed: whether or not to encouraged Christians to separate themselves from churches that happened to be led by liberal pastors or which were directly or indirectly linked with the ecumenical movement.<sup>47</sup>

While not raged nearly as bitterly as in America, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy raged in Singapore with the founding of the Singapore Bible-Presbyterian (BP) movement, and burned with a lower flame with the founding of Singapore Bible College. The twin binaries existed alongside of each other for a time, with the Fundamentalist rejecting liberalism in Singapore churches for a time.

Yet, the emergence of a third side came about in the New Evangelical movement, linked with the various new evangelical parachurch organizations (Navigators, Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ, Varsity Christian Fellowship) and then the Billy Graham crusade of 1978. The New Evangelicals, while personally rejecting liberalism, do not call for separation from liberals on the ecclesiastical level. This attitude has more natural affinity with the predominant Asian mentality of avoiding conflict where possible. Alongside pietism's focus on individual piety, and corresponding denigration of ecclesiology, it is no wonder that most Singapore Christians would take the New Evangelical route.

Parachurch organizations were all the rage in the 60s and 70s, precisely because the youths rejected the liberalism in the mainstream churches.<sup>48</sup> In Singapore's anti-intellectual climate, liberalism has not been very viable, and in the long term has lose out to the New Evangelicals, who in time took over much of the leadership in the mainstream churches, unlike in the West. Liberals however are still present; they have not been utterly eradicated. It is therefore rather disingenuous for Sng to claim that recently liberal theology has stopped being a potent force in Trinity Theological College (TTC).<sup>49</sup> The

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 234

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 235

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 238

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 267

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 352

most charitable reading of Sng is that he has no idea what kind of nonsense is being peddled in TTC even today. Let's be blunt, to be educated in TCC is to be exposed to all matter of heresies and to be encouraged to apostatize from the faith, in the name of "ecumeneity."

The New Evangelical experiment in Singapore is similar to its expressions around the world, with the exception that it has managed to re-capture a significant portion of the mainstream. But its compromising character has continued. It is more likely thus to read Sng's assertion that evangelicals have no problems attending TTC not as saying something positive about TTC, but as conveying something about the compromise and openness to liberalism under the guise of niceness within Singaporean (New) Evangelicalism.

We note also the parachurch route the youth have taken towards renewal in the Singapore churches. It is no surprising therefore that the low ecclesiology of the older generation is perpetuated in that generation, who are the current (older) leaders of the modern Singapore churches. With such a low ecclesiology, the witness of the church can never be strong. This applies to a certain extent also to the Fundamentalists in the BP movement. The dissolution of the BP Synod in 1988 was over ecclesiology, or rather a truncated ecclesiology that focuses only on the negative goal of separation.<sup>50</sup> By having half of a proper Presbyterian ecclesiology, the BP churches were severely imbalanced. Together with their non-confessionalism, it is not surprising that the BP movement splintered. After all, true biblical separation is not just separation from, but separation **FOR**. Having the former without the latter is a sure recipe for disaster.

## The Charismatic Renewal

In December 1972, an event occurred in Bangkok that would have far-reaching consequences for the church in Singapore. Bishop Chiu Ban It of the Anglican Church was attending an international Christian conference when an overseas colleague handed him the book *None O'clock in the Morning* written by Rev. Dennis Bennett. Bishop Chiu immediately saw the contrast between the love and power revealed in the life and ministry of Rev. Bennett and the dry, heated, theological arguments that went on in the conferences. Not a person easily attracted to tongues and supernatural hearings, the Bishop nevertheless kept an open mind on those matters as he pored through the book. One afternoon, he prayed that God would give him the Holy Spirit in the same measure as he had given to many others. ...<sup>51</sup>

So began the Charismatic renewal movement in Singapore, began by a single bishop to the Anglican Church and beyond, a movement that has undoubtedly enliven many

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 312

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-3

people's spiritual walks and brought about a revitalization in segments of the Singapore Church.

We however know that God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line. This present author also was affected in an initial positive measure by some elements of charismaticism. It was as my then pastor brought charismatic stuff into my traditional mainstream Presbyterian Church that God used to bring me to repentance and faith in him. But that has hardly made me an apologist for the charismatic movement. Just because God has used the charismatic renewal does not mean that the movement is of God or approved by Him. For this author personally, while the charismatic movement brought me to faith, the more I continued in there the more I began to lose my zeal and fall away from the faith.

We see in Bishop Chiu's account that what the Scriptures say has scarcely any importance at all. His whole "conversion" is all about the experience. Chiu's observation about the conference may or may not be true, because we do not know to what extent the conference is actually biblical. But let's just talk about the surface observations of seeing "dry, heated, theological arguments." Why is that a problem? Must everything be exciting?

