

To Be, Not To Be

Little Watchman

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Also by Little Watchman

Basic Christianity

The Bigger Picture

Little Watchman Translation (of the New Testament)

Love, Not Right

Introduction

Back in the '80s John White wrote a challenging little book called "Flirting with the World" in which he called out the church of the day for taking on some of the World's ways and methods.

The church is the bride of Christ. Effectively we're his fiancé. So when the church does things the way the World does, instead of the way Yeshua does... we're kind of flirting with someone while we're engaged to someone else!

It's a bit slutty, and pretty disappointing for a girl of our standing.

To be honest. These days I feel like the church has moved way beyond flirting, and she's actually having an affair. Full on, sleeping with the World.

We run our churches like businesses, we use marketing and advertising techniques, we focus way way too much on money and on how many people are attending.

We charge people for things which should be free. We focus on what non-believers want, and on being accepted by them, (or at least acceptable to them), by not mentioning those things which might offend non-Christians, like abortion, homosexuality, men and women's roles in a family - things we should be standing up for, not sweeping under the carpet.

We seem to be all about affluence and our image. We're more about Facebook than about the Bible. More about image than spirit.

John White passed away in 2002. For his sake, I'm kinda glad for him - he would have been devastated.

He warned us, but we didn't listen.

When I was a young Christian we used to hear sermons about wolves in sheep's clothing, sneaking into the flock and harming young Christians. These days the message needs to be about sheep in

wolves' clothing. Christians who look so much like non-Christians that you would be hard pressed to find any evidence that they're Christian at all.

What can we do?
How can we fix this?

One of the books I read recently, (Who Stole My Church, by MacDonald), made an interesting statement. "I'm beginning to understand why the younger guys prefer to start churches. I sometimes think that changing one is impossible."

I've personally been trying to change the church for 35 years. I don't think it's impossible but it sure seems to be a slow process. I've been doing it one person at a time, (by discipling those who I think will be future leaders), and assuming that the change will come in the next generation. Starting a new church is tough work, and honestly, not my gift. But sometimes like MacDonald, I also think that it would be way easier to just start again.

The (Western) church just seems so entrenched in its ways. So unwilling to do any kind of self examination or re-evaluation. So totally confident that its application of good business practices is working. You're almost a heretic for suggesting that something might be wrong.

If we were sending missionaries to another culture we would certainly expect them to "do church" in culturally relevant ways. And we should expect some aspects of the surrounding culture to be seen in a particular church. But if someone sent new missionaries to the West, then I would be very surprised if their solution ended up looking much like how we "do church" here now.

We seem to have lost the fundamentals of the church being a body, working together as each part does its particular role. Do we even know what it means any more to look after the poor, or have we happily handed that over to our governments?

Where is that strong sense of community that jumps out at you when you read the early part of Acts? Where is the devotion to teaching/learning/discipleship, and to prayer? Where is the loving one another? The kind that is real, and deep, and sacrificial?

“Innocent” flirting that started with adopting worldly music and trying to improve our marketing and relevance to non-believers, has led us down a path to where we are barely recognisable from what we used to be.

I agree, the church was kind of lost already by the ‘80s, but in a different way. It was a bit cold and lifeless, it had lost its passion for loving God, and loving each other. But instead of fixing the error we have just moved to the opposite error.

We swapped the organ for a keyboard, and we introduced drums to become more “relevant”. But we missed the point of who we are really meant to be.

It has nothing to do with music. It has everything to do with being faithful, relentlessly faithful to our fiancé. And being proud to show off the ring, and to declare to anyone that will listen, “That’s my future husband! I’m totally in love with him.”

Let me say this bluntly. Entertainment might well be what they want. But it is not what they need.

What they need, is to hear from God. To receive his spirit and to build a strong relationship with him as his born again children. Then, whether they are entertained or not, their eternal future will be secure. And I suspect that they will also be much more content with the here and now, entertained or not.

By all means our music should be in a style relevant to our audience. But that is a very different focus to “entertaining”.

How are you going to make this happen?
Are you going to change the church you’re in?

Or are you just going to start again?

However you do it... do something. It's too important to just give up.

Missional, not Attractional

There is a lot of talk these days about being “missional” vs being “attractional”. They are pretty catchy jargon words, but really what they are on about is this:

Your church can either do what it can to attract people to it, or it can go out to where the people are. Some people argue that you could do both, but I don't think that is correct. They stem from completely different mind sets, and you will really only be doing a token job of one of them.

Many of the big “mega” churches seem to work on the attractional model. They have great music, snazzy preaching, and usually big fancy buildings. When small churches try to copy that model they usually fail. Their music isn't up to that kind of professional standard, their preaching is faithful to the Bible but the preacher is more comfortable standing at a solid lectern with his Bible than walking around on stage with an almost invisible microphone. And the audio visual support in a small church is usually pretty basic.

And the building... well, don't get me started. It's usually some run down, drafty old church building with old style plumbing, hard seats and no heating, or it's some rented school hall with seats you have to stack away afterwards. Basically it's just not usually that inviting at all.

For most churches, attractional just isn't going to work.

But it's not meant to! Yeshua didn't tell the church to attract, he told us to go.

Yeshua told us “Go and make disciples”. Just like he did. Just like he was told by his own father.

Heaven is attractive. People already want to go there. But Yeshua didn't just sit on his throne waiting for them to arrive, he went to show them the way.

Yeshua was sent. Yeshua went. Yeshua was missional.

We were sent too. But we very rarely go anywhere. Instead, the modern Western church has come up with a better idea. Instead of going, we stand around in a big huddle, and we jump up and down, waving our arms in the air and shouting out to the lost, “Come over here. It’s fun. Come and join us.”

I don’t necessarily mean literally, but so many churches seem to just stay with each other and try to attract non-Christians to come and join them. We do sausage sizzles, or English lessons, or bowling nights for teens. Just to get them in the door. (Because then we can force them to listen to a 5 minute devotion and they will want to become Christians too.)

How is that working for your church? Successful? I doubt it.

Yeshua sent us, but we didn’t go. We stayed. And we tried to attract them to us instead, like we had a better idea.

Like Jonah. Jonah also had a better idea when he was sent - he ran away.

I’m sure you know how that worked out for him. In the end he realised that if God sends you... Go. Now.

Jonah was sent. Jonah went. (eventually). Jonah was missional.

Isaiah didn’t say, “Here I am, make me attractive.” He said, “Here I am, send me.”

God isn’t looking for Christians or churches who are willing to do things which have nothing to do with the gospel just to get people to come in the door.

By all means offer free English lessons to the members of your church if they need them. But seriously? Giving people free English lessons on the condition that they listen to a short devotion at the end? What does that say about the value you put on the message you are giving them?

Christian teens need fun group activities. And if they like bowling, then take them bowling. But don't send a mixed message that if they listen to a message about Yeshua they will be rewarded with bowling!

Isaiah was sent. Isaiah went. Isaiah was missional. And the same for Paulus, Petros, Phillip, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy ... Yeshua sent them. They went. They were all missional.

Same for us. We have been sent. We need to go. As a body, we need to be missional. It's a mindset.

Now, let me just add one more thing, just so I'm not misunderstood here.

I am not in any way saying that we all need to go overseas as missionaries, or that we all need to be evangelists. In fact I quite passionately believe that we are not all evangelists. I'm certainly not one.

We are a team. The church is a team. We all have our roles. And when I say the church is sent, I mean that is our purpose, our mission, our focus for everything we do. As a team we need to be going. This will mean that some will literally go. Others will stay and support. Others will train. Others will comfort. We all have our role, but that role has to fit in with the church's overall mission to go.

And I don't mean we have to go overseas. Go to your neighborhood. Go to the people you work with. Go to your friends. Go where they go and get to know them. Talk with them. Show them what real love is all about.

Get rid of that thinking that we have to get them to come to us. Let's be imaginative with ideas about how we can go to them. They don't know Yeshua. They don't know that they need to know Yeshua. And even if they did, they don't know how to get to Yeshua from where they are at. Someone needs to go to them and to show them the way. Your church needs to be willing to do that.

If your church is willing to accept the command, and to make “go” its focus, it will be a very very different church than one which makes “attract” its focus.

If your church is already like that, then fantastic. Get involved.

If it isn't, then change your church. You don't have to be in a leadership position to lead. Start going. Talk with your friends. Get them going.

Talk with your church leaders. If they won't change and they just want to be “attractional”. Then don't just go, ... leave.

Seriously, find another church which is focused on going, and join them.

Churches need to stop trying to attract, and they need to do what they were designed for. To go to the lost and help them find their way home.

The Way, not the Destination

I lived in Silicon Valley for a few years. So I used to drive up to San Francisco fairly often.

San Francisco is famous for having lots of one way streets and lots of “No Left Turn”s, (they drive on the right).

It’s easy now with GPS and Sat Nav, but back then maps were on paper, and getting somewhere in San Francisco was not easy. You would get to your street and suddenly realise it was no left turn. So you have to go another block or two before you could turn left. But then to get back to where you needed to be you need to turn left again... so again another few blocks... and again... and... again. And then you would find that you are on the right street, but now you are too far the wrong way from where you needed to be. But it’s a one way street, so you have to go another 8 block loop to work your way back down the street...

This was such a problem in those days that there was a local expression, “You can’t get there from here.”

If God’s way was to be attractional then Yeshua would never have had to leave heaven.

Almost by definition heaven is a very attractive place. When God said, “Go”, Yeshua could have just said, “No need. This place is so attractive they will come here. Let’s just let them see how good it is.”

But of course, we can’t get there.

As far as we know, “You can’t get there from here”.

We don’t know the way. We’ve been going around in circles, the wrong way up one way streets, following what we thought was the right way only to find it’s no left turn and we have to go around again. Even if we wanted to go there, we’re so hopelessly lost. And we don’t even have a map.

And that is the point isn’t it. We’re lost.

Lost. Get it?

If you're lost then you don't know the way home. No matter how attractive home is, you don't know how to get there. Even if you want to go there, you can't.

Yeshua had to come and get us. He had to find us and lead us back home.

Just like a shepherd with a lost sheep. He has to go and find it.

Lost things don't usually find their way home unless someone goes out looking for them.

And that is the case with those around us who are lost too. They're lost.

We can make our church attractive, but even then, they are still lost. They still won't know how to get here.

As far as they know, they can't get here from there.

We need to go and find them and lead them back home.

A generation ago, (at least in Australia), the lost were still pretty close to home. They had more "wandered away" than they were "truly lost".

Even as non Christians they had probably grown up with Sunday school. And they knew that God was there, and they knew who Yeshua was.

But they had just wandered off for differing reasons.

So all that was often needed was a gentle push in the right direction and they could find their way home. Quite often a simple tract or a short conversation, or one sermon from an evangelist would be all it took to get them back on the right path.

In those days, (really not long ago at all), churches could get away with being attractional. I still don't think it was the right way to be, but it still kind of worked in the short term. (Of course, in the long term it led to the problems we have today...)

But today. The lost are really lost.

They have no understanding of who Yeshua is. They often have very little concept of God, even of any god. They have grown up in a godless atheistic society and they've been told that they are nothing special, just another animal in a naturally driven line of animals.

Attractional won't work. They're lost. They need someone to go and find them. They need someone to show them the way.

They are so lost they don't even realise they're lost. They have forgotten that there is a home, let alone where it is or how to get there.

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hey don't need churches which are attractive. They need churches which are missional.

Churches which are functioning as a body where every member does its part. Churches which are mission focused, and who are sending people out to find those who are lost. Who will tell them about God, and about who Yeshua is, and who will lead them back home, where people will love them, and teach them, and build them up to become part of that body. People who will give them a purpose, and who remind them of their value to God, who has made them in his own image, and who loves them so much that he sent his own son to sacrifice himself to become the way for them to be able to be reconciled with him.

Why aren't they coming to your church?

It's not because it isn't attractive enough. It's because they're lost. They need you to go and find them.

Like Yeshua, we need to become the way, to not just show them... but to go and get them, reach out to them and become the way they meet Yeshua.

Disciples, not Evangelists

So, we get that as a church we need to be missional. We get that we need to go to where the people are.

The most common mistake I've seen from there, is that we assume that this means that we're all supposed to be evangelists. We are not all evangelists. And we're not supposed to be. (I like evangelists, we need evangelists, but I'm not one and I don't want to be one).

For sure, the church should be missional. For sure, as a church, we should be focused on evangelism.

But that is very different to us all becoming evangelists.

Very few evangelists are good at helping out with practical things, like the kitchen, or with building maintenance.

Very few evangelists are good at counselling Christians who are struggling with illness or suffering or sin.

Very few evangelists are good teachers of deep spiritual truth.

I haven't seen many evangelists who are great intercessors, but they do often seem good at praying for non-Christians.

And somehow, they always seem to know exactly what to say to each individual to reach their heart with the message of Yeshua.

They know when to be bold, when to wait, when to question... it's an amazing thing to watch a gifted evangelist at work.

If you want to turn someone from being a non-Christian into being a Christian, then an evangelist is perfect for the job.

But Yeshua didn't say, "Go and make believers of all nations...". He said, "Go and make disciples".

After they become Christians, they don't need evangelists any more.

Then they need teachers, pastors, helpers, counsellors, healers, administrators, ... there are whole lists like this in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4.

The church is a body and we are its parts. And just like the parts of a body, we are all different, we all have different gifts, but we all work together to build each other up and prepare each other for doing God's work.

In their great little book "Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness", Cook and Baldwin have a chapter about two church models.

They call the first model "church as a field". It's what is we've been calling "attractational".

It assumes that the work of God is done on the church premises, (the field), and so what is required is that non-Christians are attracted to the church so they will come to us and then they can then be saved. In this model they build big churches in prominent places. They have professional standard music teams. We should broadcast our services on TV, internet and podcast. They have big budgets and they do a lot of PR and marketing of their church in the community.

What this model needs is evangelists. It's all about getting them saved once they're in the door. Once the people are coming, we just need the evangelists to reach them with the saving message of Yeshua.

I think we have also realised that everyone's story about how they became a Christian is different, so evangelism usually works better if its individually tailored rather than mass marketed to a crowd, (although really gifted evangelists seem to be able to "convert" large numbers of people with one message). But the successful attractational church needs more and more evangelists.

I think this is where the push is coming from. They say that everyone is valued, but I think it's pretty clear that in this model the evangelists are valued more than others. And I also think that this model reinforces the dichotomy between the "professionals" who stand at the front and do all the work for God, and the "attenders" who just come along and watch every week.

Cook and Baldwin call their second model “church as a force”. It’s what we’ve been calling “missional”.

It assumes that the work of God is done everywhere. It’s about us going to where the non-Christians are and exposing them to God in some way so he works in them to be saved.

This model isn’t about buildings, or marketing, or “perceived success”. It’s all about building up new Christians, training and equipping them, and then releasing them to be and do who they are for God. It’s about making disciples.

Some can be evangelists, but we need some to be teachers. Some to be pastors. Some to be helpers. Etc...

The church becomes a living organism of Christians working together, supporting and encouraging each other as we reach the lost together.

On the outside both models seem to be focused on evangelism and the gospel. But they are very different on the inside.

One is controlled and focused on numbers, (because it has to keep growing to remain attractive and financially viable).

The other feels “out of control”, (but really, it’s just out of our control), and is focused on people and their needs, and how we can build them up for serving God.

In the second model, everyone is valued, everyone is accepted. There are no heroes. There are very few professionals, and even more importantly, there are very few “attenders”, because everyone becomes involved. Everyone has a role to play. Everyone is “in ministry” to the extent that they have grown into it.

And their meetings are also very different.

One model “does” church in a way that attracts non-Christians. They call it “seeker friendly”. The sermons are almost always gospel messages. They are sweet and nice and not confrontational.

