

***And
to the
church in
Auckland
write...***

**Personal insights into today's church scene
by Ray Miller**

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Getaway with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me, watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly”. - **Jesus Christ**

Matthew 11:33 [from *The Message* New Testament translated by Eugene Peterson]

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foreword

It's often been said life's a journey - or pilgrimage, and especially so for me during the last five years.

After a life-changing conversion experience when I was 21, I spent a quarter of a century within the confines of a local church. There I married, raised a family and served faithfully in a variety of spheres involving people and buildings. When that particular church became increasingly authoritarian, legalistic and controlling we eventually voted with our feet and exited, along with hundreds of other families.

After experiences at several other Auckland churches I began another era of my journey. Over the next few years I visited many churches of different denominations all over the region, some on several occasions if the regular minister was away. One visit was usually sufficient to pick up the 'vibes' of a place. These experiences were both enlightening and fascinating. There were fair doses of legalism, and religious rituals everywhere and we found that even the pentecostals had developed their own distinctive formality. I was quite unprepared for a bemusing fact that soon became apparent: like others before me, we didn't seem to fit in to the pigeon-hole of any local church or the general 'church scene' at all!

My first reaction to this revelation was "is it me / us or was there another deeper reason?" All the while I searched the scriptures and my own heart and sought God earnestly. Slowly insights came, the mist cleared and I began making notes, reading, thinking and praying further. After 40 years of Christian pilgrimage, five years touring local churches, countless hours, days, months and years seeking - this is the result.

And so to the church in Auckland I write - what I believe the spirit of God is saying not only to this city, nor even New Zealand or Australasia but to the churches of our entire Western culture.

He that has an ear, let him hear...

Ray Miller

January, 2002

index

		foreword
		acknowledgements
page 3	①	churches
page 6	②	church buildings
page 7	③	attendance versus fellowship
page 8	④	the fortress mentality
page 11	⑤	the two conversions
page 13	⑥	titles
page 16	⑦	the system
page 19	⑧	leaders
page 20	⑨	religion versus christianity
page 22	⑩	size and numbers
page 24	⑪	the parable of the bus
page 26	⑫	quicksand
page 28	⑬	withdrawal symptoms
page 30	⑭	two or three
page 32	⑮	john twenty-one
page 33	⑯	living stones
page 35	⑰	hands off!
page 36	⑱	my goal
page 37	⑲	the vision of the cracked vessel
page 38	⑳	true church versus false churches
		further reading
		final words

acknowledgements

To my wife Jan, God's most precious gift to me. A lifetime companion, my constant supporter, encourager, proof reader / critic, intuitive counsellor, gourmet exemplar and massage therapist. My own 'Hephzi-bah' who opened 'Beulah' land to me (Isaiah 62:4). My deepest love and appreciation.

To Shaan my 'number one son' who took a rough collection of notes and with skill and expertise cut, polished and honed - or rather re-wrote them exquisitely. My deepest gratitude and respect.

Writing these pages, my mind has frequently roamed to when or where I got the prompting for these topics that turned into chapters. What was the spark that ignited the subject? What comment, whose words? Many times I've pondered - some I've identified and they come from all possible sources. Mostly however, from God's word, the sacred pages which have been my constant and daily reading material for over four decades. But under the quickening of his Holy Spirit without which it's just ink on paper. How often passages and verses have come alive and have absorbed my thoughts and led me on into truths concealed for earnest explorers to dig and discover. The Holy Spirit and his anointing on the written word have been my continual delight.

But also from conversations with Christian friends - how often a comment, a thought shared, a truth, an insight from whatever source, I've been able to pick up on and develop - wondrous indeed this body ministry of fellow pilgrims we meet along the way. My debt to them is gratefully and awesomely acknowledged. As I heard somewhere: "if I can see any distance at all, it's because I stand on the shoulders of giants". To these my Christian brethren who have stopped to briefly share and have passed on so much to me, usually without even realising it - thank you so very much indeed.

Likewise the writings of others - where can one begin? Those who've taken the time and trouble to publish their thoughts and experiences - what treasure we have on our bookshelves and bedside tables. From daily devotionals, to articles and leaflets, books, tracts and notes, even letters to the editor - thank you all. I'm hugely in debt to you my fellow pilgrims and travellers.

churches

Of all sizes, styles, varieties, denominations, they're on many street corners. From cathedrals to sheds, from ornate to utilitarian; protestant, catholic, evangelical, pentecostal, charismatic, fundamental, liberal, traditional, legalistic - any variety of 'ic and 'al. There's orthodox, un-orthodox, dead ones, formal ones, alive ones, welcoming and friendly ones, biased and rigid ones - whatever! Some cults include themselves amongst them, even scientology seeks the name of a church.

