

What is Ancestor worship ?

and

**How should a new
Christian respond?**



What is ancestor worship?

Many Asian and Chinese families practice ancestor worship. For the family unit it provides a link with its past. Sometimes it also acts as a check on individualism. But there is a world view which drives this practice. For many, this worldview includes both the spiritual and the physical (the living). Traditionally, it is thought that when a person dies his/her soul does not go to an immediate resting place. Instead it goes on a journey to the other world. Living relatives provide goods or necessities that mirror those on this earth to ensure that their stay in the other world is comfortable. Looking after your elders beyond their life span is seen as a good thing and is valued in Asian families. It shows that the children and descendants have been brought up to care for the family. However neglecting these duties will provoke anger of the dead ancestors. It is often thought they can create trouble for the living relatives. As a result, fear often drives this practice. In today's modern society this belief may not be as prevalent amongst the younger generations. Hence it is more likely that ancestor worship is done out of love and respect not out fear or belief in the spiritual realm.

Many international students who convert to Christianity face problems with their families on this issue. Many families still hold on to traditional values. There are many rites and rituals to follow and depending on the families, refusal to participate may result in rejection and ostracism. Rituals often occur during funerals, certain festivals to honour the dead. These may include ritualistic processions, burning of incense or joss sticks, burning paper gifts, bowing, chanting etc. For the Christian it is important to know what is acceptable and what is not. It is important to make a stand on these issues so as to honour God and not compromise their Christian witness.

There are two issues to consider. Firstly, how does the Christian think about ancestor worship, what is the biblical understanding of the dead and spirits? Secondly, how can the Christian convert act without participating in spiritual worship of idols and demons and yet still convey a sense of respect for their ancestor? Not only is this important for their relationship with their family but also for their witness to them.

On the first issue, the Bible doesn't actually say much about the dead, except that they are waiting to be raised for the judgment (1 Thessalonians). The Bible does speak against the worship of any person or object other than God. On the matter of idol worship, the idol itself is nothing and the Christian should not participate in the worship of demons. This is what idol worship represents. The idol is a substitute of God. Ancestor worship in the traditional sense is recognising the influence of the spiritual world over living and the malevolent nature of the spirits of the ancestors. But these spirits do not present any danger to us. The Christian need not worry about them. Their ancestors are not waiting for them nor do they need caring in the other world. There is not much we can do for the dead. The Bible is also clear that God is sovereign. Therefore taking part in any ritual or rites to appease these spirits should be avoided by the Christian. We should fear God more than any spirits. Only God alone is worthy to be worshiped.

However, many families today perform rites as a mark of respect for their ancestors in recognition of their lives and to remember them. It is not exactly worship. The bible does not speak against respecting ancestors but the practices associated with it are still a cause for concern. The rites and rituals still remain the same, for example the keeping of the ancestral tablet, the burning of paper gifts, burning joss sticks, bowing, offering food, etc. Although people say it's only paying their respects to the dead, the rituals suggest that there is more taking place. The rites are designed to acknowledge the presence of these spirits and to appease them.

This leads us to the second issue, what can the Christian do to show their respect for the dead? The problem for the Christian student is this, refusal to participate is often misunderstood as rebellion and disobedience. Because ancestor worship is an expression of filial piety, the parents fear that they too will be neglected and forgotten in their old age and in the after life. By refusing to participate in rites and rituals their children appear to be refusing to show their love to them, it's the only way they understand it.

The Christian convert knows that this is not the case. They do love their parents and the Bible commands us to honour our father and mother. The expression of that love however, needs to be different. It can no longer be shown through ancestral worship.

In this matter, the Christian convert must be proactive. They must anticipate what will happen before it happens. Firstly, the issue of their conversion must be brought to the attention of the family. This should be done early and in gentle ways. It doesn't have to be declared loudly. Little things can be slowly introduced. Actions often speak louder than words. In an Asian culture, it is often better to be noticed and asked by your elders than it is for us to tell them. So the advice is to live in such a way that Christ's love becomes evident in the life of the convert. This will help the family understand that there is genuine change in the person and not just the result of western education or the influence of some foreign culture. Show genuine care and concern for the family and exercise great patience and perseverance when there is conflict and confrontation. When the issue of ancestor worship comes up, the Christian needs to substitute rites and rituals with Christian practices which still acknowledges the dead ancestors. Non participation often signals to the family, rebellion or disobedience which is dishonouring to the family. In front of other relatives this is also very shameful. Instead of performing the rites and rituals the Christian has to make great effort to show that they still love the family and respect their ancestors. There are things which the Christian can do to show their respect. This is even more helpful if they are visible acts of love, things that can be clearly seen by others like getting flowers for the dead, helping to clear and clean the grave site, contributing to the cost of the funeral. In other words certain practical help and symbolic gestures are helpful to show that the Christian is still very much part of the family. Inactivity is often misunderstood as disobedience. This is to be avoided.

As we are ministering to international students particularly those from Asian backgrounds, it is always helpful to speak to the individual student. Find out how they understand it. Find out how devoted their family is towards these practices as there are different degrees of devotion. Each family is different. Help the Christian student understand that God is with them and loves their family. Some will have conflicts with their families no matter what they do. Others may not have to face this. For those who do face conflicts it will be a test of their decision to follow Christ. The Bible assures them of the hope that awaits them in the new creation.

Written by: Ken Lim.
Date : 20th March 2005
Queries: lpken@yahoo.com