But church is for Christians. (By definition – church is the body of believers. A non-Christian cannot be part of a church). Why have we

made it for non-Christians? And how are the Christians going to grow if they are fed the milk of the gospel over and over every week?

The other model does church in a way that builds up the Christians. It's about depth.

The sermons are challenging and sometimes even uncomfortable. But they help us grow. Non-Christians are welcome, but the meeting is not about them, and it's not specifically for them.

I love evangelists. But I'm not one, and I'm very happy to stay that way.

In over 30 years of being a Christian I've only helped a couple of people become Christians. But I fully believe that I have done the work God intended for me.

The attractional church model puts a lot of pressure on everyone to become evangelists and feeds our guilt if we're not one.

But that model is flawed in many ways, and the missional, "body of Christ", model will liberate us to be who we are meant to be in Yeshua, and it will transform the church back into the real "hands and feet of Christ" that it was when it began almost 2,000 years ago.

A Ministry, not a Business

Churches don't need a CEO.

Unfortunately I have forgotten which book, otherwise I would give it credit. But I remember reading in a book many years ago where the author was saying how God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, (Psalm 50), but when so many churches need money we sell hot dogs or sausages and our second hand junk to the community to get a few dollars.

The author was lamenting because God will provide for his ministry and he doesn't need to sell sausages, and he certainly doesn't need to beg for a few dollars from our non-Christian neighbours.

Now while I imagine there are many well meaning and lovely Christians out there who sell the sausages and bake the cakes, I have to agree with him.

If God wants a ministry done, he will surely provide the resources, and all we have to do is pray and trust him to do so, and give him the opportunity.

Now, somehow related to all that, is the modern trend of charging for ministry.

On the surface, User Pays seems like a very fair way to do things. In Australia petrol/gasoline is taxed, (quite highly taxed), but that tax pays for all the roadworks nation wide. The idea being that if you use the roads more than I do, then you'll need to buy more fuel than me, so you'll pay more tax than me. That seems fair right?

If all our tax was that way, I would pay less tax because I don't have any children attending school. And maybe I can opt out of other government services, like pensions or aged care, (because I'm not that old yet).

But what about church?

Does User Pays work for church?

Is it OK to charge \$5 for a copy of the sermon to cover the costs of recording, producing and hosting it? Is it OK to charge \$10?

Is it OK to charge \$10 for admission to church on Sunday? (Because you're hearing the sermon for free after all).

Is it OK to charge for coffee after church? Especially now that we all want better coffee and the machines are expensive. And we need an actual barista to make it.

Is it OK to charge for counselling?

Counselling is expensive outside the church. So maybe we should because people expect to pay for counselling?

Is it OK to charge for pastoral care?

Is it OK to charge for English classes?

So my big problem with all this is that there is no biblical precedent. I don't see a single instance, or even a hint, that the early church charged anyone for anything.

In fact, quite the opposite. I see the early church giving things away to anyone who needed them. For free.

And I see people giving substantial amounts to the work of the church. Even property. Regardless of what "services" they used themselves.

It is not biblical for Christians to all pay the same amount for anything. In the Bible, contributions were always supposed to be related to the ability to pay. If you have more, you should contribute more. If you have less, you need to contribute less.

In fact, if you don't have enough you shouldn't have to pay at all. Someone else should pay for you.

So if we have to pay at all for ministry, it should be by donation, and nobody should be made to feel like they need to contribute any particular amount.

I believe that charging for ministry is built on our lack of faith in God to provide. (The other option is that we're just plain greedy and we love money, so let's assume the best and go with lack of faith).

Keith Green was a famous Christian musician in the early 1980's. He had already signed a deal with a recording company when he came to the realisation that God did not want him charging for his music because it was a ministry. (After all, if your ministry is done by the Spirit of God, it's hardly fair for you to get paid for it is it!). He tried to convince other musicians and Christian authors, but with little success. His record company also wouldn't let him out of his contract, (they wanted their money). So he declared that if you felt you couldn't afford his music, all you had to do was write to him, and he would send you one for free.

He paid the record company himself, and sent it out to those who asked, for free. Nice.

In 2 Kings 5 we read how Naaman, a foreign military commander, came to Israel to see Elisha. Naaman was seeking healing for his leprosy from Yahweh, God of the Jews. After Elisha prayed, Naaman washed in the Jordan and he was healed. Naaman offered to pay, but Elisha refused to accept payment for ministry, and sent him off home. His servant Gehazi was not so honourable. Gehazi chased after Naaman and lied to him that Elisha had changed his mind. When Elisha found out, he cursed Gehazi with the leprosy from which Naaman had been healed.

God doesn't need money from non-believers. And he certainly doesn't want us charging fees for work that he has done through his Holy Spirit. Whether it's healing, preaching, teaching, music or writing. If God is the one who does it, then it should be free. (Of course if you think God is not in your ministry and it's all your own personal effort, then go ahead and charge rip people off).

Now I'm not saying that if you are a full time worker in the church that you shouldn't be paid. In 1 Corinthians 9 Paulus says that he does have the right to be supported by the church where he was teaching. (Although in his case, he didn't exercise that right, he would rather do extra work on the side than have anyone be able to say that he was just trying to profit from the gospel).

But even then, there is a big difference between being supported while you work there, and charging for a specific ministry. This is very different from charging admission. Or charging a fee to copy or download a sermon. Or even charging for a song or a book which has Christian teaching. I know there are costs involved with some ministry. But let's trust God to provide those costs instead of just doing the math and charging everyone for something that should be free.

The other problem I have with it, is that it puts a barrier up for the "lower classes". Lower income people who can't afford to pay for these things. It attracts the wealthier middle class, and makes church much more socially acceptable. Like a club for the middle classes. (Or is that what we're deliberately trying to do when we charge?)

In the kingdom of God there are no classes.

Things have changed in Western culture haven't they.

We're now totally obsessed with money.

We don't want to give it away to anyone.

We don't want anyone else to get something for free.

We somehow think that if we have money that we earned it. Or even worse. That we deserve it.

We live in million dollar houses and we won't even give someone a free coffee when they visit our church.

Church has one goal. Reaching the lost with the message of the good news of Yeshua. Everything we do should be based on that.

Everything we do should be measured in terms of how it helps or hinders that goal. Not by how much it costs.

Should church be "user pays"? Definitely not.

We're lucky that salvation isn't user pays. Because we couldn't afford it.

Let's stop begging from non-Christians. In fact, let's start refusing to take their money.

And let's give God the chance to bring glory to himself by trusting him to provide for our needs as we minister to others on his behalf, rather than just opening ourselves up to the, (justifiable), charge that we are just after people's money.

Holy Spirit, not Marketing

It's not our job to attract non-believers.
That's the job of the holy spirit.

If we attract them when he isn't, then we're wasting our time anyway and they still won't be saved.
If he attracts them, then it won't matter whether church is entertaining or not, they will be drawn by him, and they will be saved.

One of the most amazingly effective messages I've ever heard about was "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God".
Preached by Jonathan Edwards in Massachusetts in 1741.
It ended with the entire congregation, prostrate on the floor, crying, begging God for forgiveness.
And yet it was read from a written script, in monotone, with no particular emphasis or emotion.

It was powerful because the holy spirit was drawing the people. (And inspiring the message).

As Paulus said in 1 Corinthians 2, his message wasn't convincing because of his persuasiveness, or eloquence, but because they were delivered in the power of the holy spirit.

Why are so many churches so focused on being well marketed?
On being trendy, and attractive.

We're not selling fashion. We are preaching the message of salvation.
It is not a logical argument that we can win by debate. It is not something we can prove using science.
It requires faith. Faith requires the work of the holy spirit.

A Republic, not an Empire

In the Bible, churches had a multitude of leaders, not a single Pastor. Is that a solid evolution? Does single Pastor just fit our culture better? Are there any rules for this kind of thing?

Actually the Bible makes it clear that there is only supposed to be one form of government in general, let alone of the church. "Benevolent dictatorship" is the only Biblical model for good government.

For some people, "dictatorship" has some bad connotations, so let's go with "benevolent monarch". It has the same idea. One person has absolute power, but that's a good thing because they are benevolent. They genuinely have the best interests of everyone else in mind, and they rule accordingly. This is how God rules.

This is how he wanted to rule Israel, but they wanted their own king like the nations around them. In the end he let them have what they wanted. But that didn't work out too well for them.

But what about the church?
What should church government look like?

It's the same really.
Yeshua rules the church as benevolent monarch.
The Bible is very clear, that Yeshua alone is the head of the church.

If only it was that easy.

The Bible also talks about Elders and Deacons, (and some other titles depending on which English version you read). Basically, there are two roles.

Biblical Elders are responsible for the spiritual oversight of the congregation, (including themselves...).

They are there to make sure we are taught correctly, and that we are safe and growing to maturity as Christians.

They are our examples and mentors. They care for our wellbeing. But they are not our kings, nor our lords. Only Yeshua has that title.

They pray for us.

Deacon really just means servant. And Biblical Deacons are servants of the congregation. They are there to make sure that all our physical needs are met.

To make sure we have enough food. That we have chairs to sit on.

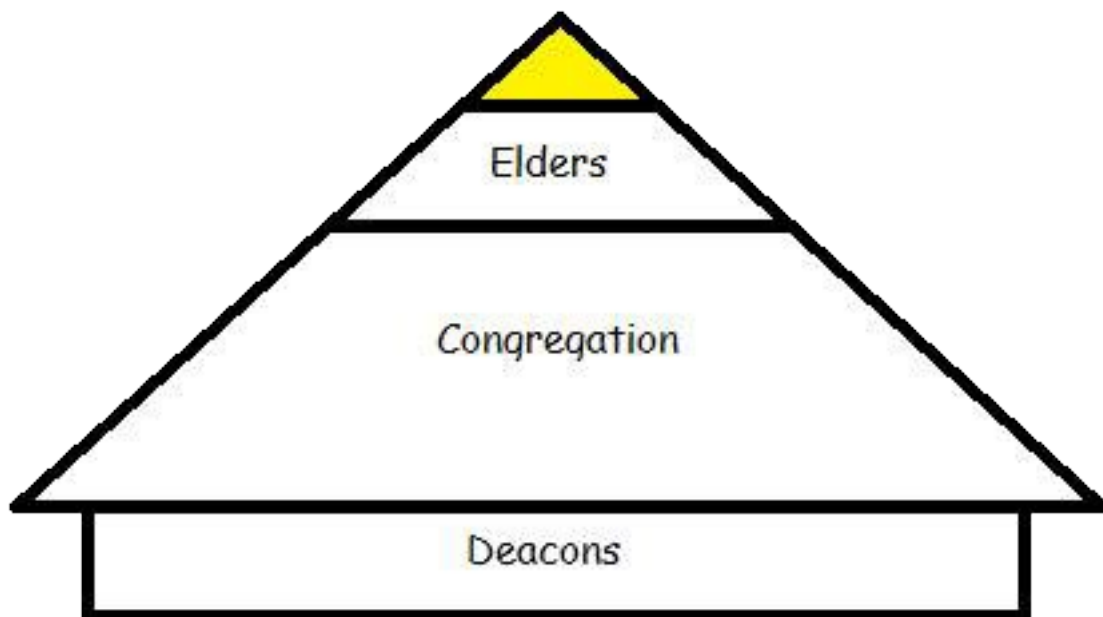
They make sure our money is properly looked after and distributed fairly.

They make sure that our buildings and properties, (if we have any, or even if we rent them), are cared for and looked after.

They do all this practical stuff, so the Elders can focus on prayer and teaching.

They too care for us and love us. But in different ways.

So we end up with this kind of structure:



Yeshua is the sole head of the church.
The Elders are following him and leading us.
The Deacons are bringing up the rear. They are our support team.

This is the Biblical model for church government and leadership.

So how do Elders and Deacons get the job?

In most churches they are elected.
But democracy has no place in church. It's not God's model for government.

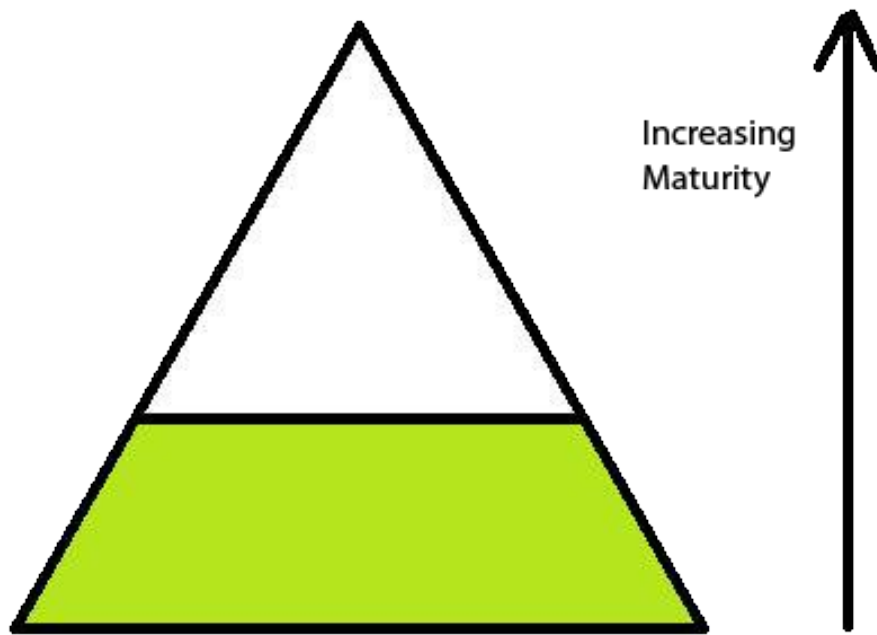
The only thing close to a democratic election of leadership in the Bible seems to be in Acts 1.
But this was before they received the Holy Spirit, and honestly, I think they got it wrong. And even so, they were elected by chance, not by anyone voting.

In Acts 6 the Apostles, (basically in the role of Elders), asked for the names of some spiritually mature men that could effectively become Deacons.

They would be responsible for the practical oversight of the church. They were not elected. Nobody voted. They were known to be spiritually mature. And the "Elders" approved of the choice and appointed them to the task.

After that, Elders were appointed by the Apostles who started each local church. (Or by their representatives).

In fact, there is a major problem with democracy in church.
If the church is growing properly then there will be many more young Christians in the church than there are mature Christians.
It will look a bit like this:



The number of people in the white triangle, (the mature Christians), will be the same as the number in the green part, (the young Christians).

So, in a democracy, the youngest Christians would end up running the church.

Contrary to the belief of most young people today, ... that is a really bad idea.

I'm not saying young Christians are stupid. But making these decisions requires spiritual maturity that they simply do not have yet. Paulus says that nobody should be an Elder unless their children are already grown up, (and turning out well).

He also says that they shouldn't be recent converts, (because it's too dangerous for them). The youngest Christians just shouldn't run the church.

Elders have the responsibility to make the leadership decisions for the church. That's their job.

They cannot abdicate this role to a vote from the congregation just because the world does it that way.

Just as a father has the responsibility to lead his family, (while taking their needs into consideration), so the Elders have the responsibility to lead the church.

But they do not have the authority to give that responsibility to someone else.

So, Elders must make the decisions themselves.

(Of course they should listen to the congregation, young and mature, and take what they think into consideration).

So the current Elders should be choosing spiritually mature leaders from the congregation to join them as they come along.

Deacons also need to be spiritually mature Christians.

They will often, (but not always), also be teachers and mentors.

But their main tasks in relation to the church will be about practical matters.

Deacons should also be chosen by the Elders.

In Acts 6 the men were proposed by the congregation, but the decision was ratified by the Elders.

They weren't elected, they were simply put forward as men who were known to be spiritually mature.

The initiation of the whole process and the final decision was done by the Elders.

And there is one more "government" thing that I have seen done badly in so many churches. A Deacon is not an apprentice Elder.