Each has a different style and emphasis, endless lists in any phone-book and very off-putting to the earnest enquirer. Some are formed by charismatic leaders, but most are brought into existence by a variance of opinion over some point of doctrine, a split or division that births yet another 'assembly'. Each has a structure and format that appeals to some, yet offends others. Why, how, where on earth did they all come from? What's one to make of them all and what does God think about this bewildering array?

A few things seem common to all churches; structure, financial burdens and performance orientation. Each has its own way of doing things, frowning on others who do things differently. A constitution, a mission statement, a hierarchy of authority, a leadership structure - A 'code' written or unwritten.

Usually there's a building that requires endless and constant time, effort and money to maintain. Most have salaried staff that require financial support, sometimes housing and vehicles and administrative staff, paid or voluntary. The amount of effort and money that is associated with the mechanics of just keeping a church and its programmes operating and ticking over is awesome to consider. The weariness and commitment associated with it all is sapping. Little wonder so many truly committed folk experience 'burn-out'.

The central figures, with titles like pastor, priest, minister, reverend, or just plain brother must be good performers in public and private. But let's think back a while to biblical times. Jesus had been crucified, died, buried, and then risen. When Peter preached there were 10,000 converts on just two occasions. It's estimated there were 50,000 new converts added to the church in Jerusalem in a few short days or weeks. But there were no church buildings, as such, no salaried staff requiring financial support, no denominations, no religious structures to defend. Just a collection of individuals whose lives had changed. Dependent on God totally, and on their fellow Christians for fellowship and encouragement besides. It's staggering to realise that for some 300 years there was not one 'church building' in existence, not a solitary one. Not until the Roman Emperor Constantine's conversion in 323AD did it become mildly fashionable to be identified as a *Christian* and the first church building erected.

What a trend and burden Constantine started and lumbered the human race with: church buildings, their upkeep, maintenance, repair, debate over, the associated effort - and most of them but a monument to the founder and his ego. And people started to have to wear their 'Sunday best' clothes to church in case the Emperor showed up! Slowly the human race came to accept the idea that the church was the building where believers met. When all the time the church for which Jesus had died, - his bride-to-be that he is going to return for, is the invisible body of born-again believers world-wide.

And so it is today... Ask most people “where’s the church?” and they will direct you to a particular building labelled as such.

Saul, to become the apostle Paul, became a follower / disciple of Jesus after his personal Damascus Road experience. This follower of the risen Christ, travelled widely, establishing churches in many towns and cities. Yet not one of these early churches is noted to have had a building programme. Paul not only earned his own keep, but supported those who laboured with him - rather different from the clergy today. There was no salary package for Paul or his companions. Collections taken were for distribution to the persecuted followers in other cities. Imagine that?

Any offerings were distributed to the poor and needy of other places, not directed to a salaried staff. There were no buildings to swallow up money. Attention was directed to spiritual things, not temporal, except where there were food and clothing needs.

Imagine if the financial and associated time and effort needs of a building and pastoral team were removed from a modern-day church, how much more could be spent on evangelism and assistance to the needy. But the unseen factors of modern church membership are for real.

To many Christians, the holding powers of a church are simply; security or protection and a feeling of safety; belonging to a visible ‘club’; companionship - everyone craves like-minded friends for feelings of assurance and comfort; programmes to occupy the energetic and often to make the pastor look good; decisions made for the flock; being told what to do, how to live, how and when to meet, what to believe, what interpretation to put on events, even how to dress, all taking away the worry of personal decision-making!

John 10:27 Jesus said “My sheep hear *my* voice,...and they follow *me*”

Has the modern church substituted:

Church membership security	for	dependence on God Himself
Belonging to a church group	for	belonging to Jesus alone
Doing the pastors bidding	instead of	doing God’s personal will for us
Listening to the preacher	instead of	hearing the Shepherd’s voice
On the church roll	instead of	recorded in God’s book of life
Following a minister’s advice	instead of	seeking God’s word for direction
Attendance at meetings	for	waiting on God, growing in God
Being a clone	instead of	the individual that God created
Man’s expectations	for	following Jesus guidance
Outward show substituting	for	an inner experience with God
Church ian ity	for	Christ ian ity
Hiding in a crowd	instead of	personal fellowship & sharing
Shining a pew	instead of	finding our own place of service

How Jesus and the Holy Spirit must be grieved as we offer up our blood-bought Christian liberty to any man, no matter how authoritarian or charismatic they may be.

