

INTERVIEW

Interview of Dr. Stephen Tong

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STEPHEN TONG: [*prayer*] Father, we ask that you may bless us and give us wisdom in discussing the things you want us to say for your church and your kingdom. Amen.

PETER LILLBACK: I have the joy of being one of the editors for the new international Reformed journal called *Union with Christ*, in English, but we actually use the Latin name, *Unio cum Christo*. We, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia (WTS), are excited to have a partnership with the Seminary in Jakarta, International Reformed Evangelical Seminary (IRES). These two seminaries are working together on this journal. And it is our hope in every one of the issues to have not only theological articles written from a scholarly perspective, but we also want to have interviews with people who are actively engaged in ministry and are making a difference for the Lord. And so in our initial journal, we wanted to have an interview with Dr. Stephen Tong, a great friend of Westminster and a theological leader in Asia and indeed around the world. And so I have the joy of asking Dr. Tong several questions and listening to his wisdom. So we are very grateful for this privilege, Dr. Tong, to ask you these questions. Because I think you are a great evangelist who loves the proclamation of the gospel, I prepared the following questions.

PL: *Why should Christians care about the work of evangelism?*

ST: For me, Christianity is good news that should be preached to anyone and everyone. Thus, we must not separate Christian ministry from evangelization.

PL: *Many pastors are very busy: they have so many things to do, they are running ministries, they have to study for sermons, and they manage churches. So, doesn't it make sense to leave evangelism for professional people such as evangelists and missionaries and to let them just study the Bible?*

ST: Why are normal pastors busy only with internal work, and not including evangelization in their ministry? This is not right. We should include evangelization in our schedule, our ministry.

PL: *So, from your perspective, how much time do you think a pastor should dedicate to evangelism in terms of his mission?*

ST: Every time he meets non-Christians it is a good opportunity to reach them, to tell them about Jesus Christ. And it cannot be planned by ourselves. When opportunities are given, we cannot just ignore them.

PL: *Should a pastor do more than just local evangelism? Should he think of himself as a missionary and reach across cultural settings?*

ST: In the case of Jesus Christ and Paul, they always made evangelization a top priority: they preached and took care of the Christians, but they also preached to and taught non-Christians. For Christian workers, I think three things must be done: to teach, to evangelize, and to pastor. If these three are done by one person, this person will be a strong servant of God; otherwise, this servant will be weak.

People try to trichotomize the ministry, but I don't think this is the teaching of the Bible. You know Paul himself was a profound theologian and was fervent in preaching the gospel.

PL: *Would you summarize for me your experience in evangelism? As you look back over your career, what things have you done that are the leading expressions of evangelism and how did you carry them out?*

ST: I was first called for evangelization. After studying theology, I became a lecturer in the South East Asia Bible College for 25 years, and I asked the school to give me the freedom to preach the gospel every year for at least 4 to 8 months. I didn't get any salary when I went to preach; I just depended on God's grace. One semester I taught; another semester I preached. I did this for 25 years, and it made me an evangelist who had the opportunity to teach theological courses. It also made me a theological lecturer who did not forget to evangelize the people. During that time, I also pastored a church for 4 to 6 months every year, while at other times, I went out preaching. So I became a person with three responsibilities: preaching and evangelism, pastoring a church, and teaching in a seminary.

PL: *I understand you've just finished evangelizing more than 100 cities in Indonesia over 2 years?*

ST: Two years and 8 months.

PL: *And in this way how many people did the gospel rallies reach?*

ST: I think overall there were 450,000, of whom about 60 to 65% responded immediately.

PL: *Some people say in our day of global communications and high technology that there are many different ways to evangelize. There's mass evangelism, but also other ways. What do you think is the most important way today to preach and to fulfill the mission of evangelism?*

ST: In evangelization, you have all kinds of methods, but the most important method must not be ignored, that is, personal contact. That is why the incarnation is a necessity. Christ, who could by all kinds of means communicate to people, did not even use angels, but himself came to the world and became incarnate. That is the reason why personal touch and personal presence are most important, and why other methods in evangelization are not as important as this. So, come in person, then you can use technological means, like internet, Radio, TV, DVD, CD. But they are also just additions to personal contact, which is the most important method.