Deacons are men with gifts for managing practical things.

Elders are men with gifts for teaching, pastoring and spiritual leadership.

I think it would be very rare to find someone who can do both.

A Deacon is not a second class leader, they are very spiritual men who have different gifts to the Elders.

And just because you are a good Deacon does not in any way mean you will be a good Elder, (or vice versa).

That's just the way the world does it.

And I think that is where we get the idea of a single Pastor leading the church.

He's the CEO.

But this is not a business, it's the church.

We have a CEO. Yeshua.

We need to follow his model, and have a group of Elders, and a group of Deacons.

Sure, most Pastors are pretty talented. But guaranteed they will be weak in something.

And them claiming every role for themselves, will leave the church lacking in some gifts.

Them claiming they are spiritually mature enough to run the whole church without needing a group of Elders... is just arrogant. (And wrong).

Of course it's totally OK to have a full time pastor.

As long as he's either one of the Elders, or reports to them.

Let's stick to doing it Yeshua's way.

A Community, not a Download

With gatherings restricted because of COVID, almost every Western church I know of has gone “online”.

Either live streaming or at least recording and publishing a video feed of their weekly meeting.

But now that we’re gathering together in-real-life, church attendance has dropped remarkably.

From what I see, that is especially true amongst the younger generation.

Christians have gotten used to being able to “attend” church without leaving home.

Church on the couch, in your jammies, with coffee maker at the ready...

“Couch Church” - how good is that!

For most smaller churches this has added another problem.

They were never very attractive in the first place, but now they have to work out how to have an online presence, when they don’t really have people who understand the technology, let alone how to make it look good at the same time.

Couch Church has also given everyone the opportunity to try out some of the other churches around them.

Churches with bigger budgets, and I.T. teams.

And of course the big budget, more “professional” churches are way more attractive, and many people seem to have left the smaller churches.

And now that we can go back to church in person, face to face... many people haven’t.

They’re still couch churching - at the bigger, attractive alternatives.

I think this is a huge mistake.

They have given up way more than they have gained.

Better music, better sermons, more entertained... maybe...

But they've sacrificed relationship, intimacy, friendship.
And most importantly they've sacrificed body life.

Church is a body. You must find out what part you are in that body, and you must be the best part you can be.
You must fulfil your role in the body for the benefit of the church.
Not just for your own personal benefit (or pleasure).

If you're a foot, then you're not an artificial foot.
You can't be taken off and left at home. You have to function as a foot, helping the rest of the body.
Otherwise your life will be totally unsatisfying.
No amount of entertainment will be able to make up for that.

Hebrews 10 warns us not to stop gathering together. It reminds us that even back then, this was a problem. That some people didn't gather as often as they should.
It reminds us that the purpose of gathering is to build the others up.
It's not about getting, even though we get. It's about fulfilling the role for which we were created.
It's about achieving our purpose in life.

1 Corinthians 12 is about how we were all baptised into one body.
This is our destiny.
You are not an individual Christian, because there is no such thing.
A Christian is by definition, part of a body.

And that body needs to work together.
It needs to live and grow together.
We need to hang out. We need to talk. We need to get to know each other.
Even going to church on Sundays isn't enough really. We need to live our lives intertwined with each other.
We need to love one another.

Online church is way more impersonal. It caters way too much for our modern preference to withdraw from society so we can present the online us the way we want to be seen.

It's fake. It's just watching a performance on TV.
It's not being there.
It's not community.

Church needs to be living together as a community. Building each other up. Functioning as a body.
You cannot do that online.

Worship, not a Production

There is some great Christian music.

I remember when I was a young Christian, one of the teens in the church gave me a cassette tape that they had made themselves, of all their favourite Christian songs. I loved it. It changed my world. About 6 months later I went to California for a business trip. As soon as I had the chance I headed to the local Christian bookstore. I bought about 50 CDs! All the songs from the cassette, and then some.

I ended up with literally hundreds and hundreds of CDs over the years.

Some music is just phenomenal. So moving. So powerful.

Sometimes “worship” at church can be moving like that too. But I say “worship” in quotes, because I don’t get how we made worship mean music.

Worship is telling God how amazing, how awesome you think he is. Especially compared to yourself.

Worship is mentioned in every book of the Bible, except John’s letters, and it’s almost always without music.

What are the most amazing Bible worship stories?

When Paulus and Silas sang in prison?

(OK, so it **can** be music... but it doesn’t have to be)

The woman with the alabaster jar of perfume who anointed Yeshua?

The women who put her last two copper coins into the offering?

When Abraham offered up his own son as a sacrifice?

When Yeshua, son of Yahweh offered himself up in our place, as an act of obedience to his father.

Worship costs.

It's not always about music.

It's about declaring to whoever is listening, by word or deed, that Yahweh is way more important than us, and we choose to serve him with everything we have, and with everything we are.

We put a lot of pressure on our "worship team" at church.

We make like it's a huge production number every week, that has to go perfectly.

Maybe we should let them sit one out every now and then, and just get on our faces ourselves and actually worship God.

Participants, not Spectators

Do you ever feel guilty that you're not a full time missionary in some foreign country? Don't you feel like you have failed because so few people, (if any), have become Christians through you?

In Matthew 28 Yeshua said "Go and make disciples of all nations". Now, there is something we can easily miss because we are reading it in modern English. More accurately, Yeshua said "Go ye and make disciples of all nations". Ye is old English for you, (it's plural). (Actually, according to a Greek professor I know, there is another important difference: Yeshua actually said, "As ye go", not "Go ye". "As ye go, make disciples of all nations". But more about that later.)

And regardless of the Greek text, if you think about the context - Yeshua was talking to his disciples, (plural). He wasn't talking to one disciple, he was talking to them all together as a group. He was giving them a command as a team.

Imagine a soccer coach says to his team "Go out there and score goals".

Early in the first half, Peter passes the ball to the star player, Harold, who singlehandedly dodges past 2 defenders and slams the ball past the opposition goalie to score a goal. The other team shoots several times in the first half, but goalkeeper Mike dives again and again to stop every shot.

A few minutes into the second half, fullback Charles carelessly trips the other team's player just as he is about to shoot and gives away a penalty kick. Mike tries his best, but can't stop the penalty shot from going in. Late in the game Albert scores with a header from David's corner kick. And right at the final whistle Mike does an amazing save to stop the other team scoring.

The team wins 2-1.

How do you think the coach is feeling?

Can you imagine him angrily yelling at his players, “I told you to go out there and score goals and only 2 of you did it. Harold, Albert, well done. The rest of you... I’m very disappointed. Mike, I can’t believe you even let the other team score a goal!”

Of course this makes no sense. Of course he is happy, his team won 2-1. Albert scored a goal, but if David’s corner kick hadn’t been good, there would have been no goal. The one goal that did get past Mike, was more Charles’ fault than Mike’s. And if Mike hadn’t saved so many shots from the opposition, the team may have lost 2-5 instead of winning 2-1. Harold did score a goal “singlehandedly”, but what do you think the score would be if all the other players sat down and it was Harold vs the other team? And where did Harold get the ball from to start his amazing run for goal?

“Go out there and score goals” wasn’t a command to individual players, it was a team command. What the coach meant was “work as a team and score goals”.

This is what Yeshua meant too, when he was talking to his disciples. “As you go, work as a team and make disciples of all nations”.

It is important that someone scores the goal, but we are a team. We need to work together as a team and recognise our dependence on each other.

We give too much emphasis to the person who “scores the goal”, the person who is the last link in the chain of people who plays a part in someone becoming a Christian, and not enough recognition to the team of people, all doing their part so that as the team, that we call “the church”, we can make disciples of all nations.

And a soccer team is not just 11 players. It’s them, their coaches, their bus drivers, the people who sew the uniforms, the ones who bring out the half time drinks....How could the team play without uniforms? Or shoes? Maybe you are “only” the person who makes the shoes. Or the one who sews the uniforms. Maybe you’re “just” the kid who brings out the oranges during the break. Everyone on the team, (the whole

team, not just the ones on the field), is an important part of the team, and without everyone, working together as a team by all doing their bit well, the team wouldn't be successful.

It's the same with our Christian team. We might think that it's only the full time workers and missionaries who are "on the field" playing. But we are all part of the team. Maybe you just teach a little Bible class, or get alongside people who are struggling from time to time. Maybe you just make cookies for the youth group. Maybe you just pack up the chairs or wash the dishes. These are all important roles. You are all members of the team.

Read Romans 12. It's all about how, as Christians, we are all parts of one body. You are a hand, I am a foot, someone else is an eye, or an ear. Paulus says that all the parts are important, even the ones we don't usually give special attention to. We don't need a body with 10 eyes but no hands, no feet, no ears. We don't all have to be evangelists. In fact, we mustn't all be evangelists.

It's not important whether you are the final link in someone's chain. It matters that you are part of the team, and that you are doing the role that Yeshua gave you to do. And that you are doing it well.

And it matters that you know, that whatever your role, you are important. We need you on the team. Just as a body can't properly function with bits missing, so the Christian team cannot properly function without you. Yeshua needs you on the team, that's why he picked you to be part of it.

Many western Christians have heard of D.L. Moody, the famous American evangelist. Literally thousands of people throughout America became Christians at meetings where he preached. But have you ever heard of Edward Kimble?

Edward Kimble was a nobody. He had an ordinary job and all he did for God was teach kids at the Sunday school of his local church. In his whole life he was only that "final link in the chain" for one person.

So, who is greater? D.L. Moody who was the final link for thousands upon thousands or Edward Kimble who was the final link for just one?

Does it change your answer if I tell you that the only person that Edward Kimble ever led to Yeshua was D.L. Moody? Who is greater? Only God can answer that. But what if we asked D.L. Moody, what would he say?

Our goal, our job, our commission as the church is “as we go, working together as a team, make disciples of all nations.” If Yeshua calls you to be a full time missionary you definitely should do that. But if he doesn’t, that’s because he has another role on the team for you. You don’t need to feel guilty about that. You don’t even need to feel bad if you never “led anyone to Christ”. Maybe that’s just not your job.

You’re meant to be part of the team, and not just standing around watching everyone else do it. Find your job. Do it well. Even if it’s just being the water boy. Even if it’s “just” sewing uniforms. Every part of the body is important. Every member of the team is important. The “Great Commission” is a team command.

Giving, not Making

It's not just that a church shouldn't be a business.
The church is the "hands and feet" of Yeshua. His representatives on earth.

Shouldn't their focus be like his... giving. Not taking?

It really bothers me when I see a wealthy church.
And especially if they spend that wealth on an impressive building.
And have high paid pastors who drive luxury cars.

In the Old Testament the Jews did have a temple.
God didn't want one. He wanted a tent.
But when he did finally cave in and let them build one. It was impressive.
Very impressive.
Filled with gold this and gold that.

It was definitely designed to attract.
And to glorify God by showing how much his people would spend on a temple for him to live in.
(BTW: It's kind of interesting though that Solomon spent 7 years building the temple, and 14 years building his own palace.)

But this is the New Testament.
God doesn't dwell in temples made by man any more.
He dwells in churches. In groups of people!

When we spend so much on a building, that God doesn't even live in... I wonder who we're really glorifying?
I don't think it's him.

And we represent Yeshua. The son of God who sacrificed himself completely for his enemies.
How do we have the same attitude if we spend all our money on making our own lives luxurious?

On building expensive buildings.

Can you honestly imagine that if someone gave Yeshua two million dollars he would spend it on a building?

Can you imagine if someone gave the early, (Acts), church two million dollars they would have spent it on a building?

If your church has that much money, it should be thinking about how to give it away!

I remember in the GFC of 2008, hearing that the main Anglican Church in Australia had lost 8 million dollars in the stock market crash.

I was a bit stunned really. Not that they had lost the money, but they had eight million dollars and they had just invested it like they were a bank, or some kind of business.

The church is never going to run out of money.

(Well, until it's taken away at the rapture anyway, and after that nobody is going to care).

God doesn't need your money. He never did. He never will.

Give it away, if your church needs more, he'll send more.

If you think that giving is about money, then you have completely missed the point. Giving is about your heart. It's about your attitude.

It's about your willingness to trust God.

It's about you serving God and about you not serving money.

The band "Everybody Duck" has a great song called "Get in the plate".

It basically says, that if you really want to give to God, then next time you're at church and the plate comes around... get in.

Give your **self** to God, not your money.

God wants you to reach a point where you rely on him for your security instead of relying on material things.

It's true that God does like you to demonstrate your heart attitude by giving your material things to him.
But God doesn't need money from anyone.

Btw: God definitely doesn't need to go begging to non-Christians for money.

And he doesn't need to have a fund raiser to flog off useless junk and hot dogs to passers by either.

If God wants something to happen he will arrange the funding. Trust him.

Read "L'Abri" by Francis Schaefer. Or the biography of George Mueller or Hudson Taylor.

Seriously. God is loaded. And you don't find biographies of Christians who trusted God to provide and didn't receive what they needed.

If you need money for some ministry that you believe God has called you to, then just trust him.

I don't even think you need to ask him. He already knows that you need it.

Do sparrows ask God for food? You are worth more than many sparrows.

If you need money or material things for God's work, then just trust him and they will come.

If he doesn't send the money, then maybe you were wrong - maybe it's not God's work after all?

Perhaps it's time to start fasting and praying about your ministry. Collectively too, about your church's ministry.

Perhaps it's time to start fasting and praying about recognising needs and wants.

Our Western culture is blaring the message louder and louder every day... "IT'S ALL ABOUT MONEY".

But it's not true.

It's all about God.

It's all about trusting him and relying on him for your security.

Yeshua even literally said, "You cannot serve both God and money".

It's your choice which one you serve, but you can't serve both. It's impossible.

So which is it going to be?

A Temple, not a Building

Some of the temples around the world have incredible architecture. Massive buildings with huge rooms and high ceilings, and often having ridiculously ornate decorations - with gold everywhere, sometimes even jewels, and filled with incredible paintings and statues. They try to, and often succeed in, evoking feelings of magnificence and awe, and reverence.

Temples are designed to impress.

To impress the god they are built for. To say, “This is how great we think you are. We have offered up all this valuable stuff to build a temple for you”.

But also to impress people I think - there is definitely some “our god is greater than your god, and we have the temple to prove it” going on with some of them.

Yahweh, the only real god, used to live in a temple like that. In Jerusalem.

But his actual home is in heaven. And from what the Bible says, there is a temple there that would make anything we could build look like a child’s cubby house.

Like something a five year old made from cardboard boxes and blankets.

But even so... Even though the man made temple was just a child’s copy of something way more magnificent... God lived in it.

Wow.

That says more about him than it says about how great the temple was. (It was filled with gold, but where he’s from gold is so common they use it to make roads).

But he appreciated the heart of the people who were building it for him to live in. Until then he had been camping in a tent. (A very special tent, but still... a tent).

Interestingly too. It was him who told them to make that tent. He gave them very detailed instructions on how to build it. What it was to be made from. How it was to be laid out and furnished. Very exact and precise details.

And then he came to visit. God literally lived in a tent so he could talk to his people through Moses and the priests who followed after him.

If you have your Bible handy, turn to the part where God tells them to build a temple for him.

That's interesting isn't it... it's not there. There isn't one. God never told man to build him a temple.

Solomon decided to build the temple after he had spent 14 years building a palace for himself. Then he thought, "I shouldn't be living in such an ornate palace while God lives in a tent".

(Wisest man who ever lived, and he thought of that **after** he built his own palace!)

Instead of ripping the palace down, he built an even more ornate temple for God to live in.

Now, I'm not denying that God blessed their attempt anyway. And that the temple glorified him. And I'm not saying that they did something wrong.

But what I am saying is that it seems to me that temples are something men decide to make for their god to live in. Not something that their god demands from them.