But there are traps the other way also, if we exchange:

Christian liberty	for	license to the flesh
Discipleship to Christ	for	individual crankiness
Discipleship to Christ	for	rebellion to all authority
Being led by the Spirit	for	self-will and stubbornness
True Christian fellowship	for	isolation and withdrawal
Humility	for	spiritual pride
Accountability	for	going it alone
Teach able ness	for	the 'know it all' attitude
Co-operation	for	becoming a malcontent
Giving, sharing	for	selfishness

If there was no visible evidence of the church for 300 odd years after Jesus death, where and how did it operate? Consider these scriptures:

Romans 16:5 "The church that is in their house"

Collosians 4:15 "The church which is in his house"

Philomen 2 "The church in your house"

In a house - extraordinary? Not really, just scriptural and simple. Jesus himself said "where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them" **Matthew 18:20**

So, according to the master, a church can be, or rather is, just two or three people gathering and fellowshiping together - what an awesome concept! Jesus himself had a church of 12, and one of them later turned into a traitor.

Imagine this: Christian believers, of any locality, with the absolute minimum of fuss or bother, not having to rent or buy a building, without having to pay for the support of anyone, no sound system, microphones, gadgets, equipment, no offerings or collections to be taken, no mechanisms, no structured leadership as such. Each one able to share, participate as they desire, meeting as frequently or infrequently as they desire. Fellowshiping, sharing, supporting, encouraging each other. Praying specifically, not just generally, not limited by time deadlines, or programmes. Flexible, organic, sub-dividable, personal, able to be adapted, or even disbanded if necessary, to be reformed if and where desirable. Able to have each person's gifts operating, never just based on one person's performance. Perhaps meeting around a meal as Jesus' last night on earth. At any venue as the early Christians did - in forest or cave! Not just at one person's house either - at any that's available. Informal, not having to dress up for the sake of appearances. Places where everyone feels comfortable and not a misfit. Each one accepted, loved, trusted, encouraged. Each the others 'keeper'. Self - correcting, as and when appropriate. No embarrassment over personal mistakes. Meeting to focus on God himself, with true fellowship. And, the most important function of all; the Holy Spirit able to move, lead, prompt, guide, as *he* intended. Powerful stuff. And yet, simply what the early Christians did for 300 years during the most powerful and vibrant period of church history and undoubtedly countless times since. Is it worth a try today?

When you get to the seventh church in Revelation chapters two and three, Jesus is standing outside knocking, trying to get in but nobody seems to have missed Him...how odd.

church buildings

Consider the old testament tabernacle: a mobile tent, for the requirements of the law dispensation. Able to be shifted around, carried with the children of Israel as they journeyed to the promised land. No land to purchase, not rooted in one spot, no building permits to obtain, no fees to pay, lightweight, transportable, and relocatable.

Numbers 9:16-23 "Their movements directed by God".

Matthew 17:1-8 The 'mount of transfiguration' scene: Jesus with Peter, James and John "on a high mountain apart" Jesus transfigured before them, in His resurrection glory perchance. Moses and Elijah joined in, both having been dead for centuries. Surely one of the most wondrous and glorious occasions in the history of the world. Peter's response: "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you will, let us make here three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah".

Poor Peter, he wanted to start a building programme, wanted to immortalise God's action by constructing monuments. How like mankind, before and since. "Let's do something for God, something tangible, like erecting a building". "Let's commemorate this fantastic occasion" or "let's organise this move of God, lets build on it". At least Peter said "if you will Lord" to Jesus, who wasn't recorded as even answering him. God answered Peter on Jesus behalf, "this is my beloved son, hear ye him". Answer enough? Focus on Jesus alone God said then, and he still says the same thing today - don't focus on a construction programme. DON'T TURN A MOVEMENT INTO A MONUMENT.

It seems to me, mankind hasn't learned much over the centuries. We're all builders by nature (our fallen nature). We all seek to turn our high point experiences into something tangible, to hold onto an experience, to immortalize it - to somehow make it permanent often under the guise of sharing it with others.