Chiu's observations make him seem like a *schwärmer*, a term Luther used derisively against the Anabaptists who want to swallow the Holy Spirit "feathers and all." Now, there are two possibilities here: Either the conference was unbiblical, and thus the dryness is an actual dryness, in which case the problem was not with theology but with the unbiblical nature of the teachings, or Chiu felt it was dry despite it being biblical, which implied he was looking for more beyond what God has revealed. Either option does not speak too well about Chiu and his reasons for wanting the "Holy Spirit baptism."

Much can be said about the unbiblical nature of the Charismatic movement, while appreciating it has recovered some elements of Scripture that were present in the Reformation but have been neglected by the modern church. But I digress. What I would like to focus here is how the Charismatic movement has allowed manifold heresy to enter the Singapore churches. The Charismatic movement brought in the Shepherding movement in its incarnation of the Hope Church movement and the G12 moment. It opened doors for the entrance of the Word-faith movement through Rhema Bible School, which has links with the Methodist Church in Singapore, renting or sharing locations with Paya Lebar Methodist Church. It opened doors for the entrance of the heresies of Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, the Copelands, and many more. It has lastly made the Singapore church more receptive when Third Wave Charismatism arrived in the 90s in the New Apostolic movement, and the Vineyard movement. And the nadir of Charismatism in this era has come with the false apostle Bill Johnson and his "Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry," revivalist Todd Bentley and mystic John Crowder. Do I need to mention the

growth of our popular home-grown heretic in the person and ministry of Joseph Prince, an antinomian Word-faith "preacher," which Sng spoke approvingly of?<sup>52</sup>

Here is where the triumphalism of Sng hits the roof. Sng sees the church growing and getting better from the 1960s onwards (actually from 1819 onwards). But what kind of progress it is when the Singapore churches are infected with heresy? Just go to any Singapore bookstore, and notice what books are being sold on the shelf. Look, if nobody wants to read heresy, nobody would buy those books and the bookstores would not stock them. Bookstores not owned by churches operate on the basic economic principle of supply and demand. If there is no demand for heresy, there would be no heretical books on sale. That these bookstores are selling trash and earning money is a sad indictment of the Singapore churches.

While liberalism is the great intellectual enemy of the faith, a case can be made that Charismatic has metastasized into the great popular level enemy of the Christian faith. The Singapore churches have raised up a bunch of people who think with their emotions, judge base on feelings, and have Matthew 7:1 as their favorite verse (out of context of course). Numerically the churches might be growing, but the nature of their faith is diminishing every day. The popular saying for shallowness is a mile wide and an inch deep. Singapore Christianity is probably 2 miles wide and a nanometer deep; that's how bad it has become, no thanks to the Charismatic Renewal.

### **Contemporary Evangelicalism, Uniquely Singapore**

The following year [1982 -DHC], the Full Gospel Christian Businessmen's Fellowship, in cooperation with just over 100 churches came together and sponsored a nationwide Gospel Rally. Billed as the pastor of the world's biggest church with over 200,000 members, the speaker Dr. Paul Cho Yongi-gi hailed from South Korea. By the time he arrived in June, 10,000 counsellors [sic], 1,500 ushers, and a 2,000 strong choir had been trained. For five evenings at the National Stadium, an average audience of 40,000 turned up to hear about God's word and to receive healing.

December 1985 saw another major evangelistic rally. The speaker this time was Reinhard Bonkke, well-known for his big tent evangelistic ministry in Africa. Sponsored by the Full Gospel Christian Businessmen's Fellowship, Church of Singapore and the Anglican Diocese, the campaign also received the cooperation of 68 other churches. For five nights, the meetings were held at the National Stadium. Total attendance came to 160,000. About 7,000 came forward for either salvation, rededication, healing or deliverance.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 335. For a succinct rebuttal to the core of Prince's theology, see Daniel H. Chew, *The Essence of the Hyper-Grace Error*. Accessed at [http://www.angelfire.com/falcon/ddd\\_chc82/theology/EssenceHyperGrace.html](http://www.angelfire.com/falcon/ddd_chc82/theology/EssenceHyperGrace.html)

Even as the Bonkke mission was held, preparations were being made for another larger campaign. The speaker this time would be Argentinian evangelist Dr. Luis Palau. ...The sponsoring body was the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore. ... In all, 11,902 persons registered decisions, 59% being acceptance of Christ into their lives.<sup>53</sup>

Another organization which came to the fore in the 1990s was the *LoveSingapore* movement. Begun in 1995, largely through the initiative of Lawrence Khong, Senior Pastor of Faith Community Baptist Church, it spelt out five strategic goals for churches:-

1. *Unite the body of believers together*
2. *Serve the community*
3. *Establish a prayer cell in every housing block by the year 2000*
4. *Launch a seven-wave harvest in 2001*
5. *Churches to adopt unreached people groups across the world*

Church leaders responded positively to these goals. Over the next five years, various activities were organized. Churches were encouraged to participate in them as they were able to. At its peak, about 150 churches participated in its activities.

5 August 1995 saw thousands packing Singapore's largest indoor stadium for a concert of prayer. Appropriately called *Day to Change Our World*, it was premised on the belief that before revival could take place in the city, the believers themselves must be united. ...