And I wonder how much the decision was influenced by Solomon's desire to build flashy buildings, by his desire to show off his own immense wealth. I wonder how much it was influenced by the amazing temples that had been built to other gods which were worshipped in the countries around him. And to say, "ours is better than yours".

Yeshua said something interesting about the temple one day. "See these things? Not one stone will be left on another."

To Yeshua, the temple was just a building. Just stuff.

By then, God was over living in buildings made by man. Stephanas even reminded everyone in his famous speech of Acts 7 - The Most High does not live in houses made by men.

God was doing a new thing. No more man made houses, no more man made tents. From now on God was only going to live in temples that he had made himself.

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paulus tells the Corinthians that they are the temple of God, and that God lives among them.

In English this can be taken two ways, but the “you” here is plural. I don’t think he is saying that the individual Corinthians are temples of God, but that as a group they were a temple of God. God dwells in churches... the people, not the building.

A church is not a building. There are hundreds of sermons about the church being the people, not the building. And they are correct. The building is just a place where the church gets together every now and then.

God lives in churches, but not in buildings.

So let’s focus on building churches and not put so much emphasis, or time, or money, on building buildings.

Hand Outs, not Hands Out

It disturbs me that when churches need money they so quickly turn to non-Christians to get it.

Stereotypically, the roof needs fixing, so we have a church fair, or something like that where we flog off all our unwanted second hand goods, and bake cakes, and sell sausages, or whatever our particular ethnic equivalent is.

And we ask everyone who passes by to give us a few dollars so we can fix our roof.

Of course sometimes the cause is more noble than fixing a roof. But the principle is the same.

We say that we worship the one and only God. Creator of the universe. Saviour of people's souls. The God of all power.

But our actions show that we do not believe that this all powerful God is able to get us the money we need to fix the roof on the building we built for him - so we are coming to you non-Christians to try to get it instead.

Can you imagine Yeshua doing that?

Or the apostle Paulus? Petros? Anyone from the Bible?

In Acts we read that there was a famine in Jerusalem. And the Corinthians collected money to send to the Christians there who were suffering.

Do you think they had a church fair? Do you think they sold souvlaki or second hand urns?

Do you think they asked the non-Christians in Corinth for donations?

That's not how it reads in the Bible is it. They had a collection. In the church. From Christians.

If you wanted to give, you put money in the box. Then they collected the money and delivered it to the Christians in Jerusalem.

On a practical level these kind of church fairs don't usually raise much money anyway. They take a LOT of work. Usually for just a few hundred dollars.

I feel certain that some of the wealthier Christians in the church could have donated that much themselves without any problem at all.

Of course it's good that everyone wants to pitch in and help, and to do their bit. But if you really want to do something like that, then do it in the church. Don't go begging from non-Christians.

We represent God. Are we saying that God is a bit short this week, so could you please give us a few bucks?

We should read those biographies of people like George Mueller, Hudson Taylor, Francis Schaeffer... These guys lived their lives with the principle that if God wants something done, then he will fund it. If he doesn't fund it, then he doesn't want it done.

These three in particular never asked non-Christians for money, and I even seem to remember one case where they specifically refused money because it was from a non-Christian.

In fact, if they believed that they needed money for something, then they didn't even ask other Christians for it, they just prayed for it.

And it always came.

Shouldn't we be known more for the fact that we give hand outs?

That we help, even non-Christians who are in need.

Instead of being known for having our hands out, asking for spare change, like beggars.

Discipling, not Socialising

Doesn't your heart break when you get home from church, and you're thinking through all the conversations you had with people there, ... And it was all just gossip. Just nonsense, like the weather, or sport, or someone's new car... or what was on TV.

What a waste of time.
What a lost opportunity.

If you're spiritually mature, then church gatherings are your opportunity to disciple the less mature members of your church. If you're not spiritually mature, it's your opportunity to learn from someone who is.
Ask them questions. Listen to what they have to say.

Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 6, "These words, which I command you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them for a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the door posts of your house, and on your gates."

Hebrew parents were expected to talk with their children at every opportunity about God.
When the kids are helping in the garden we can talk about how God makes things grow, even us.
When we're fishing we can talk about how God wants to make us fishers of men.
You get the idea.

It's still true today, for the church, and its spiritual children. Whether you see yourself as the child or the parent. Don't waste your opportunities talking about the weather.

The Bible doesn't tell the church to socialise. It tells us to make disciples.

And if you read about the times where the early church gathered... there is nothing there about the great picnic they had, or a great day at the beach. Certainly nothing about how humid it's been lately, or how expensive those new chariots are.

It's all about how the truth was preached, how people were built up and encouraged, how people prayed for others, and people were healed and delivered.

How lives were changed.

What is it going to take to change your church gatherings into events like that?

You.

You can change it. You can be the catalyst that starts it all off.

One person at a time. As you meet them.

Teach or learn, depending on where you're at. Maybe a bit of both.

But don't just chat.

Don't just socialise.

We've got work to do.

On a Hill, not Under a Bushel

What does your community know about your church?

Do they know what you believe? What you are for, and what you are against?

Do they know where you are?

Do you do things for the community?

Do you help the poor?

Would you help them if the community asked you to?

Do you do anything in schools?

Do the local teenagers know anything about your church?

If they got into trouble would they call you?

What if they were feeling suicidal?

We have so much to offer the community.

We have solid beliefs founded on a reliable God.

We have the answers to the big questions of life.

We have resources to help if people are in need.

But if nobody knows that... it's all a bit of a waste isn't it.

Yeshua told us to put our light on the top of a hill, not hide it under a bushel.

Light can reveal sin as well as advertise help.

Perhaps these days, with social media backlash, and cancel culture, your church is too reluctant to be up there on a hill.

They see that as too easy a target.

But if the church won't stand up for what's right... who will?

If the church won't help the poor... who will?

If the church doesn't make a difference... who will?

We need to let them know.

In a nice way.

Not by advertising.

By going to where they are, sitting with them, talking, getting to know them.

Going through stuff with them.

And being there for them when they need us.

A Beacon, not a Soap Box

Hebrews 13 has a section in the middle telling us how Yeshua endured suffering outside the city gate in order to make his people holy.

Outside the gate was a place of shame. That's where lepers were sent. That's

where unclean things were burned. Being sent outside the gate to die was a declaration of shame and disgrace.

But Yeshua did it.

For us.

So Hebrews 13:13 is full on then... "Now then, let us go out to him, outside the camp, bearing his reproach."

Let us go outside the gate and identify ourselves with Yeshua. Even though by doing so we are identifying with his reproach. Identifying with his shame and humiliation.

Even so. Let's go.

I find an interesting parallel in modern society. Those who live in the city are the "cool" people, they are the "in" crowd. Those who live outside it are the rejects, the losers. There is a lot of social pressure on us today to be part of the in crowd. To be cool. In fact churches even try hard to be cool so they are more attractive to the worldly. (Funny, the Bible says the gospel is offensive to them, but we do all we can to not be offensive).

A lot of Christians spend a lot of time and money maintaining their connection to the in crowd.

We walk like them. We talk like them. And sadly, ... we think like them.

Here is a challenge...

Are you willing to walk outside the city gate, in full view of everyone, and to walk up to where Yeshua is suffering and declare to everyone watching, "I'm with him"?

Why not? Do you love the world more than you love Yeshua?

Are you willing for everyone to think of you as a loser? Weird? A freak? A reject? An enemy? Persona non grata?

If you are, then praise God. Push open that gate, walk out to the boos and hisses of the crowd. And stand proudly with Yeshua.

But if you're not willing, then how do you think that makes Yeshua feel? After everything he sacrificed for you. Can you imagine him looking at you standing in the crowd, not willing to step out. While he suffers.

Can you see his face? His eyes staring at you. His heart breaking with disappointment.

You know the really weird thing... even then Yeshua loves you.

This is why he died for you. Even though you know that and you still won't step out.

In the World, not Of the World

Several times in the old testament God tells Israel not to be like the nations around them. He tells them not to eat certain things, not to follow certain practices, even not to have a king. He did this because he wanted his people to stand out.

He wanted the nations around them to realise that Yahweh, the god which Israel worshipped, was the one true god. And not a man-made fake like the god they worshipped.

It's the same now for us. God wants us to be different from the world around us.

He wants us to be a light on a hill, the salt of the earth. He wants us to not conform to the culture around us.

He wants us to be different - to love one another, so that the world will know that we are his disciples.

Christians are supposed to be different.

But there seems to be a growing trend for Christians to blend in. Somehow we think that helps us be more attractive to non-Christians. But in reality I think it is the opposite. They already live like that and they know it's not working. They want something different. They want answers, not more of the same.

The church used to be worried about being infiltrated by wolves in sheep's clothing, but now I worry that it has been filled with sheep in wolves' clothing. It's getting harder to tell which ones are the Christians.

In the Bible Paulus tells us several times that we are ambassadors for Christ, and that our citizenship is not here, but in Heaven. We're not from here.

Tourists aren't from here either. But tourists are only interested in having fun. They go around and do all the things the locals do. They try to blend in. But of course the locals can see that they are just tourists. They are only kidding themselves that they blend in.

But ambassadors, while interested in local customs, are focused on business. They want to expose the locals to the customs from their own home country. They only want to know local customs to the extent that it helps them understand this country and how to better communicate the message of how much greater the ambassador's home country is than this one.

If we get drunk like they do, if we sleep around like they do, if we illegally download music like they do, if we gossip and swear like they do, even if we focus on money and prosperity like they do, how will they know that we are different? How will they know that Yahweh our god is the one true god?

In fact, we should be actively looking for ways we can differentiate ourselves. How can we shine like stars in this ever darkening world?

Btw: it's also important that we focus on our own lifestyle, not on pointing fingers at theirs. We should live holy lives but it doesn't matter if they don't. They don't know God, why should they live holy lives!

We should be known for our holiness, but also for our love and acceptance, and not for our judgement and finger pointing.

Yeshua has told us to be different. And the stakes are high - either we're different and they know we are his disciples, or we blend in and they don't. But then how will they be saved?

How about you? Are you different?

Which one are you - ambassador or tourist?

Salt, not Honey

The church is supposed to be the salt of the earth.
We're so concerned about being liked, that we taste more like honey.

We don't speak out about homosexuality and promiscuity.
We don't preach against pre-marital sex, even though most of our teens think it's just "normal" these days.
We don't even seem to be willing to speak out against abortion, which is becoming more and more common.
Babies killed because they were inconvenient.
And we're so concerned about being "welcoming" that we don't say anything.

If we can just get them to come, they'll be saved by our message.
But what if we watered down the message so much that there was no taste left at all?

We're so fixated on getting them to come to us, and being attractive.
We're supposed to be going to them, and we're supposed to be a bit offensive.
Not deliberately provoking them for the sake of it, but Yeshua says the world will hate us.
We need to accept that.

Our message needs to be different to what they're already hearing.
Otherwise there is nothing to make them even want to consider accepting it.
They think they already do! So many people already think they're Christians, and that they're OK with God.
Even though they're openly gay, or living together without being married.
Even though they think it's OK that they had 3 abortions already.
Or that they get off their face every Friday night on drugs or alcohol.

Where's the salt?

I see it a bit from the Catholic church. At least, from the Pope.
Even though there seems more and more opposition from his bishops
these days.

30 years ago nobody would have imagined the Catholic church
preaching that being gay is OK.

It doesn't look like it will be much longer.

And abortion? How can it be right?

Especially if it's just because you don't want a baby right now.

Some people think it's OK to just kill a baby if you don't want it?

I know people who would love to take care of it. And you.

Yeshua said "the world hates me because I testify about it — that its
works are wicked."

Yeshua said, "If you were from the world, the world would be fond of
its own, but because you aren't from the world, but I selected you out
of the world, the world hates you because of this."

And John wrote in 1 John, ... "Don't marvel my brothers, if the
world hates you."

Why are we so concerned if the world hates us? Isn't that a good
thing?

Doesn't it indicate that we are no longer of the world?

Doesn't it indicate we are chosen by Yeshua?

Isn't that a reason to celebrate?

Why do we try so hard to be liked by them?

Would you go out of your way to be liked by someone who killed a
family member?

And yet we go out of our way as a church to be liked by the world
which killed our saviour!

If all we give them is honey, they will never even realise that they have a problem.
They need salt.
And it's our job to deliver it.

Old School, not Old Fashioned

I have to be up front and say right from the beginning, that when it comes to the church, tradition for the sake of tradition annoys me like nothing else.

I like some traditions. I really like Thanksgiving for example. And when my kids were growing up I really liked the annual “Baba’s Challenge” where I would set my kids 10 tasks to achieve within the year. Tasks which would stretch them a bit and develop their character.

But in church we need to make sure that any tradition that we adopt is still consistent with the truth.

Take the whole Christmas/nativity thing for example.

The tradition is that three wise men, (aka kings), came to visit baby Jesus and his parents in a manger. Sadly that’s not what the Bible says.

Nowhere does it mention three of them. But it is plural, so at least two. The word it uses to describe them “magos” is usually used to refer to priests of Zoroaster, and elsewhere in the New Testament it is translated as sorcerer. (Elymas and Simon were both sorcerers in the book of Acts). But we want to make it nicer, so we call them “wise men”. We don’t want to say that three magicians or sorcerers came to visit Jesus.

When they saw Jesus they bowed down to him. The Greek word used to describe him was “paidion” which means a little child. It was not “theladzo”, (meaning newborn baby), or “nepios”, (infant). Jesus was no longer a baby when they came to visit.

After their visit Herod killed all the children 2 years and under, (based on when they told him they had first seen the star). It seems pretty likely that by the time they visited - Jesus was about 2 years old. And if that is correct then it also seems pretty unlikely that they were still living in the manger. (But I guess they could have been).

So two or more magicians from the east came to visit Jesus when he was about two years old.

And the whole Christmas thing anyway. It's incredibly unlikely that Jesus was born in December.

There is no instruction to celebrate Christmas in the Bible. In fact, as far as we can tell it was started hundreds of years later by the catholics because everyone was running off to have fun at Saturnalia, (the end of year celebration to the god Saturn), and the church adopted Christmas as a way of bringing them back.

Why, for example do we give gifts to each other?

In the Bible story the gifts **were** all given to Jesus. So then why don't we all give a gift to Jesus every Christmas?

Would it surprise you to hear that part of Saturnalia was giving gifts to each other?

Quite often I hear the argument that if we didn't have Christmas and Easter then non- Christians would never come to church. So what? Are they supposed to? I thought the church was supposed to be going to them?

You might think that this is all no big deal. But I think it is.

From what I see, we have accepted the tradition instead of the truth and it damages our perceptions. And it damages the world's perceptions about Jesus.

In fact there was never even anyone called "Jesus" in the Bible! Seriously. Jesus is a made up Latin name, created by the catholic church to differentiate him from Joshua.

The person we call Jesus was really called Joshua. Yeshua if you want to really transliterate it from Aramaic. Yeshua means "God saves".

In Greek they transliterated that name as Iesous. And in Acts 7 and Hebrews 4 you can find this name, but it is talking about the Old Testament Yeshua who led the Israelites into the promised land. (Which interestingly is kind of what the New Testament Yeshua did for us! hmmm.)

So, to avoid confusion the catholics renamed Yeshua, (the one who saved us), to Jesus. And then later on English itself changed to start words starting with I to be spelled with a J instead, but pronounced Y, (like in “you”). So the name became Jesus, (but pronounced “Yesus”).

Again, it’s now a tradition and again you might think it’s no big deal. But I still think it is.

God didn’t call him Jesus. God called him Yeshua. Why? Was he trying to tell us something?

And again we have accepted the tradition instead of the truth.

Now in the Bible there were some people who really valued tradition. The Pharisees.

In Matthew 15 you can read how Yeshua told them off because they broke the commands of God for the sake of their traditions! God had commanded them to honour their parents. But their tradition said that if you have given money to the temple then you don’t need to give any to your parents.

