

Shihmin Peng - Personal Statement (04/18/2014)

I was raised in a Christian home with my grandfather as a pastor in China. While growing up, I was actively involved in church activities, such as leading the youth group and participating in the adult choir. As a curious teenager, I started asking many questions about life and faith – problem of evil, how did the Bible become canonized, and the question about election and predestination. My pastor thought I was more interested in asking questions rather than getting answers; a point which I would honestly admit. Indeed, I was more fascinated with showing off myself to my peers than searching for the truth. After I left home for college, I stopped attending church eventually.

For the next 35 years, I basically lived a secular life. I studied in the United States, received my MBA from a reputable business school, and worked in top financial institutions, moving gradually into senior management. For a period of time, I thought that I had managed to build a relatively decent safety net for me and my family.

As an eyewitness of the September 11th attacks, I saw thousands of lives perished right in front of me; that demolished the very notion of the safety net which I had worked so hard to build. To this day, the scene of buildings tumbling down stays so vividly in my mind, which serves as a constant reminder to me that everything can be taken away in just an instant, no matter how well we have prepared. I started searching for answers, and turned to a good friend from graduate school who later became a Buddhist abbot in Upstate New York. Looking at life from a Buddhist's point of view, it led me to construct a human perspective in which life is full of suffering as a result of our attachment to people and material things. Hence, the way to avoid suffering is to sever oneself from people and things around us. To retreat from the city and stay in a temple in the mountain may provide a short relief, but eventually I would have to go back to reality facing question of life with no answers.

It was the event of losing the person closest to me-- my father--that aroused my desire to search for the true meaning of eternal life and love. In 2006, my father had accidentally fallen onto the hardwood floor, resulting in brain trauma. I stayed by his bedside during the last two days of his life. I began to pick up the Bible, reading verses to him as if we were reading together. The words from the Bible made me feel so serene and peaceful; the tranquility of the moment enabled me to re-evaluate my life, my relationship with my parents-- and most important of all--my relationship with the creator, my God. The love I had for my father and my family was so real that the detachment of human feelings from Buddhist's teaching no longer made any sense to me. I promised my father before he passed away that I would go back to church to search for the true meaning of life.

With God's mercy and grace, I discussed my questions with my pastor, and then I realized how arrogant and naive I had been. It was only I, who refused to see the truth, made all of the excuses along the way to avoid God. All of my efforts in building up my career were to seek the praise and affirmation of others. I began to realize my sinful nature and desperately sought the help and the grace of God. On September 22, 2006, during a musical evangelism event, the Holy Spirit touched my heart. I deeply repented my sins and asked for the forgiveness of God. And I accepted Jesus Christ as the savior and the master of my life. Both my wife and I were baptized in January 2007.

In 2008, during the global financial crisis, God's grace guided me through the difficult days and enabled me to place my complete trust in God. At that time, I thought my life was stable and I was satisfied with my job working for Merrill Lynch, a reputable financial company. Within a short while, the company in which I had worked so hard to advance my career was merged with Bank of America. The merger followed with a series of re-organizations and layoffs. Worrying about my job, I started praying to God to shield me from these changes. After struggling for a period of time, I began to realize the meaning of God's sovereignty, and I trusted God for His plan for me. I learned to pray to God, and asked for guidance through these challenges to make me a good Christian witness of God. As I stopped worrying about the changes around me and realized that being a good Christian would make me a good worker as well, God has faithfully led me through a successful career during that tumultuous time. I praised the Lord for guiding me through each test and for leading me closer to Jesus Christ.

In 2012, I participated in a 10-day mission trip to several Mid-West states, spreading the Gospel and providing assistance to new college students from China. Our trip started at St. Louis, and we journeyed over 2,000 miles in 8 days in order to cover as many states and colleges as we could. This was also the first time that I was able to concentrate exclusively on evangelical work without worrying about anything else. I had the chance to experience the joy of serving God's works. God lead us all the way with His wondrous work beyond our comprehension. At the end of the mission, we visited Rhode College in Memphis, which was not on our original schedule. We were at first rejected at the security office as we did not make any prior appointment. After several attempts of negotiation, we were allowed to be in the student cafeteria during lunch time. We were able to speak to several Chinese students and invited them to join a new student event in a local Chinese church during the evening. I was assigned to give a testimony to the students, which was followed by a smaller group discussion. My wife and I had a spontaneous idea that we should take this opportunity to let these students hear the Gospel, understand God's love, man's sins, Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins, and the importance of accepting Jesus Christ as savior to be reconciled with God. Praise to the Lord - all 6 of the students from this small discussion group accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, the Lord of their life, and made conversion prayers with us. After we shared the

good news with the other team members, we all praised the Lord for His wondrous way of letting His people hear the Gospel and return to Him. We all thank the Lord for letting us be part of His work.

Since then, my journey has taken me to various roles in the church and I embrace them fully to this day. As I continue to serve the church in various capacities---fellowship group leader, choir leader, Sunday school teacher, leader of worship service, member of the mission committee, and volunteer participated in campus evangelistic work---I find myself struggling between my job and serving church, with the limited time and energy I have. In a sermon on July 21, 2013, the pastor used Ephesians 2:10 to challenge us whether we were doing good work which God prepared in advance for us. This call struck me like a bolt of lightning, and tears filled my eyes as I felt clearly that it was now the time to follow God's plan rather than that of my own. After a few days of prayer, I realized that I felt true joy only through serving God; it paled any accomplishment I have in my job. With my wife's encouragement and enthusiastic support, I told my manager about my willingness to answer God's calling to serve Him. We started the succession and transition process, and I will resign from my job within a year. As each day goes by, I feel truly blessed to have the opportunity to devote the rest of my life to love God, to know God, and to serve God.

I have always felt full of joy when reading and studying the Bible. When the Word of God enlightened me, I was eager to share the lessons I had learned and the joyful experiences with family and friends from my fellowship group. Since then, I have greatly enjoyed preparing lessons and interacting with brothers and sisters during Sunday school classes. I have decided that I want to devote all my time and energy to study the bible, to apply my newfound knowledge to daily life, to share with brothers and sisters, to teach, and to spread the gospel to my Buddhist friends as well as to campus students from China. As instructed in 1 Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have". I am aware that, in order to fully realize these words, I need to be equipped with substantial knowledge in Scriptures.

I am thankful to have the opportunity to study at Westminster Theology Seminary for M.A.R in Theological Studies where I will be able to build my theological foundation, to apply this foundation to daily life and to share with others. I firmly believe that my past experiences rebelling as a teenager, pursuing the meaning of life via Buddhism, and managing the operations of a major financial corporation have enabled me to communicate with people in the secular world, especially those from China and Taiwan with atheism or Buddhism backgrounds. I understand that it will be a great challenge to study in the best seminary school, but I am eager to meet these challenges so that I can be equipped with the best theological foundation to bring the lost people to know the Gospel and God.