PL: *So, with the passing of time, the incarnational model is still the best?*

ST: Yes. Personal evangelization is the foundation of other methods of evangelization. Mass evangelization can only be successful if this evangelization can reach the result of a personal contact with the gospel.

PL: *You are very much identified with Reformed theology, and people tend to say that Reformed theology focuses on doctrinal correctness, and not so much on practical theology or cultural ministry. Why is this, and do you think this is changing?*

ST: I still think we should not dichotomize these two things, because theology is the crystallization of our faith, and evangelism expresses the Word to the people with the love of God and challenges them to be responsible. If these are separated, either theology alone will cause the church to be very static, not dynamic; or evangelism alone without theology will cause the church to become weak, and have no power. But when these two are combined, they become a power both inside and out. The gospel is the power to save everyone who believes [Rom 1:16].

PL: *So you think a theologian should be an evangelist?*

ST: An evangelist without theological training is a story teller. A theologian without evangelization will be a mere dreamer rather than one who does the good work of God.

PL: *Sometimes, part of the ministry associated with your work has been identified with a very strong emphasis on the cultural mandate. What is the cultural mandate, and why do you think this is important for the work of the church?*

ST: No man can live without cultural influence. And Christ alone is wisdom above everything. So only when Christ is preeminent in all aspects of culture can Christianity say, “We are witnesses of Christ, and we are the light of the world.” So the cultural mandate lifts up Christ and his Spirit in all aspects of human life in culture. That is the reason culture should serve as a servant of the gospel.

PL: *What are some of the ways, you as pastor, theologian, and evangelist have tried to encourage the fulfillment of the cultural mandate in your ministry in this congregation?*

ST: I try to make theology return to its original path, the original wisdom according to the revelation of God, and then to influence philosophy with biblical wisdom of God, that is, philosophical understanding. This includes influence on the political realm, the management of the government: to let Christ be preeminent and sit upon his own throne above the political thrones of political leaders [cf. Col 1:16–18]. So too, Christ influences the educational world; Christ influences the economic world; Christ influences all other aspects of the cultural mandate in literature, in music, in everything. So people are brought back to right theology, right philosophy, right music, right education, right knowledge, and right science and understanding. This is the responsibility of Christ’s church.

PL: *You mention politics. Do you think that a church and a pastor should engage in politics? It is a place of great tension and disagreement; is that part of the cultural mandate?*

ST: One cannot live without any political influence. Every Christian should take care, should be aware of his or her political responsibilities. Even though we do not encourage Christians to take sides in any political party, they can have their own position and make their own decision. But they must not influence the whole church to follow them because in this case, everybody should be responsible for his or her own conscience, but in the whole church, Christ should be made preeminent. The leader should influence the political world.

PL: *What do you tell to Christians who say, “I believe in the gospel; I stay away from the gospel as it relates to politics, because I just want myself to be completely for the gospel”?*

ST: That is a very shallow position for evangelicalism. Many evangelicals do not know anything except the gospel and the preaching of the gospel. But when they deal with the unrighteousness in society, they think that it would be better if somebody were to apply the righteousness of God as the principle to judge and to govern the whole country. So in their conscience they know that Christians should have positions of responsibility as statesmen or society leaders. Everybody, deep in his or her heart, knows that the cultural mandate cannot be ignored.

PL: *Earlier in the conversation, you said we should worship with the right music. You know that music is frequently debated today. The cultural mandate regulates music as well, but how do we know which music is best for the church?*

ST: Music that is good must be from the heart, for the purpose of glorifying God, of describing the beauty of the glory of God in his creation, and of building up faith and also building up character. Those characteristics define good music. Good music is not based only on melody, rhythm, or harmony. There must be purpose in it. So, some music only raises up carnal desires. I don't think that's good music. Some music meditates on the greatness of creation and of human life and the beauty of goodness and morality; that is better music. Some music gives the highest degree of adoration to God; that is the best music. So good music must combine the natural order with melody, rhythm, style, and so on. But it must do more. It must convey the meaning of being human, man's purpose for living to glory and enjoy God's creation and appreciate himself as the image bearer of God. This is the best music.

PL: *So you think pastors, theologians, and evangelists should concern themselves with music in their ministry?*

ST: I believe so. But because so many pastors, especially those in the eastern world, do not have the opportunity to be educated, to be taught to appreciate good music, they have lost one of the most important privileges they can have in this world. This is sad. Martin Luther once said that it is a very great pity that pastors do not understand good music.