They were also obsessed with washing their hands, and their bowls in a special ceremony before they eat. But these were just empty ceremonies and they weren’t really washing anything at all. Yeshua said it straight... “how come you wash the outside of the bowl and not the inside?” Seriously, when you think about it, that is completely the wrong way around. If the inside of the bowl is clean you don’t even really need to wash the outside. In Mark’s account of this story we hear that they had many things like this.

Paulus says that these traditions which are handed down take you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy. And that most of them actually come from the world.

The Pharisees held the traditions of men above the commands of God. They were slaves to their traditions. And in many ways this is what blocked them from recognising Yeshua as the true son of God.

Do we put tradition above God? Are we slaves to tradition? What truth is it blocking us from seeing?

Actually if you want to find out if you're a slave to a tradition, try not doing it and see how you go.

I find that most Christians can't eat a meal without praying first. Try not doing it. See if you're a slave.

And if you're really worried, then give thanks afterwards. Even in the tradition there is no reason it has to be first.

In Galatians Paulus is lamenting that people are observing special days, and months, and years. He worries that he has wasted his time on them, and that they will be enslaved again to those things. Now he is mostly concerned there about Jewish festivals, but the same arguments apply.

At best traditions are just shadows of the truth, but in most cases they are not even that. Christianity should go beyond traditions. We have the truth. We have the spirit of God. We really don't need to be continuing any traditions which are working against that.

Why do we need to celebrate Christmas? or Easter? Why do we need to have some little token of prayer before we eat?

What other traditions do we have? What are they blocking?

What about you, and what about your church? What traditions are you following?

Please, at least examine your traditions and see if they are based on truth.

Spirit Powered, not Soul Powered

There are some incredibly talented people in the world.
And doing church is hard work.
Doing it well sometimes feels almost impossible.

But let's say you get that we're a body, and each one should be doing their bit.
So then you start looking around your church for talented people.

You find a guy who's been successfully running his own business for more than 10 years.
A teacher who is well known because her students usually go on to university.
And a nurse.

You start recruiting, getting the first guy to take on church finances, and to do a review of where all the church money is going, and particularly anywhere it is being wasted.
You ask the teacher to be in charge of the Sunday school program, and the outreach to local schools.
You ask the nurse to train people up, to be better equipped to visit the elderly and infirm.

Nice. It's finally working as it should.

Is it?

Are they spiritually gifted?

If their gifts are just natural talent, you probably just destroyed your church.

The business guy will bring all his worldly business practices with him. He's a bit ruthless with his employees, but nobody ever says so in case they get fired.

The teacher is actually domineering too. It's her way or the highway, and while a lot of her students go to university the others are deeply

harmed by the high pressure, no failure accepted culture of her classroom.

And the nurse loves doing her job, and is very caring and loving towards her patients, but honestly, she needs a break from that on weekends. Now she doesn't get one, ever.

During the week she works with kids with cancer, and any spare time she used to have she trains people in the church how to look after old people. (Do you think she'll last?)

If you were picking a group of say ten or so people to take over your church when you're gone, would you pick some fishermen, a political activist, a Hebrew scholar, some tradies, and a thief?

Yeshua did.

What did he know that you don't?

Everyone in your church has a spiritual gift. It might or might not match their natural talents, and it might or might not be evident by what job they do.

You need to get to know them. Know their character. Know their passions. Know their hearts.

Then you might have a chance of choosing good leaders as you hand that list over to the Holy Spirit to show you who is best, and what roles they should be serving in.

They all have some spiritual gift. Get everyone involved in church. But don't rely on worldly thinking to choose your church leaders. Don't rely on worldly thinking to assign roles to anyone in your church.

Grace, not Law

I recently saw a live performance of “Les Miserables”. It is a great story.

After being imprisoned for 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister’s starving child, Jean Valjean is released on parole. Javert is the policeman he must report to, his parole officer.

But society does not welcome him back, and at his lowest point he meets Bishop Myriel. The bishop, who is not well off himself, gives him food and shelter. But he repays him by stealing the silverware. Of course he is caught and returned to the bishop by the police. But with Jean Valjean’s life in his hands the bishop explains to the police that this man is his friend, and that in his rush to leave he forgot the candlesticks which are part of the set of silverware. The candlesticks which he then gives to him.

The police release him, and Jean Valjean is forever changed.

He becomes a good man and even becomes mayor of the town.

Fontine is a single mother, a widow, and works in Jean Valjean’s factory, from which she is unfairly dismissed by his foreman. In her desperation she turns to prostitution to provide for her child, Cosette. When he hears what happened to her, Jean Valjean rescues her from prostitution, and on her deathbed promises to take care of Cosette. Which he does, raising her as his own daughter.

The second half of the play revolves around the French revolution. Jean Valjean supports the masses in their uprising against the corrupt nobility.

When Javert the policeman is captured as a spy, Jean Valjean is permitted to execute him. But he allows Javert to go free.

To the great distress of Javert who cannot understand this response and commits suicide because he cannot face the revelation that he has spent his whole life pursuing a man to punish him, but the man is actually a good person.

Later Jean Valjean also risks his own life to save the life of Marius, (Cosette's fiancé).

That is not the whole the story, and there are other "sub plots" within the play. But it's enough to make a challenging point about grace and law.

Javert represents "Law", and despite his constant effort over many years he is unable to change Jean Valjean.

In fact the efforts of the Law actually make him a worse person. Initially he very reluctantly stole a loaf of bread. But after 19 years in prison under the daily influence of the Law he willingly stole the silverware from the one person who had shown him any compassion at all.

Javert continued to pursue Jean Valjean for his entire life. Desperately trying to prove what a bad person he was and to condemn him for whatever he could prove that he had done wrong. All the Law wants is to convict people of their mistakes and to punish them. It has no positive effect on them at all. If there is any change at all, it only makes them worse.

On the other hand, Bishop Myriel represents "Grace". He interacted with Jean Valjean for only one night. But in that one brief interaction Jean Valjean was permanently changed for the good. He instantly wanted to become a better person. And he did. Becoming mayor, rescuing Fontine, raising Cosette as his own daughter, saving her fiancé after the revolution, and giving Javert back his life. Grace wants to overlook the wrong which has been done and to do something to bless the wrongdoer.

The Law is relentless, it never gives up. But Grace needs only one opportunity.

So what? What does that mean for us?

We see the same thing in the Bible. The Law, (the Old Testament), convicts us of sin. It doesn't help us to change. At first it looks like it will, but it is powerless to do so. The Law just makes us feel worse. The Law makes us guilty. But even more, Paulus says that the law actually makes us want to break it. And we do.

But the free gift of grace, (the New Testament), which comes from God through Yeshua - changes us. You cannot become a Christian and remain unchanged.

Look at Paulus for example. As for following the Law he was "perfect", but it made him ruthless, unloving, cold, legalistic. It made him a murderer! But after he was touched by grace he became loving, forgiving, self sacrificing.

A life of following the Law almost destroyed him, but grace changed him from the inside out after one brief encounter.

But Paulus is just typical of all of us. God could rightfully encounter all of us with law. But because of Yeshua, he is able to encounter us with grace. None of us could possibly stand if he used law. We are all guilty. We are all condemned.

But God is not the god of law, he is the god of grace. And in his grace he has accepted us. And it makes us want to change. It makes us want to be better people. It makes us want to live lives which please him.

So how about us, the church? How about your church?
What do people encounter when they encounter us?
Especially if they've sinned against us. Grace or Law?

Do we legalistically point out their flaws and their failings and reject them? Or do we overlook their failings.

Do we forgive them?

Do we assume the worst or do we struggle to find one possible positive interpretation of their behaviour?

Do we presume innocence or do we presume guilt?

Most of us hope the guy speeding past us on the road meets a cop just around the corner. Most of us don't want people to get away with doing the wrong thing. (Unless of course the person doing the wrong thing is us!).

Most of us are upset when some young guy who blatantly broke a serious law doesn't go to jail.

That is law. But what if we were people of grace instead of people of law?

How incredible would it be if not matter what people had done, the church responded with grace, and those people were permanently changed for the better.

What if the story of the church was a trail of grace?

What if everyone who encountered the church could trace their new life in Yeshua back to that single moment?

What if thousands of people celebrating their new lives gave credit to your church for that moment of grace. For that instant where you could have responded with law or grace, and you chose grace.

When you could have justifiably responded with law and condemned them for their wrong doing, (and would have destroyed their life by doing so), but instead you chose grace.

Just like God did when he encountered you.

Just like God did when he encountered me.

Just like God did when he encountered every member of every church.

Judging, not Judgemental

Responding with grace doesn't mean ignoring sin.

The church still needs to stand up for righteous living.

We still need to be known for living good moral lives.

People need to know what moral means.

We need to represent God's opinion on things like gay marriage, abortion, sex outside marriage, greed, social justice, climate change.

But like the cliché, "hate the sin but love the sinner".

We must make sure we meet people with grace, not with law.

We must make sure that our church reputation is that we are not judgemental.

But within the church it must be different.

We cannot allow immoral people in our church leadership.

They can be in our church, but not in our leadership.

If they become Christians, the holy spirit himself will lead them through their sins, one by one, prompting them, and guiding them to change.

As their church family we should help them through that process, but it's not our job to demand that they address any particular sin in any particular order.

But just like in the letter of Jude.

We must stamp out immorality in our church leaders. Or they will take us down a road much worse than the one we find ourselves on now.

False teachers, the sexually immoral, the greedy, the corrupt.

We must say no. You cannot be a leader here.

You cannot be a pastor. You cannot be an elder.
You cannot lead worship. You cannot lead our youth.
You cannot teach our children.
You cannot serve in any public capacity, where you are seen to represent our church.

If our leaders are anything like that, they have to go. (They can stay in the church, they just cannot be in any kind of leadership role).
And it's not just the obvious sins, like having affairs, or embezzling money.

If you read those lists in the New Testament.. the one that stands out to me is greed.

And I see a lot of greedy people in the church.

I once moved to a new area, and joined a local church that looked pretty good at first.

They had a vibrant group of young adults, people were friendly, and we had some great times with them as we invited them all over for dinner. (Two families at a time).

But after we had been there a while we suddenly found out that they were building a real-estate empire worth millions of dollars.

All driven by the pastor who had failed as a real-estate investor before he became a pastor.

Buying up all the houses around the church, (at \$1M each), so that when the church became big they could make a car park for 2,000 people.

(At the time the church had about 100 regulars).

At the end of the year they would always ask for donations to help meet their shortfall.

It turned out that the shortfall was because of their massive real-estate mortgage. \$350,000 dollars a year in repayments! For buildings they mostly weren't even using yet.

They could only cover it because of a very generous donation every year from a very wealthy member of the church.

But in the end, they couldn't keep up. So they decided that they could no longer afford to have a youth pastor.

They fired him, so they could keep their real-estate empire going. And the young adults group was pretty much the best thing in the whole church!

That was nearly 20 years ago.

They still only have about 100 members.

They still don't need the parking space.

Honestly, for me, that kind of greed disqualifies you as a church leader.

He should have been gone a long time ago.

Church leaders need to be judging everyone. They have to protect the flock.

And sometimes difficult decisions need to be made.

But we have to balance judging with making sure we are not judgemental.

Love, not Not Hate

In John 13 Yeshua gave us a new commandment. “Love one another”. It’s the only commandment he gave us. It’s pretty important.

In fact, Yeshua said that when the world sees how we love one another they will realise that we are his disciples.

Not when they see the size of our mega-church, or how prosperous we are, or even how great our music is. When they see how much we love one another.

In Matthew 22 Yeshua summed up “The Law” in two statements. Love God. Love one another. Do both of those, and you have satisfied the law.

And, generally, as we read the Bible and build up “the big picture” in our heads... It seems that in Old Testament times, God’s dealing with man had more of an emphasis on the first... Love God. But in New Testament times, (now), God seems to be dealing with us in a different way. Now his emphasis is on the second... Love one another.

God has given us the Holy Spirit to help us choose wisely, to enable us to live life his way. He wants us to focus particularly on one thing... love one another.

To be honest, in most churches the people hardly even know one another. They’re not even close to loving one another.

I have seen churches where they have come to this realisation of how important this is, and they’ve really tried to love one another. It’s a beautiful thing.

But it’s not easy.

And even if we do come to this realisation and want to love one another. How do we do that? What does that mean?

Some time ago now, Gary Chapman wrote a book called “Five Love Languages”. If you have never read it. Get one. Read it. This book is fundamental if you want to love others.

In the book he describes 5 “languages” or styles of feeling loved. See the appendix on Love Languages for more detail.

Now, if, for example, your love language is Gifts, but I try to show you love by Acts of Service... You will not understand what I am saying. I will be saying “I love you” but you won’t understand it. If your language is Gifts, and I want to show you love, I need to give you a gift.

Just like, if you only speak English but I say “愛するよ”。 You just won’t understand what I’m saying. I’ll think I’m telling you that I love you, but you won’t be hearing it.

This can revolutionise your church. Not just to try to love one another, but to do it in the language of the one being loved.

Find the Gifts people in your church, and give them gifts. (It doesn’t have to be expensive, but wrap it nicely, make some effort).

Find the Quality Time people in your church, and spend time with them focussed on doing what they love doing. (Not just with them, but focus on them).

Find the Acts of Service people and do something for them. (This one is tough because these people really struggle to let others do things for them. Maybe they’ll let you help them do something).

Find the Physical Touch people in your church, and give them a hug or a pat on the shoulder. (In the appendix on Love Languages, I talk about how Chapman’s “Physical Touch” language may be more about intimacy and trust, and not just about touch. Share a secret with them).

Find the Words of Encouragement people in your church, and compliment them on something. (But make sure it’s true, and that you mean it).

Loving one another, (in their language), is fundamental to being a successful church. You have to make this happen.

Have you ever done something which you later realised has really hurt one of your good friends? The kind of thing which makes you try to avoid them for a while because you know that that conversation is going to be pretty uncomfortable.

Peter did that. He told Yeshua that he would stand by him even if it meant his own death. Yeshua said that Peter was wrong, he wouldn't. Yeshua said that Peter would deny him completely to save his own life. Yeshua was right.

At the time when Yeshua needed him the most, when he was falsely arrested, when he had every right to expect his close friends to stand up in his defence... That very night, just as Yeshua had said, Peter denied three times that he even knew Yeshua.

And as he denied it the third time he heard the rooster crow, and remembering what Yeshua had said, he looked over to where Yeshua was.

At that same moment Yeshua lifted his head and looked directly at Peter.

I can imagine Yeshua's look of disappointment, I can imagine that gut-wrenching knot that would have formed in the pit of Peter's stomach as he saw that disappointment on Yeshua's face, and he realised what he had just done.

No wonder he went off and bawled his eyes out. I probably would have been sick.

That realisation. And knowing that there was nothing you could ever do to take it back.

And after you have let your friend down, eventually the day comes when avoiding each other is no longer possible and you have to face them.

You know they have every right to hate you, to yell at you, to abuse you.

Fortunately you're among a bigger group of friends, ... but then, "Can we talk?"

The anxiety, the pounding heart, the cold clammy sweats as you walk off together to a quieter place.

And then Yeshua asks Peter, "Do you love me?"

Nailed.

How can he respond to that? If he says "Yes" then Yeshua can ask, "Then why did you abandon me in my hour of need!" Peter knows that when it came down to it, he didn't love Yeshua at all. Peter humbly answers with the truth, "No." He says, "You know I'm fond of you."

Are you married? Can you imagine if your spouse asked, "Do you love me?" and you replied with, "You know I'm fond of you"? What life expectancy would you put on that relationship! It's in a bad place.

Yeshua asks Peter again, "Do you love me?" and Peter replies again, "I'm fond of you."