What's more, buildings and monuments are tangible, and can be seen, long after the initial thrill passes and the daily routine sets in. Let us make here three tabernacles said Peter, not just one - Peter was thinking big. They fell on their faces, and so do many building programmes.

However logical to undertake, however spiritually 'worthy', however visionary, however 'led' leaders seem, the building programmes oft-times just seem to 'fall on their faces'. The effort necessary, the commitment of member's time, energy and finances, the divisionary consequences can be extraordinary. Consider some church building projects in Auckland in recent years alone.

Finally, if something gets finished people sit back, relax, with a satisfied smile and say "look what we've done for God - what we have achieved, for God of course!" The congregation settles down, well satisfied with themselves, perchance to contemplate the overdraft and the financial burden they've lumbered themselves and future generations with. Some maybe repeat the whole scenario elsewhere - dear Lord forgive us!

And Jesus came and touched them, that's what it's really all about, hearing God's voice, getting God's touch. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man save Jesus only. The building

programme had been overshadowed by God exalting Jesus. And nothing more was written about the occasion, or Peter's immature natural earthly reaction. Will we ever learn? Probably not!

But the idea is so attractive - our very own building. Not having to shift around and set up each time, not having to clean up other's mess, and our own space. Being able to use it any time we want - the list is endless. The vision can be so appealing and the down-sides disregarded in the euphoria.

Another lesson can be learned in the turning of movements into monuments. Dear Peter - what a chump he seemed sometimes. His mouth really seemed apt to run away and at times seemingly tried to talk Jesus out of his God—appointed mission on earth. Then, one church empire was supposedly built on his leadership, and it's the most guilty of ornate and ostentatious buildings the world over - while beggars sit on the steps and wonder at the misplaced energy and values of it all.

Consider the words of Jesus responding to the disciples when they tried to show him Solomon's temple in Jerusalem: "Do you see these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down" **Mark 13:1,2**

If they all will eventually come down, then why bother to put them up in the first place? Better to let the dead bury the dead, and let the worldlings build their buildings, perhaps to rent or lease them for a time if absolutely necessary.

It's odd to further consider that Jesus' family trade was carpentry before he was anointed for his earthly mission and Paul was a tent-maker by trade - both in the building business, but neither erected temples or church buildings. Instead both chose to build the one true invisible spiritual church, that will endure through all eternity! So, lets forget the buildings can we, and concentrate on helping God to build his kingdom within human hearts - not our little empires on earth!

attendance versus fellowship

Have you been along to a church service recently? How did the service go for you? How did you manage the hassle of getting ready, dressed, and organised to get there? What about the effort of transporting yourself and your family to the venue, of getting a parking space and all the other items of readiness and transportation?

And then, once you were actually there, the greetings, the sitting in rows of pews or seats, with good views - usually of the backs of heads. The standing up and sitting down, again and again repeatedly, the announcements of this or that, things it takes to keep folk occupied and an assembly ticking over.

The collection - where it went you have no idea, you have to give it in trust, from your pocket to theirs it goes, mostly to just keep the church machinery ticking over, salaries paid and expenses met. How much of it actually extended God's kingdom - no-one has any idea. Throughout all this, the wearying ordeal of looking after or worrying about kids if you have a family.

How's the performance of various folk who are 'involved' and accredited? The worship: how controlled and influenced was it? Switched on and off at someone's say so? The sermon: how much spiritual nourishment did you actually receive?

Then "see you later" farewells: were they just polite or were they sincere? Then, repeat but opposite dramas of getting there, back home to comfortable surroundings again - but at least you did get out of the house for a while!

Does this sound familiar? Was it worth the effort, energy and time? How much lasting benefit to you was the whole deal? Compare this scenario: a minimum of fuss in preparation and transportation, come as you are, meet a small group of folk that you can converse with for a while and get to know. People you can have eye contact with, instead of seeing the back of their head. Seated in a circle, you can gauge reactions and learn about them and their real lives. Then you can have some food, while you chat and share or sit or stand without being told to do so! Informal, casual, but real. Sharing heart to heart about experiences and concerns you have, getting comments from folk speaking to your exact circumstances, if you'll be open and transparent with them. Giving as well as receiving, helping others as you are sharing, blessing as you are being blessed yourself. Continuing conversation with whoever you'd like to while the occasion winds down.