PL: *Do you think the day is coming when mass evangelism is going to come to an end? With the aging of Billy Graham and after years of your leadership, maybe no one will be able to take your place? Maybe we don't have to do it on account of technology? What do you think about the future of mass evangelism?*

ST: When I was very young, I heard this ill-conceived idea. Then I said, “No, the God of eternity is the God of ancient times and the God of modern times.” So I tried to preach with power and courage and with dependence on the Holy Spirit. I have tried to imitate what the apostles and prophets had done. So I hope I have at least postponed the end of the mass evangelism period. I have witnessed in the last 58 years that God never changes. Mass evangelism is still going on. And people still come to evangelistic meetings. In mass evangelism, the whole city will come and see some great things happen. They will experience the glory of God and hear great singing and also a great message given. And so, people will change their minds. So I don’t believe that mass evangelism will come to an end.

PL: *But it does take great gifts to be the leader of a mass evangelism movement. How does one know the calling to do that work? What is the evidence of that calling?*

ST: Probably some are now being called, but they are yet sleeping. They are not listening to God’s calling or are not believing in it. We should believe that since God is still at work, new leaders of mass evangelism will rise again.

PL: *How important do you think the theological seminary is for the integrity of the church?*

ST: A theological seminary is just like a fortress. In daily life, it is not important, but on the day of attack, it is important, for who is going on the defense? Who is going to fight for the truth? Theological seminaries are very important indeed.

PL: *So, in a theological seminary, what is the most important foundation that a pastor has to learn when studying there?*

ST: If a pastor is to be truly used as a servant of God, he should take notice of three things: How to pastor the sheep, how to evangelize non-Christians, and how to teach Christians to understand the whole teaching of the Bible. So a servant of God should have three things. In my church, I ask every servant, every co-worker to have these three things in their ministry: to pastor, to evangelize, and to teach. When all these are present and work together in a man, this man will be a strong servant of God.

PL: *So should a seminary’s curriculum teach these three areas?*

ST: Even in my church, our board of deacons is based on only three functions: pastoring, evangelizing, and teaching.

PL: *Do you think it is problematic to work with liberal theologians or pastors in denominations that have departed from biblical authority?*

ST: Since liberals are not believers, we are not going to work with them. I don't have any interest in working with people who are not believers. Paul says that believers and non-believers cannot take the same yoke (2 Cor 6:14). Liberals are dying out.

PL: *Why do you think liberalism is dying?*

ST: Because with no faith, there is no presence of God; and with no true belief, no submission to the true revelation of God. What can they bring to the world? There's no message. If there is no message, there's no attraction for people. The message is very important.

PL: *There are many Charismatics and Pentecostals in the world, and they seem to be growing in number. Do you think they are true Christians? And if they are, what's the problem with them that you are concerned about?*

ST: I believe that liberals are more honest. They want to know the true revelation of God. But because they have difficulties in believing in God, the God who reveals himself—it is indeed not easy to believe that God is a living God—they finally confess that they don't understand. But when they try to pretend that they understand theology, they actually are far away from the true path.

But Charismatics are very different. Because in the Charismatic movement, especially in its radical extreme form, Charismatics are, purposely or not, faking Christianity. So these are no true Christians. They have no true gospel, no true revelation of God, no true submission to the Word of God, no true faith in the gospel. So, this is far more dangerous.

PL: *Do you think the gospel can get through to Pentecostals or Charismatics, in spite of their emphasis on their experience?*

ST: Yes, people are of several kinds. Some are very practical and some are very theoretical. Now charismatic people, especially the audience, are very simple believers. When they are guided by the wrong leader, they will go far away from the gospel. Yet some are truly seeking to know God. Even though they are very simple in their faith, God can still give them the opportunity to understand the gospel.

PL: *Do you sometimes find that the Charismatics or Pentecostals are attracted to Reformed theology?*

ST: Yes, I believe that very fervent and honest Charismatics, though guided wrongly by their leaders, when they discover Reformed theology,

will be stronger than many traditional Reformed people.

I am not liked by Charismatic leaders, but I am deeply loved by the Charismatic audience. They truly want to understand. But after they have been deceived into thinking that the Reformed faith is wrong, they do not understand what the Reformed faith is. But when they listen to our Reformed 21 TV program, they understand. The Reformed faith is not at all what they have been told, so they try to understand it and become better Christians.