Five months later, 90 pastors gathered at Hotel Sofitel, Johor Bahru, for a four-day Prayer Summit. They came from different church traditions. Through tears, confession and reconciliation, walls of suspicion that had kept churches apart were torn down. As they committed themselves afresh to Vision 2001, the pastors agreed to divide themselves into 26 geographical networks, covering the whole of Singapore. They would continue to cooperate and pray for one another. Pastors would exchange pulpits on Sundays and they would meet annually at the Prayer Summit. Such was the support that by the year 2000, the Summit had attracted 683 church leaders.<sup>54</sup>

And so we have arrived at the modern times. This author can remember quite a number of the more recent events, like Love Singapore's campaign for Vision 2001, of which as a youth I had in ignorance attended those hyped-up meetings. Speaking of which, were the goals mentioned there achieved? 2001 has come and gone, and I wonder if all the revivalistic hype has actually achieved anything of value.

The concept of revivalism is alive and well in Singapore, and big rallies are not uncommon. Before every National Day (August 9) ever since I was a youth (around 1997), I

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 296-7

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 333-4

remembered there was a big event organized called the Festival of Praise (FOP).<sup>55</sup> More recently, there was the Global Day of Prayer event.

We can see from the revivalist speakers of recent times that quite a few of them are not Christians. Paul (David) Yonggi Cho is a Word-faith heretic. Lawrence Khong has at best violated Scripture by usurping the title of "apostle" and promoting the unbiblical G12 principles, which are basically a reworking of the charismatic Shepherding errors. The FOP used to have Hillsong United for their big praise concerts, while other times they had other bands like Jars of Clay or Delirious. In this present culture, I wouldn't be surprised if "Jesus Culture" is embraced by many in the Singapore churches, and I personally know the names of 3 Singaporeans who went over to study at Bill Johnson's Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry (BSSM), one of which is in some form of full-time ministry in a Singapore church.

What one can see therefore in Singapore in contemporary Evangelicalism is basically a corrosion of biblical orthodoxy from whatever little they previously had. The Charismatic movement has become a cancer destroying the faith of many while convincing them they are still Christians. While biblical orthodoxy and vitality degenerate, the church has become bolder yet more and more deluded about her own health. Thus, when I said that Sng is triumphalistic, the actual situation of the church in Singapore bears this out. We are having rallies, boasting in our numerical growth, boasting in how God has been "so good to us" with so many conversions in Singapore, but all the while the rot within is destroying the churches, and few Singapore church leaders see that! My experience over the GDOP fiasco showed me many Singapore church leaders are blind. The blind leading the blind, and refusing to listen to godly rebuke. Unless God starts working, where is the hope for the long-term health of the Singapore churches?

Singaporean contemporary Evangelicalism is the church of Laodicea. We think we are rich, we think God is richly blessing us, we boast in our numbers, in our relative influence in society, in our big rallies, our numbers of decisions. We believe we are exceptionally blessed by God, more so than any other nation in the world. We take God's kindness in providing us good political leaders that prospered our country, and treat that as if we are suddenly the most favored nation in God's eye. We took God's mercy in rewarding our evangelism efforts, and see that as indication that we are on the right path spiritually. But we are poor and wretched. The voice of God to Singapore is the same exhortation to the church of Laodicea. Come to Jesus and admit our poverty. Repent of our manifold sins and wickedness and toleration and promotion of error!

The church in Singapore has never been strong, but many Singapore church leaders evidently think they are doing well. There is no contrition over their part in tolerating false teachings including all the nonsense brought in under the umbrella of the "Charismatic renewal." There is no repentance for their hardness of hearts in their false ecumenism. And I know that none if any will listen, because that has been my experience. The only

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<sup>55</sup> Festival of Praise (<http://festivalofpraise.org.sg/>)

way they might listen is to be upstaged by younger and emerging pastors. In other words, they will perhaps listen to results of church growth, but that's not guaranteed either.

### **Concluding observations**

The Singapore Church has come a long way since its founding, yet the project is at risk of dying. On the intellectual front, old Liberalism, new Liberalism, and liberal "Evangelicalism" continually assault the intellectual foundations of the churches, which however have few defenders. On the popular front, charismatic heresies assault the faith under the guise of lively spiritual Christianity, also with little defenders to defend against it. Meanwhile, an increasingly Westernized and liberalized libertine society is growing increasingly hostile to the Christian faith. Assaulted by enemies within and enemies without, yet without many defenders, the Singapore Church is in a dire state.

Far from exuding confidence in her future, the proper response to the situation in Singapore should be repentance and mourning over her many sins. It is not time for rejoicing but for mourning. There is much work, but much opposition will come from those who call themselves leaders in the Singapore churches. It is still unclear how the situation will turn out, but unless God works in Singapore, all will be lost.

May God have mercy upon the churches in Singapore and grant them true repentance.