Going away feeling built-up, encouraged, having shared, and experienced real blessing - 'body ministry'. No formality, or routine, or format that must be followed because of tradition. No performers or performances, no 'profile' exhibitors. No collections but if you do give it's exactly to where you want it to go, and to do exactly what you want it to do. No time limit imposed. Wow, what a difference! The difference between mere attendance and true fellowship, and often, the difference between religion and reality.

In many churches, the proportions are much the same. 10% make it happen, 80% watch it happen and the other 10% have no idea what's happening.

the fortress mentality

An unusual phrase 'fortress mentality'. My ears pricked up when I heard it used with reference to a particular local church recently, how odd I thought. What does it mean, where did it spring from and what possible relevance could it have to a church of all things or to the current church scene? I started to consider and explore. I knew a fortress was a type of ancient castle - I explored further.

In medieval times, forts were positioned anywhere to defend some valuable thing or area, often for a minimal time but a fortress was a permanent structure, designed and built to last supposedly forever. Its prime purpose was to withstand sieges, long and arduous attacks from any or all sides.

Location and position was immensely critical, often they were built on the top of a hill, or a rocky outcrop where look-outs could spot attackers coming. There were other advantages of elevation, the attackers had to shoot uphill, and gravity was on the defender's side. Hot tar and other nasty substances could be poured on attackers - all rather messy but apparently effective.

Usually fortresses were self sufficient, not vulnerable to having supplies cut off, with granaries and store-houses to outlast long sieges. Entrances were kept to a minimum, often there was only one main doorway, with portcullis and cunning protection techniques in guard-houses. Narrow slit windows, made for small targets, could easily be protected with shutters - but they didn't allow much light in, so the interior spaces could be quite gloomy.

During a siege, fortress-dwellers could close draw-bridges, shutters, barricade other openings, and wait for the attackers to wear themselves out and eventually give up, then life in the fortress could continue on as before. Obviously life in a fortress would be quite controlled and disciplined. Only basic activities were catered for, the entire accent of the fortress was to protect and keep intact, and to keep the occupants alive. The workers only could venture out when the surrounding countryside was at peace, otherwise only scouts or marauding parties went out after night-fall to do their mischief.

But where's the connection between an ancient fortress and a modern-day church? I believe many modern-day church groups and denominations are built with similar mentalities.

Consider these points: usually a fortress church is the vision of one 'driving force' personality. Charismatic, persuading, influential, dominating, eventually leading into controlling. Fortresses are built for security, to defend position, creeds, beliefs, held to be so valuable that they warrant separation and alienation from the general populace and other churches. Permanence - turning vision into bricks and mortar to outlast the founder and his lifetime. Often it seems these are birthed through the personal insecurity of the founder - why else?

The 'flock' within, feel like the select few; chosen, elitist, nurtured to be faithful and safe within the confines of the fortress. "In the world, but not of it..." taken to the extreme. As time passes, intermarriage becomes common, often alarming in its extent. "It's in the flock's best interests" they say, but it makes any dissenters think twice about escaping and leaving relatives behind. This logic is often behind the encouragement to seek a marriage partner 'inside'. Offspring will then grow up

within the confines of the fortress, increase the numbers of the faithful and growth is achieved.

Slit windows give a narrow view of the world outside, and are hard to be penetrated. A general all-enveloping gloom prevails inside, only filtered light only is admitted. Fortresses are to be defended at all costs! When attacks are made, alarms sound, defence stations are taken. All attacks are to be repelled vigorously. It doesn't matter how, or with what, the fortress is defended. Pour boiling tar on the attackers if you have to - twist and distort the truth if necessary, but never admit to error or wrong-doings. The reputation of the church is paramount, and must be protected, by lawful or unlawful means. This aspect is disturbing - inhabitant 'members' who are basically honest and law-abiding, will often quite readily, lie, twist, distort or do whatever is necessary to defend the fortress and then, once the attack is repelled will revert to honest and respectable lives - incredible but true! Their moral values seemingly operate in two separate compartments., It doesn't matter if the 'attackers' wish to see the inhabitants set free of the oppressive conditions within the fortress, indeed, some of the occupiers are their very own kith and kin left behind by escapees. All visitors and outsiders are to be screened and if of 'doubtful' motives repelled.