PL: *We are two years into the leadership of Pope Francis in the Catholic Church. Do you think he is a help to Evangelicals and Reformed people or a danger to us?*

ST: I have not studied this much. I have the impression that he is very aware of the social gospel. If Catholicism is not returning to the true gospel, it cannot represent Christianity. The Reformed faith is the most important representation of Christianity in its message and belief, but we should extend, widen our vision to evangelize people, lest we are limited to our own subjectivity and limited ideas. This would be a sad result.

PL: *What makes Reformed theology so biblical? Why does it have that character?*

ST: Since the Reformation, Reformed believers have been committed to God's revelation. We believe that the Word of God is living, that God is a living God. We emphasize salvation by grace. This is through the work of the Holy Spirit. So the five *solas* are the foundation of our search for the truth.

PL: *Tell us what the five solas are, and, from your vantage point, how do they touch your church? How do they impact your ministry?*

ST: We warn every person who stands in the pulpit, (1) Preach only according to the Bible [*sola Scriptura*]. (2) The purpose for this is to build people's faith upon the Word of God [*sola fide*]. If you preach the Word, (3) they can experience the grace of God [*sola gratia*]. We tell them that (4) the grace of God is only through Jesus Christ [*solus Christus*] and (5) this must glorify God, so we give all the glory to God [*solī Deo gloria*].

PL: *Tell me a little bit about the compassion ministry that you mentioned earlier. Where do we reach needy people, and is that an important part of every church? If so, how does this church try to care for those who have needs?*

ST: It is among the most important things, but the last of those. The most important thing for the church is true faith in God. So doctrinal renewal is most important; then comes epistemological renewal; after that moral, ethical renewal and ministerial renewal and cultural mandate revival. Only after these five areas are renewed comes the social work of the church.

PL: *Reformed people tend to be a minority ministering in contexts where there is a different religious majority. How does a Reformed church work from a minority position?*

ST: We should accept the fact and confess that Christians are always a minority. And we must understand two things. Jesus says that the way is narrow, the gate is strait, and people who find it few [cf. Matt 7:13–14]. So our minority status is a fact. But Jesus taught his little flock, his minority, not to fear [cf. Luke 12:32]. I personally believe the minority must not feel inferior. When a minority holds on to the truth and does so for the majority's benefit, it at the same time gets rid of the status of being a minority. Instead, it will be appreciated by many people. Even though this is difficult, we should depend on the Holy Spirit and divine blessings to do it.

PL: *What should the church, as well as Western secular culture, do in the face of Islam and Islamic terrorism? What should the church and secular culture do to address this?*

ST: In worship, we cannot cooperate. But in doing good things for the benefit of the majority, we can do good works together. As members of society, we should be open to God's common grace for everyone. But when it comes to the faith, we should follow carefully only what the Bible teaches us. So, we in Indonesia, as a Reformed church, are a minority among a Muslim majority. Nevertheless, we try to make friends with Muslims but hold onto the finality of Christ, that true salvation is only in Jesus Christ [cf. Acts 4:12]. We do not know what their response or reaction will be, but we hold on to this principle always, no matter what happens to us, and we depend on God.

PL: *I think, throughout the years, you mentioned to me that there have been threats to your life as you proclaim the gospel boldly. How have you personally found courage to keep preaching when you know there are people who oppose you so much that they even declared they want to harm you?*

ST: I believe that if I do not do this, I should die. So I can only beg God and walk and preach and believe what the Bible teaches us. Then I entrust myself to God. During the first period of my ministry, I had already prepared myself to be a martyr. But to date, nothing has happened to me. I believe that we must be courageous and not be afraid of harm that might come to us. If any harm does come to us, we are thus prepared already. So if I have been preaching boldly in this country for 58 years, but nothing has happened, it means that God is protecting me until my time is up. And when that time comes, it will be a blessing for me, even if it comes with difficulty.

PL: *To finish, let me ask some questions about your ministry over the years. If you were to sum up your ministry, how many times have you preached, and to how many people have you preached?*

ST: Roughly, I have preached about 32,000 times to 35 million people. Among those meetings, I think about a third were evangelistic meetings or gospel rallies.