Do you think he's wondering if Yeshua is letting him get away with this? Do you think he's hoping "fond of" is enough? Do you think he's squirming, knowing that he deserves to feel this uncomfortable?

The third time Yeshua asks Peter, "Are you fond of me?" Peter knows that he's nailed. He knows he didn't get away with it. He knows that Yeshua knows.

"Yes Lord, you know everything. I'm fond of you."

Sometimes our relationships aren't what we think they are.

Sometimes we need to "have a talk", and be honest with each other.

But Yeshua didn't yell and scream at Peter for only being fond of him. This was more like, "I'm glad we had this talk. I'm glad we both understand where we're at in this relationship. Let's move ahead now that we understand each other and build something great."

I imagine Peter thought he was about to get the, “well in that case you can’t be part of my team any more” speech. But Yeshua isn’t like us. His love is unconditional. He sees the long term. He sees the potential. And he reinstates Peter as the leader of his disciples.

How about you?

Do you love Yeshua?

How about other people? Do you love them? Especially the people in your church?

Or are you just fond of him, fond of them?

Yeshua gave us one commandment, “love one another”, but most of the time we’re just fond of each other. (or less).

Most of the churches I’ve seen are satisfied that they don’t hate one another. But loving someone, and not hating someone, are not the same thing.

The Old Testament Law said to honour your parents.

Most Christians would say that they do.

I ask them what they did to honour them? Did you build a statue?

Dedicate a park? Hold a party?

Usually we assume that “I never dishonoured them” is the same as “honour them”.

It’s not.

And “love one another” is not the same as “don’t hate one another”.

It’s easy to move a relationship to the next level because you can start the conversation and make it as deep as you want.

The risk, is that the other person won’t be comfortable with that, and they will break off the relationship, or reject you in some way.

But if we never take risks in relationships, then we would live in a lonely world where everyone was an acquaintance.

Take the risk. It’ll be worth it.

Most churches are full of acquaintance relationships.

We're supposed to love one another and the best we can do is talk about the weather!

How are we going to explain that to Yeshua when he asks, "Did you do what I told you?"

It's too easy to make excuses, like, there are too many people to know them all. Or, we're just busy people leading busy lives. We don't live near each other.

But what it comes down to, is that we can make excuses or we can do what we were commanded.

Make the time to go and talk with every person in your church. Start the conversation.

Or call them.

But work out how you can start the conversation to move it up a level.

Share some feelings and opinions with them.

Do what you can to move each relationship to a level where you at least know each other.

Then do what you can to keep it there, and move it deeper.

If all your church relationships were that deep, if we really were loving one another - that would be an amazing church to be part of. Maybe it's idealistic. But so was "love one another the way I have loved you".

I think it's worth trying for. I think it's doable.

Let's work out how we can improve our relationships. Let's take a step closer to loving one another the way Yeshua loved us.

Individuals, not Clones

There are so many discipleship programs available today. And most of them contain very valuable material.

Personally I found a lot of value in The Navigators materials and programs.

But is the concept of a discipleship program for all Christians Biblical?

In Deuteronomy 6 we read:

”These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates.”

In old covenant times Israel’s children were to be taught the laws of God ‘casually’.

Not in formal classes or lessons, but as they sat at home with their parents, when they went to bed, when they rose again in the morning. They could always overhear their parents’ conversations, and learn as they lived their everyday lives.

These laws were always ‘visible’ -- tied on the forehead, written on the door frames and gates.

Wherever the children went, whatever they did, there were opportunities to learn and talk about God and his laws.

If they were helping dad look after the sheep, they might have the opportunity to talk about how God is a shepherd over all of Israel. When they helped mum cook the bread, they could talk about Elijah and the widow’s bowl of flour which was never used up.

As opportunities came along, the parents were supposed to use that opportunity to teach their children about God and his ways.

The same in new covenant times -- Yeshua used the same technique to train his disciples.

As far as we know he didn't run a twenty-six week Wednesday evening study group. He basically lived his life with them, and in front of them, for a few years - and used every opportunity available to teach them more.

New Christians are spiritual children. The best way for them to learn about God is to hang out with older mature Christians who are always talking about God's character and his works, and how they relate to us in our walk with each other and with him.

While the new Christian helps you shop for the food for dinner, you could talk about spiritual fruit.

If they are around for afternoon coffee and share something about a good looking student at their school, there is an opportunity to talk about God's principles for relationships. And not just an opportunity, but one which is immediately relevant to them because of their current life situation. No need to wait for week seven of the 'Studies for Christian Disciples' before you can talk about it.

The best learning, is learning which is relevant to the students' needs. Sometimes these needs are obvious, but usually you have to really get to know a person before their needs become apparent. Growing a deep relationship in 1-2 hours, one night a week, with fleeting greetings on Sundays is extremely difficult. But growing a deep relationship with someone you hang out with all the time is almost unavoidable.

Learning about fasting because it is now week 13 of 'The Study' could well be a waste of time. But learning about fasting because they have just read Matthew 6 and the Spirit is prompting their hearts could lead to deep life changes.

By all means we, (mature Christians), should have a plan of what we want to impart to our disciples, but the issue is really when and how we impart it. When is simply as the need related opportunity arises.

How is by developing a deep relationship as a foundation for effective teaching. Of course a lot of what we want to teach will be simply caught by them as they live with us. (We probably won't have to teach them much about how to pray because they will pray with us so often).

But of course this also means we have to know our stuff. We might not get three weeks notice for a study on spiritual warfare. It might rise out of a sudden crisis in the life of a disciple. We might need to say, "Come around again tomorrow night and we'll study it together", but we need to know at least the basics now, and we certainly can't ask for two weeks to prepare! By then the warfare might be over, and the disciple may have already fallen.

Like Yeshua — having disciples will cost you a lot more than just an hour a week on Wednesday night. At times it may well be inconvenient, but the next generation of the church needs our attention now more than ever.

The world is becoming an increasingly busy place, and this style of discipleship might not suit your lifestyle. You might not have time to spend together with them 'doing nothing', and just building relationships. But what is more important? Your lifestyle or the next generation of Christian leaders?

Having weekly studies may well be part of discipleship, but if you are a mature Christian, then sharing your life with your disciples will transform your discipleship (and their spiritual growth) to a whole new level.

Share your life with your disciples. Share your music, your books, your secrets, your self. Build a deep relationship with them and teach them at every opportunity in a relevant and empowering way.

Unity, not Uniformity

Before you read any further, stop and look at these two images. And tell me what you see.



I'm guessing that you said something like, "The boy's hat is gone. The girl is looking the other way. The bucket and spade are the other way around."

Oh, that's right... and the umbrella has rotated around too.

Let me tell you what I see.

It's two pictures of the same boy and the same girl building the same sandcastle on the same beach near the same umbrella.

Do you get my point?

It is very easy to see differences. It comes naturally to us.

It's not so easy to see similarities, to see the things which unify us.

It's not easy to see the 99% we have in common with each other, but it's incredibly easy to see the 1% we have that's different.

And when it comes to church... we not only see the 1% difference, we divide ourselves because of it. Just look at how many denominations there are!

Sadly this is nothing new. It has always been a problem.

Paulus said in 1 Corinthians:

”Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly - mere infants in the Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, “I follow Paulus,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men?

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paulus? Only servants, through whom you came to believe - as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.”

We are so quick to divide.

I think it’s because we’re obsessed with being right. With being right and being seen to be right.

But who cares who’s right! I seriously challenge you to find a Bible passage where God teaches that we must be right.

But I can find some where he says, regardless of who is right and who is wrong... love one another.

”The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?”

The question God would ask, is not “Who is right?” He would ask, “Who is loving?”

1 Corinthians 12 is all about how we are all different but all part of one body. In fact, we are designed to all be slightly different. You are a hand, I’m a foot, someone else is an eye. But we are all needed. We are all part of the same body. We are not a cloud, and a hammer, and a

tree, things with nothing in common. We are all parts of a single body.

And how ridiculous it would be if the eyes said that the other parts were no longer parts of the body because they were not eyes! We are all the same, with little differences to make us more useful.

1 Peter 2 tells us that we are a building of living stones. Stones. Not bricks. We are not all identical. But we are all the same.

Get it?

Rocks are all rocks. Each one looks a little different, but they are still all rocks. They are all part of the same building.

Bricks are all exactly the same. If we were a building of bricks, that would be uniformity. But we're meant to be different, (and yet the same), a building of stones is unity, not uniformity.

We need to focus on the bits that are the same, not on the bits that are different. We are all living stones.

That's incredible! Have you ever seen a living stone before?

And yet, instead of greeting other Christians with, "Wow. Another living stone. How awesome to meet you." We greet them with, ... "You're different. You're not welcome."

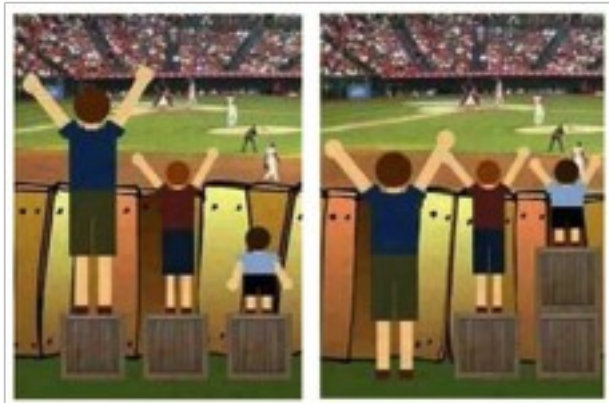
So, how about you?

Are you focused on similarities or differences? Are you looking for unity? or uniformity?

Are you loving? Or are you just "right"?

Equal, not The Same

Time to compare another couple of images.
What do you see this time?



One of them is based on being right, on judgement, on self-righteousness, the other is based on love, on justice, on not thinking too highly of yourself.

The one on the left justifies itself with, “we all have the same”. It’s not my fault that other people can’t survive with what I have. It’s about valuing people by what they can achieve for themselves.

The one on the right is trying to bring justice to everyone. It’s trying to be loving. It requires sacrifice. It involves someone going without something. Maybe even going without something they earned, something they have every right to keep. But almost certainly, something they don’t really need.

It involves someone else getting more than they “deserve”.

But it’s about valuing everyone equally and being willing to put love into action to make that a reality.

Love requires sacrifice. It requires self-denial. It requires you being willing to be the one who is wronged. The one who goes without.

Usually this topic has been called “Giving”, but for Christians, instead of asking, “How much are you giving?” it is much more useful to have in mind, “How much are you keeping?”.

Christians are taught a lot about giving. Give in secret. Give cheerfully and not reluctantly. Give generously... I don't think we struggle with understanding any of this. The only question I usually hear about giving is, “How much do I have to give?”.

The short answer is... zero. You don't have to give anything.

The long answer is... zero. You don't have anything to give.

Read carefully if you missed it. They're different.

One of our modern Christian misconceptions is that we own things. Everything we have, all the stuff we think we own, all the income we receive, all of it, is not ours. It all belongs to God. God has simply given it to us to look after for him. We are stewards, not owners. A steward is someone who looks after someone else's property or money on their behalf.

Get it? It's all God's money. We have just been entrusted with looking after some of it.

If you “get” this, it will change your whole attitude to giving. Instead of thinking of giving, you will think of keeping.

Of course God expects you to keep some of it to provide for your own needs, and those of your family. But even those considered generous amongst most modern Christians that I have talked with, keep 90% or more of what God has entrusted them with.

Now, before we get all high and mighty about that. Remember that each Christian should give what they have decided in their own heart. It's not up to you to tell anyone else how much to keep. It's not up to me either. It's God's money, if he thinks they are keeping too much he can deal with them himself.

But how about you? Do you think you are keeping too much? If God asked you to explain why you kept so much for yourself would you feel comfortable?

Do you feel like you are being generous?

One day Yeshua watched people giving at the temple. (In those days they had a big box for giving, and didn't "pass the plate/bag" like we do now). The rich man made a big fuss about putting in 10% of his fortune. The poor widow humbly put in 2 small copper coins. But it was all she had to live on. Yeshua said that she gave much more. She put in about a 60th of a day's pay, a few dollars. He put in what was probably equivalent to thousands of dollars. But she gave more. Because she only **had** a few dollars.

How much should you keep?

It depends on your situation - how much you have, and how much you need. Do you think you keeping more than you need to?

Ultimately, it depends on why you are keeping the amount you do.

Just like every action for Christians. It does not matter what you do. It matters why you do it.

Are you being generous? Or are you being selfish?

Are you cheerful about giving? Or are you struggling, and only giving begrudgingly because you love money?

Are you reluctant to give because you rely on money for your security instead of relying on God?

So, how much should you give?

Think about how much do you need to keep? And think about why. Develop that attitude that it's not your money. This will help you keep a loose hold on money, and give it a loose hold on you.

And then you will be free to give. You will be able to keep giving until you feel like you have been generous.

And then, you will be able to give cheerfully.

When you can give generously, cheerfully, without even keeping count, then you're probably not keeping too much. When you can do

that, you're more focused on loving others than on being right about what percentage you are justified in keeping.

When you can do that, you're giving in love.

Normal, not Lukewarm

Have you ever read this poem by Wilbur Reese?

I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.
Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,
But just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the
sunshine.
I don't want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick
beets with a migrant.
I want ecstasy, not transformation.
I want the warmth of the womb not a new birth.
I want about a pound of the eternal in a paper sack.
I'd like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.

In Revelation 3 we read Yeshua's letter to the church in Laodicea:
These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the
ruler of God's creation.

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you
were either one or the other!

So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to
spit you out of my mouth.

You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.'
But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and
naked."

This is pretty intense.

Yeshua would rather a church was cold than lukewarm!

That's really in your face.

How committed to Yeshua are you? How committed am I?

Where would we be if Yeshua was only as committed to us as we are
to him.

Where would we be if only 25% of our sin was paid for? Or even 90% for that matter.

(Although that's kind of the point of the gospel isn't it.)

But for sure, Yeshua wants us to be at the hot end of the scale, not lukewarm.

In 1 Corinthians 3 we read how at the judgement our work will be tested by fire.

If it is just wood, hay, stubble it will be burned.

If it is gold, silver, precious stones, it will survive and we will receive our reward.

Btw: this is not about salvation, your salvation is secure. It's about your reward based on your actions.

I remember reading a book once about a man who had a dream after reading this passage.

He stood as his life works were carried out and piled up in front of him.

Then, after the fire he looked at the pile to see what was remaining, but there was nothing there but ash.

Close your eyes and imagine your pile of works, and the fire...

Imagine looking down and seeing nothing but ash.

D.L. Moody is famous for saying "The world is yet to see what God can do through one man fully committed to him".

Of course he wasn't including Yeshua. He was challenging us, and himself.

You know whether you could be more devoted to God. You know if you're only lukewarm.

Some years ago Watchman Nee wrote a whole book about this called "The Normal Christian Life".

It's about a life lived 100% for Yeshua. A life filled with joy and power. A life like that of the apostle Paulus, or Petros.

Yet he concluded that this is "normal".

This is the kind of life that every Christian is supposed to lead.

It's not for the elite few. It's God's plan for all of us. If we would only commit ourselves to him 100%.

Of course that's not going to be the easy life.

Yeshua said that before you start building a tower you should count the cost.

Before you go to war you should check out your enemy.

There will be a cost.

But there is also a massive cost to NOT being committed to Yeshua. Nobody wants to end up with just a pile of ash.

We can so easily get caught up striving for money, for food, for houses, worried about "stuff" and how we will provide for our families.

And we do need some of these things. But even so, Yeshua told us "first, seek the kingdom of God, and then all these things will be added to you".

\$3 worth of God is not enough.

Spend all you have.

However hot you are for Yeshua, crank it up a notch.

Don't settle for lukewarm.

Don't settle for mediocrity.

Live a full-on Christian life,
100% devoted to Yeshua.

Live a normal Christian life.