It's easy to see why the phrase is so fitting. As the world goes about its business, and Christendom gets on with its mission, the inhabitants of fortresses just get older, and more paranoid! Like the derelict ancient fortresses of by-gone eras, that have lasted for centuries, so the fortress mentality will probably be around for a while yet. But I think there are lessons to be learned - beware the fortress church, and beware the fortress church mentality.

Churches today are full of willing people - some are willing to work,
others are willing to watch them.

"I've no idea when Jesus is coming back. I'm on the welcoming committee, not the
planning committee!" - Tony Campolo

the two conversions

So, you've been converted - that's great, really and truly great. You've been born again by the Spirit of God - regenerated. You've received Jesus as Saviour, Lord, Redeemer. Where did you receive this gift?

Were you out on your own somewhere, were you on some Damascus road, like Saul of Tarsus? Were you called as you sat at business, like Matthew? Or up a sycamore tree, like Zaccheus? Were you called while mending nets like James and John? Did it happen as you drew water from a well, like the Samaritan woman? Or were you brought to Jesus by someone, like Andrew brought Simon Peter?

Chances are, in this day and age, you were taken to a church, by some well-meaning friend, acquaintance or relative. Or you responded to an advertisement, or even a tele-evangelist, then sought out a church to visit. Or perhaps, you were even born into a Christian family who attended church. Anyway, anyhow, by what-ever means, you were born-again - changed.

Being converted is a change of direction, from serving self to following Christ. Awesome, and life-changing, but from my contacts and observations, few have this experience on their own. By far the great majority of people were inside the doors of some church at an evangelistic rally, or some other grouping of Christians. Usually some other person is involved, some 'coincidence' of contact with a church service. I can almost guarantee in the spiritual and emotional heat of the occasion something else was happening. Another conversion was in the process, that you may not have been, nor ever were to become aware of, 'a second conversion'. Every bit as real as the first spiritual one. What is this second conversion?

Its a conversion to the church group you have attended, to the group of Christians amongst whom you've been born-again! For me, the impact and experience of being born-again, was so wondrous that the awareness of the second, didn't even register until decades later. By then, I'd married a girl I met at that church, raised a family, gone into partnership with another church member, made many friends there, gone on countless church holidays, and spent a quarter of a century of effort there.

As I look back, the reality of that second conversion was every bit as real as the first spiritual one. As I grew spiritually, and fed my spiritual appetite for the Bible, and Christian books etc, — so my involvement with the meetings and programmes and affairs of that church grew. I never questioned any difference between my spiritual growth as far as God was concerned, and my church involvement, not for years, even decades later, until eventually I sought to leave that particular church. And then, horror upon horrors, the truth slowly dawned on me: they had converted me to their own particular but 'narrow' range of church attitudes and outlook!

I'd converted to their dress code, haircutting, beard shaving, jargon and phraseology, ways of smiling, handshaking and greeting others. Attitudes, viewpoints, world-view and interpretations on just about every subject.

I'd become another clone shining a pew each meeting. My own personality and individuality had become absorbed and drowned in a church style! And when I tried to leave - all cultish 'hell' broke

loose, the trauma almost cost me my life!

From my observation and contacts, a second conversion occurs in most folks when they receive Christ as lord, and are born-again at some established church group or denomination with their own meeting place.

This is a fact that countless people have discovered to their eventual cost and dismay. For some, the contemplation of this second conversion is so overwhelming they believe it's "too late to change" or to do anything about it, and so they resign themselves to the situation, and grow old in sadness and dissatisfaction, frustration and disillusionment. Either that, or they count the cost and view the necessary effort to leave as being too painful to have to endure, so they settle back for the downward ride to wherever.

But the distinction must be made. The first conversion is a work of God and of the spirit of God, the second conversion is the work of a person, usually a man and to a particular church group. Whilst the first brings total spiritual freedom and liberty, the second conversion brings the opposite - bondage, and the look-alike-ed-ness of a particular church group.

The first conversion brings freedom to pursue your individual giftings and calling anywhere in God's creation that he leads you — after earnest seeking and following God's promptings.

The second conversion brings 'faithfulness' to one man's work and empire — now that takes very little effort - just doing what the chap in the pulpit says.

The first conversion is exhilarating and fresh as God leads by his spirit, just like the wind "blowing where it listeth". The second conversion eventually becomes predictable, ritualistic and boring, then frustrating - and then anger can set in.

The first conversion has its security in God alone, the second has its security in a man or a group of Christians and that security produces its own comfort and takes away responsibility - its often easier to just 'trust the leaders' and follow 'the party line'.