PL: *You are at present actually kept from preaching in China. How did that come about, and why is it that so many people in China know you?*

ST: I don't understand. I know that some people who hate me are afraid of my influence on the multitudes, probably because I usually attack opposing views and am a very outspoken critic of communism and atheism. Those who are opposed are wrong in their dealings with Christians or Christian ministry. They collect information on them, and report them to the authorities, and clearly they don't like me either. In 1996, I was in Wen Zhou and 10,000 people had gathered. Overnight, a pilot flew from Beijing to Wen Zhou to inform the local committee not to let me go up to preach. There was great tension. They came to my hotel and said, do not try to disobey us. You cannot go and preach. I asked, can I go and pray for the crowd? They replied, you cannot even go to pray; you cannot appear; you must just leave this place. So I left Wen Zhou, and I went to Beijing and Shanghai to see historical sites as a tourist, and then I returned to Jakarta. That is what happened in China.

PL: *But nevertheless, many people came to know your ministry: How many Chinese people have heard your preaching?*

ST: Even though I cannot preach in China, I have preached in Moscow (Russia), Minsk (Belarus), Ukraine, and Romania. I even preached in the central Communist party political hall in Moscow, which we rented to evangelize people there. But in China, I am not allowed. But I don't worry because everything is in the hand of God. In my experience, China is the country that does not want me to preach, but it is where I have the biggest audience.

PL: *How big is your audience there, do you think?*

ST: China now has 130 million Christians, among them probably twenty to twenty-five percent call themselves Reformed. Among them, most have listened to my preaching and have been influenced by my ministry.

PL: *So, 10,000 people didn't get to hear you, but God let you be heard by 25 million people instead?*

ST: I don't know why, but I just praise God, because the gospel cannot be bound or constrained by any political boundaries.

PL: *So how does your message get into China?*

ST: I preach in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Jakarta, other places, and in the US. And when people go to see their friends, their relatives, they bring my teaching in. In China, people copy my messages without copyright. They humorously say "to copyright" means "to copy is right." We leave it all to the Lord, and in this way the gospel is widely spread without our intention and planning. Praise be to God.

PL: *How many books do you have in print now?*

ST: When I preach, people take notes of my teaching, they transcribe it, and print it, in Indonesian, English, and Chinese. Most books are in Chinese and Indonesian. I think there are about 150 books altogether.

PL: *Finally, I want to thank you so very much for that warm fellowship that is between the church here and Westminster Seminary. As you know, Westminster is very grateful that you have received an honorary doctor from us and that we are able to say, you are a Westminster man.*

ST: I am not worthy. I am praying that WTS can keep its original vision and original burden from God, just like Dr. Machen and also like Professor Van Til. They were truly men of God.

PL: *We are proud there is a Stephen Tong chair of Reformed Theology, which Dr. Jeffrey Jue, who is the provost of the Seminary, holds. We celebrate the partnership of our seminary with you. And so as we wrap up, I'd like to recognize Dr. Benyamin Intan, Dr. Paul Wells, and myself in our new international Reformed journal entitled Unio cum Christo. Would you take a moment to pray for this interview, the new journal, and the ministry that we share as we conclude?*

ST: Let us pray. [prayer] Father, we thank you for giving us the opportunity and the privilege to be your children and also to have fellowship in the love of Jesus Christ. We pray for Westminster; we pray for the Reformed movement in the whole world; we pray for the faculty, the students who study Reformed theology everywhere. We pray that you anoint all your servants, all the students who are so eager to understand your Word, and so courageous to defend the faith. This kind of leader is so important in the 21st century. We ask that you always anoint them. Give them the power, the courage, the wisdom, and the love to preach the gospel and to maintain the

Christian faith and to glorify your name. We commit all these into the hand of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please Lord, raise up more people to work for you, to evangelize, and to keep the true faith, and to pastor in your church. Hear our prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. We also pray for the journal that will be printed this year, that it will be a great blessing to strengthen many pastors and to guide many people into the truth of your eternal words.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, we pray. Amen.

PL: *Well, Dr. Tong. Thank you for being the first person to be interviewed in our new journal. You are a great role model for all of us in the ideal of being a theologian, pastor, and also evangelist, all at the same time. And we pray that this will be the vision we all will share together in the years to come.*

ST: May all the glory be to God. I am not worthy at all.

PL: *Thank you.*