Meeting, not Attending

Think about the church you attend.

How much interaction do you have with other people there?

How often do you see them during the week?

What kind of things do you do together?

What is your ministry in that church?

Do you have one?

Why not?

You are part of the church.

You don't "attend", you're part of it. You meet together.

Sounds odd, but it's an important distinction.

A major focus of any church meeting should be building the relationships between its members.

Building them up as individuals is good, but it's much more important to build them up as a team.

We need to get to know each other.

We need to love and support each other.

We **must** interact with each other, on a deep level - not just talking about the weather.

We need to **meet**

As much as churches have gone online out of necessity during COVID...

Online church just doesn't cut it.

You cannot meet with each other at the right depth of relationship, by watching a service online, or even in a video chat.

If you have to, then it's better than nothing. But only just.

As a church, our Sunday activity needs to be something which fosters meeting, and makes it difficult and even undesirable to just “attend”. We need to find ways to help people to mix, to interact with each other, to discuss spiritual issues with people that they know. We need to be training them to love one another the way Yeshua loved us. We need to be building unity, so we become one, the way Yeshua and Yahweh are one.

Obviously we have to meet more than once a week to do that properly. But every time we meet we should be reinforcing this way of thinking. This way of living.

Church should be involving. Not just attending. If you just attend, you don't feel part of it, and you won't have that need to find your role in the body of Yeshua. The role you were chosen for. The role that was created for you by Yahweh.

If you attend a church you should stop. Start meeting with them instead.

Connection, not Entertainment

What we need most from church, is connection.

Connection with God, and connection with each other.

We need teaching, real fellowship, deep worship, prayer, sharing.
We do **not** need ... entertainment.

Entertainment works completely against connection.

We all watch. We might sing along. We might even be moved by the message.

But we're not connected.

Concert quality music is not worship.

We need to worship God in a way that connects us with him.

Not just something emotional, but deep spiritual connection.

The kind that changes people.

We need ways of connecting with the other members of Yeshua's body.

Not just socialising, but ways to connect.

Prayer groups, discipleship, sharing opportunities, life lessons.

Meals, shared ministries, ...

We need to be part of important things, and realise we're not in this alone.

Entertaining church is based on the "attractional" model.

The "missional" model needs people to work together as a team.

It needs them to all be trained up.

It needs them to have a common purpose, a common goal.

We have to change the way we "do" church.

It wasn't like this in the book of Acts.

Why did we change?

Whose idea was that?

It's happened gradually, but it's time to realise that it's not working, and we need to go back to the way it was in the Book.

We need to step back from weekly meetings about what songs we'll sing at church this week, and how they'll fit in with the sermon...

And we need to ask the big questions like, "Should we have a sermon?", "Should we have songs?", "Should we do something radical?"

If all we offer is entertainment, then we need to compete with what else is on offer.

But honestly, even the local bar is offering better connection between people than most churches.

Most people don't go there for the beer. They can get cheaper beer at home.

What if we had a meal together every week?

What if we had meals together all the time, different groups, week by week?

You can really easily get to know people when you just hang out over a meal.

We moved to this area about a year ago.

Our neighbours aren't Christian.

But we've gotten to know most of them.

We've had meals with most of them. Several times.

But we've hardly gotten to know anyone from our new church.

They're all too busy. Or live too far away. Or some other excuse.

Connecting with people takes time.
It takes sacrifice.
But it's so worth it.

And for the church. It's not optional.
Like it or not, you are in ministry with everyone in your church.
They are all part of the same body.
You can't just cover them up by wearing a big coat and hope nobody notices.

Adopted, not Orphans

When new people join our church family, we need to make them welcome.

Like they were adopted, not like they're some orphan we're helping to look after, but we're not really attached to.

They are part of the family now.

They're as much a part of the family as you are.

And if you're a newly adopted member of the family...

Then ask them to show you what your role might be.

You have one. It's guaranteed.

If we just come and watch, it's like we're happy being orphans, or visitors.

There is no real, deep relationship between the people who are part of the church, and us.

If we participate. If we use our gifts too, it's like we're adopted.

We become part of the family, not just orphans who are just given a hand out and then forgotten for a week.

I'm not having a go at orphanages here. They do an amazing work, and millions of kids around the world have their lives changed by the dedication of people who work, (often as volunteers), in orphanages. But in a big orphanage full of kids, you can't get to know them all like you know your own siblings.

One problem I see with the way we "do" church, is that it's much easier to run it like an orphanage, that like a family where everyone is adopted in.

This is more a message to the leaders to know their "children", and to spend time with them.

And I get the whole argument that you can't do that in a church of
10,000 people.

So make your church smaller.

Find a way.

New Testament, not Old Testament

Moshe (Moses) was a great leader.
He led the Jewish people for 40 years.
He represented God to them. And them to God.

He was the conduit. He was God's right hand man.
When a staff needed waving, or holding, or hitting with... Moshe was the man to do it.

When the people wanted to know what God said or thought on a particular issue, they asked Moshe.
If he didn't already know, then he would go into the tabernacle (the tent where God lived) and ask God face to face.

Given the way we focus church on the Pastor's message every week, it's hard to see this.
But Pastors do **not** have the role of Moshe.
They are not here to get the word of God for us and then pass it down.

We are all priests. Every Christian.
We also all have full access to the throne of God.
We all have full access to the holy spirit of God...

We don't need another Moshe.
That was only for a particular time in history, before Yeshua, when Yahweh had to remain separate from people because of their sin.

We just need to be disciplined. Trained, so we know that we can talk with God directly.

We also don't need another tabernacle.

We don't even need a building really.
God no longer lives in buildings made by man. He lives in people directly. (Forgiven, redeemed people).

Moshe presented the people with the "10 Commandments", and "The Law". (Which was over 600 extra commands).

Because of Yeshua, we live by grace. We don't need the Law. It doesn't apply to us any more. It was nailed to the cross with Yeshua.

Most churches have new laws. They used to be things like, "no drinking", "no dancing", "no smoking"...
Whatever they are, I'm sure your church has some.

The Law does not apply to Christians.
It was executed when Yeshua was.
He replaced it with grace.
By all means we should live good lives. But not because there is a rule, or a law that makes us do it.
We should listen to the holy spirit to make wise choices.

But we do not need a replacement Moshe.
We do not need the Law.
And we certainly don't need anyone to make a new one for us.

God, not Culture

The TV comedy “3rd Rock from the Sun” tells the story of a group of aliens who come from some far off planet to visit Earth. Each episode is about funny situations they get themselves into because of their misunderstanding of our Western culture.

Until you see an alternative to your own culture you rarely question it. You usually just go along with, “that’s how we do it”.

Watching 3rd Rock gives you an opportunity to think, “Do we really do that?”. And if you’re willing... “Why?” And if you’re really serious about your life... “Should I do that?”

I lived in the USA for a few years. The culture was different there, but it was still very similar to where I grew up. I didn’t have to change much to fit in.

I lived in Japan for a few years too. Culture there is totally different. I had to change a lot to fit in. And some of that I kept when I returned to my own country. In some things, their way was better.

Like when they see that you look a bit lost. Instead of ignoring you, like most Westerners would, and instead of pointing and telling you how to find it, like nice Westerners would, they take you there. Even if it’s a few blocks back the way they came. I like that.

So, let’s look at some of our cultural “issues”.

In the West, (and increasingly in Asia), we celebrate Yeshua’s birthday. Why?

Why do we have a tree? Why do we give gifts? Why is it in December? Why do we do it at all?

When it comes to culture, we have to question everything.

If we end up deciding that it’s a good thing, then OK, but let’s be real about our Christianity and ask the questions.

It certainly wasn't in December. There definitely was no pine tree there, with or without decorations and candles.

If the gifts are based on the gifts the magicians gave Yeshua, then why do we give them to each other and not give gifts to Yeshua every year, especially if it's his birthday? Would you come to my birthday party and bring a gift for yourself and not one for me?

The Bible certainly doesn't tell us to celebrate it. In fact, if anything in Romans 14 Paulus is saying we shouldn't have any special days.

There is more information in the chapter "Old School, not Old Fashioned", about where Christmas came from and why it was a week before the end of the year.

But in reality it is a man made tradition which reinforces the stereotype of Yeshua as a baby and fuels consumerism.

If there wasn't already a Christmas, would you be pushing to start it as a tradition? Why?

And once we question celebrating Yeshua's birthday, let's keep asking questions of our culture and ask, "Why do we celebrate your birthday?"

I can completely understand parents celebrating the birth of their child. Once, when they're born. But why do we keep doing that every year? Where did this come from? Have people always done this? Turns out they haven't. Turns out it was mostly something kings and rich people did. Basically to say, "I'm special."

So once a year we tell our children that it's OK to be self centred and to be more special than everyone else. Once a year we spend more and more as consumers, reinforcing our materialistic culture and propping up our retail businesses buying more stuff we don't need.

There is a whole other side to this argument about how birthdays are used in astrology and the occult. But let's leave that for another time. Just from a cultural point of view. Why do we want to celebrate our birthday? What are we saying when we do?

And if our culture didn't have birthday parties, would we be pushing to get everyone doing it as a tradition? Why?

We need to be ruthless with this. We need to question everything.

Why do we do church the way we do?

Why do we sing?

Why do we have sermons?

Why do we pray the way we do?

Why do we arrange the seats the way we do?

Why do we eat the food we eat at church?

Why do we build churches the way we do?

Not all the answers will be bad.

Not everything has to change.

But like King Josiah in 2 Kings 22 did when they found the book of the Law in the temple which had become filled with things which shouldn't have been there - we have to go back to the book and ask the questions. And we have to make the changes, so we once again align with the book, with the way God said it should be, and ruthlessly throw out our traditions if they are wrong.

Examine everything.

Be willing to let go of anything.

God, not culture.

Wild, not a Zoo

In the Madagascar movie the animals finally come back to New York and realise that their memories of it “seemed bigger”. They were so used to living in a zoo that they had forgotten that they were born to roam the plains of Africa, not the streets of New York.

Isn't that us?

Aren't the Christians you read about in the Bible people of adventure? Aren't they people who take chances, who risk their lives, who sacrifice everything for the cause of the gospel?

Are you? Or are you playing it safe in New York?

Is your church more like a zoo, or a jungle?

Christian life isn't meant to be boring. It isn't meant to be predictable. It's meant to be an exciting adventure as you live your life as a servant of THE God.

Risking your life as you reach out to the world with his message of love and salvation.

Face it. Compared to that.. you live in a cage.

Probably that cage was originally built to stop things getting in to harm you, but it's actually stopping you getting out. It's stopping you living the life you were born to lead.

We need to escape.

We need to remove the cages.

We need to be free.

Churches should be training us to do what we were created for. But sadly, most of them actually do the very opposite. They stop us doing it. They train us to be timid, weak, afraid.

Can you change that in your church?

Can you train your youth to be confident, spiritual warriors,
adventurers for Yeshua?

Of course you can. Do it.

Life, not Liturgy

I'm not sure why, but it seems to be in our nature to want to formalise and ritualise our religion.

I suspect it's something about us wanting to feel like we have contributed in some way, so that somehow we have done something towards earning our own salvation, that we have done something to repay God for what he has given us.

If you read Exodus 12 the instructions for the first Passover were pretty simple. Eat a, (perfect), lamb, cooked in a certain way, and be ready to move.

Later in the desert they celebrated it again. And the instructions were the same simple thing. (Numbers 9)

And later in Deuteronomy 16 the feasts were listed again, and still the Passover was a simple meal of remembrance.

No great ritual. No liturgy. No extras. No special cups. Simple, poignant, symbolic, powerful.

But over the years it became a whole liturgy where this boy has to ask this question, and that man has to answer this way. And then this person has to pass that cup to this person and ask these questions. It's in our nature to complicate religion with ritual. We think we're doing the right thing. But we're not.

We also seem to have an inbuilt desire to build temples to our gods too. Even Christians seem to want to do this. God actually lives in us. Our bodies are his temple. We know he doesn't live in temples made by man. And yet, we see church after church where the buildings are grand and extravagant.

Somehow it's in our nature to want to "bring glory to God" by building big and impressive temples. But Christianity is supposed to be different.

God lives in us. Get it?

Perhaps if we didn't have such grand temples that might even give us opportunities to tell people why not - that God is different, and he lives in people now. God wants to have a relationship with us, not empty ritualised religion, but a relationship. Religion is lifeless, dead, worthless. But relationship is life.

Religion is us trying to earn something from God. Relationship is us realising that we can't earn it, and rejoicing in the fact that we don't even have to.

In 2 Kings 22,23 we read how young king Josiah had the temple cleaned out. They even found idols to other gods, and prostitutes. In Yahweh's temple! Little by little they had forgotten the relationship they had with him.

They also found the Book of the Law. They read it. They realised how far they had fallen and what they had lost. They repented. How about us? How far have we fallen? What have we lost?

In Galatians 4 Paulus laments that the Galatians are celebrating special days and months and wonders if he has wasted his time with them. The historian Josephus also lamented that Christians of his day were very quick to run off and join pagan festivals, but amazed that the pagans would never consider joining the Christians.

Around the 4th century the church stopped celebrating Passover and started celebrating Easter and Christmas instead. Easter and Christmas were both "Christianised" versions of existing pagan festivals. It seems that the church adopted these pagan festivals in order to make itself more attractive to the pagans. "You don't have to run off to the pagan festivals, we have something like that right here." Of course, they dressed them up as being about Yeshua, but they are still ritualised religion in the place of relationship.

The most common argument I hear for "doing" Christmas and Easter is that if it wasn't for these celebrations we would never get some people to come to church.

So what? We're supposed to go to them, not get them to come to us. And should we do evil that good will result? (Romans 2).

If you think one day is special, that's between you and God. But I wonder how much of our ritual has come about because we have tried to make church more attractive to non-Christians. Church isn't for non-Christians, it's for Christians. If non-Christians don't like it, that doesn't matter.

Maybe it's time for a clean-out of the church. Like in Josiah's day. To go back to the Book and see what we have lost. Maybe it's time for repentance.

Unpredictable, not Same Same

I heard a really good talk by Francis Chan recently. (He gets it. He knows the church needs radical change). He was talking about his love of surfing, and how he went to Texas and heard that you can surf in Texas!

It was a man-made wave pool, which has a predictable surf wave every 3 minutes. He tried it. It was great. He had a fun day.

But it wasn't the same as really surfing in the ocean. It was artificial. It was predictable.

When you go real surfing, sometimes there is no wave. Sometimes they're awesome. But you're out in the ocean, there's something about that that you don't get in the wave pool.

The way we do church is like the wave pool. It's man made. It's artificial. We can generate a wave by having a certain kind of music, a certain style of preaching. And we know we can repeat that week after week.

But we need to get out of the wave pool. We need to get into the ocean. The dangerous, unpredictable, awesome ocean. We need to surf the waves God makes. And if he chooses not to make waves some days, we must accept that as part of our experience.

He is not there to serve us by making waves when we want to surf. We're there to serve him by surfing when he makes the waves.

One thing I used to really like about Brethren worship meetings, was that there was no script, no liturgy, no set order. As the men felt led to speak they would stand and share a message, a song, a thought, a prayer. It was usually awesome.

Sometimes someone would share and you might wonder who led them to say that because it wasn't from God. But almost always a theme would develop, and the feeling would build that this meeting was truly spirit led.

Even churches that say they don't have liturgy, still do really. Baptists say they don't have liturgy. But week after week, they have a song, the welcome, two more songs, the sermon, and a closing song. Right?

How is that not liturgy?

Do you honestly think that is the kind of structure they always had in the New Testament church?

Do you think they had any structure at all?

Why do we do this?

Why does your church do this?

Give the holy spirit freedom to do whatever he wants in your church. Here's a scary idea... have church next week without planning it all out in advance.

(Or don't you trust him?)

Like the wave pool. Predictable, same same, gets boring real fast. It's not real life.

If you want real life, you have to take chances and let things change.

God's Way, not Our Way

In 2 Kings 5 we read a story of a Syrian general, Naaman, who caught leprosy.

He tried all the physicians, healers, crackpots and cures he could find in Syria, but without success.

His wife's young hand-maid, a Jewish captive slave from the previous war, made the comment to her mistress that back in Israel they have prophets of God who can actually cure this kind of thing. Off he went.

He went to the king of Israel, and finally to Elisha the prophet.

Elisha said, "wash 7 times the Jordan and you'll be healed".

Naaman stormed off, back to Syria, fuming that they have better rivers than that in Syria!

(I'd say he said, "Nah, man"... but that's a bit corny, so I won't).

But his servants talked him into it... You came all this way, may as well at least try it.

He did. He was healed.

In 1 Samuel 15 we read how Saul was sent to wipe out their enemy the Amalekites.

He totally defeated them, but even though Yahweh had told them to destroy everything, men, women, children, cattle, sheep... wipe them out totally...

Saul spared the king, and he also brought back the best of the sheep and the cattle to make an offering to Yahweh.

Yahweh was very angry. He had raised Saul up from nothing to become king of Israel, and when he asked him to do this one thing, Saul had a better idea.

There is a powerful statement here. "To obey is better than sacrifice"

Yahweh has more delight in obedience than he has in all our sacrifices and burnt offerings.

To the point that he was really angry with Saul for disobeying him and keeping some animals to make a sacrifice. To the point that because of this rebellion, he removed Saul as king of Israel.

What about us? The church?

In John 13, Yeshua told us to love one another the way he loved us, so that the world would know that we are his disciples.

Do we do it?

Do we even know one another?

Most churches I've seen... they tolerate one another.

But, like Saul, we have better ideas.

We have professional music, great preachers, big impressive temples buildings, fantastic online presence, even TV shows. All to show everyone how great God is, and that we are his disciples.

All of those idea, every single one of them comes from the world.

They come from big business, from marketing.

They stop us having to love one another.

Honestly I can imagine Yahweh in heaven, beating his head, crying out with tears rolling down his face...

“Will you just do it the way I told you to!”

So What?

So what are we going to do about it?

Church is great. It's what we are meant to be as Christians. So it's super important that we get it right.

But it seems that as a church we have gotten a lot of things wrong. It seems we've quite lost our way.

Deuteronomy 20 was a message for the Jews when they were fighting enemies to take control of the promised land.

It has messages for us as we do spiritual battle for the future of the church.

When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses, chariots, and a people more than you, you shall not be afraid of them; for Yahweh your God is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. It shall be, when you draw near to the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people, and shall tell them, "Hear, Israel, you draw near today to battle against your enemies. Don't let your heart faint! Don't be afraid, nor tremble, neither be scared of them; for Yahweh your God is he who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you."

But if you're too scared? Go home.

God doesn't want you on his team if you're not ready to sacrifice.

If you don't really want to be in this battle, then it's better for everyone if you just go home.

The officers shall speak to the people, saying, "What man is there who has built a new house, and has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. What man is there who has planted a vineyard, and has

not used its fruit? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man use its fruit. What man is there who has pledged to be married a wife, and has not taken her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her.” The officers shall speak further to the people, and they shall say, “What man is there who is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest his brother’s heart melt as his heart.”

But if you fight, you have to be ruthless. Not actually killing people obviously, but if something needs removing, remove it all. Or you’ll be entangled by it again.

But of the cities of these peoples, that Yahweh your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes; but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite, the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite; as Yahweh your God has commanded you; that they not teach you to follow all their abominations, which they have done to their gods; so would you sin against Yahweh your God.

The church is nowhere near as bad as we read about in Jude. Where churches were filled with immorality, and corrupt, ungodly leaders. But it’s more like we’ve been lulled to sleep. We’ve lost our power, our life, our vitality.

We’ve adopted the ways of the world, and we no longer shine out like stars in a corrupt generation.

We need to wake the church up.

We need to get people excited about the church adventure again.

Or we need to start again?

Maybe both?

Can you be bothered trying to change it?

Are you willing to do church God's way? Even though it will cost you personally?

Are you willing to have the conversations you need to have with your leaders? Even though some of them will reject you?

Are you willing to fast and pray for your church?

I hope so.

There is literally a lot at stake.

People's eternal destiny is relying on us to get this right.

They will only know that we are Yeshua's disciples. They will only know that he is really the son of Yahweh, who died to save them... If we love one another in true unity.

Like the Jews going into battle in Deuteronomy, you're not in this alone. Yahweh is going with you.

It's his battle really, he just needs us to step forward.

appendix: Love Languages

This is not so much about Biblical stuff, it's based on a book by Gary Chapman called "Five Love Languages".

And I have added some clarifications and observations of my own.

The basic idea is that each of us has different things that make us feel loved. For me it might be physical affection like hugs, but for you it might be getting a compliment that you feel you deserve.

This becomes important in two ways.

Firstly, if I am a Words of Encouragement person, for example, then I will react very badly to criticism. Essentially I will hear criticism as "I don't love you".

So I need to learn what my own love language is so I know when I'm hearing wrong. When I'm reacting because of my love language and not rationally based on what the other person actually said.

Then I need to learn not to react so much in those cases, and to realise that the other person is NOT telling me that they hate me, they are just criticising something. Maybe even correctly.

This realisation can be life changing.

Secondly, I need to learn your love language. If, for example, your love language is Words of Encouragement, but mine is Physical Affection, and I try to show you love by giving you a hug... You will not understand what I am saying.

I will be saying, "I love you", but you won't understand it. You'll just find me annoying. (And of course, you'll probably push me away, which I will take as, "I hate you", even though you only meant, "You're annoying me").

If your language is Words of Encouragement, and I want to show you love, I need to give you a compliment. It's the only way.

Just like, if you speak English, but my language is Japanese, and I say 愛するよ。 You just won't understand what I'm saying. I'll think I've said and done all the right things, but you just won't get the message.

It will be unsatisfying for both of us.

And this works for spouses. It works for parents showing love to their children. And amazingly it works for managers making their subordinates feel loved, (or at least valued). But best of all, it works for churches showing love to one another...

So, what are these "love languages"?

Receiving Gifts

Gifts people love gifts.

Particularly gifts that show that you put some thought and effort into it. They want to know that you spent time thinking about them and what they like.

Don't give gifts people a gift that is not wrapped, (even if it's really expensive). Don't give them a generic gift. And DON'T give them a gift voucher.

Don't ever forget their birthday, or travel and not buy them at least something small that they will like.

You can recognise Gifts people by the gifts they give you. They will be nicely wrapped. Possibly with hand made cards, or customised wrappings.

And the gifts they give you will have taken a lot of thought, and will usually match you really well.

Quality Time

Quality Time people want you to spend time with them doing the things that they are interested in.

Checking your email on your laptop while you watch a girlie movie with your wife is NOT quality time.

Leaving your laptop at the office so you can watch a girlie movie with your wife is great quality time, (as long as she likes girlie movies of course).

The issue is... are you focusing on me? Are we doing this thing, (that I like to do even if I'm by myself), together?

Don't ever try to do two things at once while spending time with them. Don't fall asleep during the movie.

It is really hard to recognise quality time people. If I am trying to work out someone's love language, usually I arrive at QT by elimination.

Acts of Service

Acts of Service people want you to do something for them. Actually, Acts of Service people usually want to do something for you.

They often really struggle with letting others do things for them. They will feel really valued and loved if they can do something for you that helps you a lot.

So, often the best you can do is help them do something for someone else. Sometimes, like if they're moving house or something like that, then you can help them do it.

But even if they are really sick, they're probably going to feel very uncomfortable with you doing something, (like cooking dinner), for them, (unless you're married to them).

If your wife is an Acts of Service person you better keep a very short list of things that need fixing around the house.

Also be careful when turning down their offer of help. Make sure they know that you love them and that you value their offer. Explain why you don't need their help. (I don't need a lift to the airport because my company will pay for a taxi).

You can recognise Acts of Service people very easily. They are the ones in the kitchen washing up after group dinners. They are the ones who always turn up for working bees. They are the ones stacking the chairs.

Physical Touch/Intimacy

Physical Touch people love being cuddled and hugged. They like having their hair played with. They like holding hands.

Actually, I think these people are actually more about intimacy and trust than physical touch. I think physical touch is just a common way of showing intimacy. If we feel close to people we let them touch us. So these people feel loved when you let them touch you. It shows that you trust them.

For example, from the people I know, I find that the people Chapman calls Physical Touch also feel loved if they are included in secrets. Or if you confide in them. (And they can usually be trusted to keep secrets too).

Or if you trust them with special authority or information that nobody else is allowed to know.

If it's your spouse, then just touch their hair, or shoulder as you walk past them.

But physical touch is very politically incorrect in many cultures these days, so you need to be very careful. But you will know. And try to share confidences with them instead. Open up about yourself.

What they are looking for is closeness and trust. They want to feel close to you. And that doesn't have to be physical.

Be careful when pushing them away. It will be heard as, "I hate you". So make sure that if you need to push, add an "I don't hate you, but I need space right now".

Physical Touch people also want to belong. They feel most hurt when they are excluded from something. Not invited, pushed away. Or when they just don't feel like they fit in with the rest of the group for some reason.

Physical Touch people are usually very easy to recognise. They are usually "touchy feely" types.

Words of Encouragement

Words of Encouragement people want compliments. But they only want compliments if they think that you are being genuine, and if they think they deserve it. So don't over do it.

One thing they really do not want is criticism. If you criticise them they will hear, "I hate you", when all you said was "Yes, the pasta is a bit salty". After they asked first if you thought it was salty!

If you need to criticise them over something, make sure you have built a good solid foundation first, and they KNOW that you love them. They must know it.

Then you need to give them another compliment now. And then you can casually mention the criticism, and follow it up with another compliment. They will know what you are saying. If you do it this way, they will hear "I love you, but yes, you're right the pasta was a little salty. But the dessert was one of the best ever".

You don't need to spell out the criticism as much as you would with other people. Keep it low key. They will exaggerate it in their own heads anyway.

Words of Encouragement people are very easy to recognise, (if you criticise them).

Also, particularly if they are not feeling loved in recent times, they can become very critical of everything and everyone.

And, not sure why, but they also often have a habit of telling you the same story many times.

So... which one are you?

What about the other people around you? Which ones are they?

How is that going to change how you interact with them?

appendix: Yahweh, Yeshua

Interestingly, these are the name of God, and the name of his son, yet neither of these words appears in most modern English Bibles.

Why not?

Let's look at them one at a time. But before we do, let's look at the letter "J".

J came into English around a thousand years ago, and it replaced the letter I at the beginning of some words. But unlike the way we say it today, at that time it had a Y sound. So Joshua was pronounced more like Yoshua. Keep that in mind. It might help later.

Now, in the Old Testament God has a name. His name is יהוה which we usually write in English as Yahweh.

Written Hebrew doesn't have vowels. The reader is supposed to work them out as they read. Which if you practise is not usually difficult. Can you read this? "Wht ds ths sy?" (What does this say?).

So more literally, the Hebrew name for God in English is YHWH. But we don't usually interpret vowels as we read in English, so it is easier to communicate if we put them in. So we write Yahweh.

In some older English Bibles they wrote this as Jehovah. Remember the J thing? So that would have read aloud more like Yehovah.

Now I'm sure you can see where that came from. And now you know why it has a J.

So, God's name is Yahweh. But you don't see that in many translations.

Even though it's there more than 7,000 times in the Old Testament!

We're not sure exactly when, or who did it, but we think that a bit before 100BC a group of seventy scholars translated the Jewish scriptures, (pretty much what we have as our Old Testament), into

Greek. This translation is called the Septuagint, and its abbreviated name is LXX, which is 70 in Roman numerals.

Wherever the name Yahweh appeared in the Hebrew scriptures, the LXX translators used the Greek word κυριος (kurios), which means lord or master.

So, when the translators wrote the King James Version in the 1600's they continued this practice, and wherever the Old Testament used the name Yahweh, they translated it as Lord. Then, to distinguish it from places where the Hebrew actually did say Lord, they capitalised it. And most modern English translations copied that and they usually write it like this - LORD. Often with small caps.

God has a name. In English his name is Yahweh. But in most English Bibles it has been replaced with LORD. All 7,000 times!

So whenever you read LORD in your Bible, think Yahweh.

Why did they think that was all OK? Well... I have a theory.

I presume you know the 10 commandments right? (BTW: I presume you also know that they are for Jews, not for Christians right? If not, you had better read my other little book, "The Bigger Picture"). The third commandment says, "You will not misuse the name of Yahweh your god."

Now, as time went on from there, the Jews became more and more legalistic about all their rules. To the point that they even concluded that Jesus was not God's son because he healed someone on a Sabbath.

And they had decided that nobody was allowed to do anything on a Sabbath. And they had made up more rules about having to wash bowls in certain ways before you could eat from them.

So I believe that in their legalism, they were so afraid of misusing the name of God that they stopped using it altogether.

So they never say God's name. And if they have to write it they would write Lord instead. Many modern Jews will write G*d to avoid using his name. Yahweh didn't say not to use his name. He said not to **misuse** his name. This is clearly a legalistic overreaction.

Now, we're Christians, so the ten commandments doesn't even apply to us. And even though we can still use them as guidelines to understand what right behaviour is, we don't have to be so legalistic. (In my view it almost verges on superstition). So let's go back to using God's name. Let's be proud to be known as Yahweh's people.

Jesus has a name too. And it's not Jesus!

The New Testament documents are pretty much all written in Greek. In those documents Jesus is called Ἰησοῦς (Iesous). Later on, the church decided to do everything in Latin. So it became IESUS in Latin. And then later, it became Iesus in English.

Remember the J thing? So about a thousand years ago the "I" was replaced with a "J" and it became Jesus, (but it was still pronounced Yesus).

And now in modern English we usually call him Jesus. But pronounced with a hard "J". Even though that is a long way from his real name. (But you can see how we got there).

So what was his name?

Ἰησοῦς was the Greek way of writing the Aramaic name יְהוֹשֻׁעַ (Yeshua), which we usually write as Joshua in modern English. (Remember the J thing?). Jesus' name was Yeshua. It still is.

Now, if you read Acts 7:45 and Hebrews 4:8 in an English Bible you will almost certainly see the name Joshua. These are both referring to the Old Testament Joshua, who was Moses' assistant until Moses died, and who led the Israelites into the promised land.

But his Greek name is the same, Ἰησοῦς (Iesous). So to differentiate him from the son of God, the translators chose to translate his name as Joshua and the son of God's name as the Latin derived name Jesus.

Personally I don't think that is helpful. I can see how it came about, but it is an inconsistent translation, and it hides something wonderful. Both their names were Yeshua. God chose that name. And he had a reason for doing that.

Yeshua means "Yahweh Saves". That's a pretty powerful name. And there are a lot of parallels between the Old Testament Yeshua leading his people into the promised land, and the New Testament Yeshua leading his people into eternal life. Perhaps God did that deliberately?

I don't think this is just an intellectual exercise. It is interesting to know how these things came about, but what does that mean for us on a practical level?

I think it's time to repair the damage. It's going to be a hard habit to break, but I think we should stop using the name Jesus and call him Yeshua. And we should start calling God by his name, Yahweh.

When Hilkiyah the priest found the Book of the Law in the temple, (2 Kings 22), king Josiah realised that they had not been living according to the words in the book. So they changed their ways. These would have been dramatic, major, lifestyle changes, but they made them anyway - simply because they realised they were not doing things the way Yahweh had commanded.

Changing our habits to use the names Yahweh and Yeshua might not be easy, or convenient, or comfortable. But if it is the right thing to do then it is the right thing to do.