The first conversion is what Adam and Eve enjoyed, what Saul / Paul experienced, what the Ethiopian eunuch found, via Philip, but notice how Philip got caught away, he didn't have to concretise him into a denomination! It's what Jesus' disciples experienced as he called them personally one by one.

And another interesting observation: some, even many, dear people, have somehow missed out on the reality of the first conversion, the one that matters, and have only had the second one and they end up sheltering in a secure group of people or church or denomination. The first conversion is necessary, absolutely. The second conversion is absolutely unnecessary. Beware the second conversion, and its effects. Its just man piggy-backing on something that God has done. Man 'horning in' on God's work of spiritual enlightenment, to build a person's own empire, whatever spiritual name they may give to it!

Beware, and by God's grace, spot the difference!

Your Christianity: if it doesn't work in your home - don't export it.

How they're loved, sought after and looked upon as a just reward for a person's effort, endeavour and success. The world of politics awards them plentifully; sir and lady, your honour, the honourable, the right honourable, his eminence (or his *immense* as a child called one!). Lord, lady, dame.

In the New Year's honours list, titles are usually given for some feat of endeavour, some major accomplishment, and no doubt they're generally well earned. Some are given to successful businessmen, but sometimes they're open to questions as to just how well earned they may be. Most Prime Ministers end up with a title eventually, and the royal family is 'chocka' with them.

But consider another sphere of endeavour - the religious world. It has more than its share of titles; vicar, priest, your grace, bishop, reverend, the very reverend, the right reverend, canon (have they ever been fired?), rabbi, pastor, father - *father* indeed!

These titles give prestige, honour, significance, elevation, respect, acclaim, prominence, praise, favour, authority, exaltation, distinction, esteem, fame recognition, influence, power, stature and status. Mankind's fallen nature craves so much. To bask in the glory and honour of them, to be recognised wherever, whenever, to have those feelings of pride within. The very reasons Jesus was against them!

Matthew 23:7-11 "Then spoke Jesus saying the scribes and pharisees love greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi*. But be not you called Rabbi, for one is your master even Christ, and all you are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth, for one is your Father, which is in Heaven. Neither are you to be called masters, for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant" *Teacher - Greek.

Now, this statement wouldn't have endeared Jesus to the religious hierarchy at all, in fact it was another nail in his cross. Titles feed the fallen Adamic, soulish, earthy, natural, carnal nature in all of us. Instead of the renewed, redeemed, spiritual, re-born humble nature of God within us. They're used to give predominance over one's neighbour, to give wrongly added weight to appeals and ministries. If a person needs a title to announce something that they can't convey by their life-style, then they are deceptive as well. Let the natural unredeemed world esteem and honour its own - their vision is for this world alone, and whatever honour they can attract or grab along the way! But for followers of the lamb of God, the lowly carpenter from Galilee - not so.

He left a brotherhood, of equals. There was to be no pre-eminence nor elevation amongst his followers. The ground at the foot of the cross is level!

Mark 10:43,44 "It shall not be so among you, but who-so-ever will be great among you, shall be your minister. And who-so-ever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all".

Now, most full-time, trained clergymen are at the very least called ministers. The full meaning of this may have been lost a bit! Instead of exalting a man-of-the-cloth, its meaning is exactly the opposite — the meaning is to serve others, to minister to the needs of another person, to be the servant of all

others. Not to be on the receiving end of service, but the provider and giver of service, as Jesus demonstrated on his last night on earth.

Mark 10:45 "For the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many".

He laid aside his glory, the glory and position he had with his father in heaven to come to this globe, to be a sin-bearer and a true example of servanthood - to the extent of washing the feet of his disciples.

John 13:14,15 "If I then, your Lord and master, have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you."

But there's another subtle and more dangerous facet of this subject. The usage of titles divides the body of Christ into two distinct and separate parts: the professional / trained priestly tier of *clergy* and the common people or *laity*. As God revealed to the Apostle John on Patmos.

Revelation 2:6 "the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I hate"

Revelation 2:15 "the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate"

This word Nicolaitanes, comes from *nikao* - to conquer, and *laos* - the people or laity. These deeds of the Church at Ephesus, and the doctrine of the church at Pergamos, was simply - they had divided an equal brotherhood into the two tier system of professionals and common people - and God says twice to John - he absolutely hates such division. It's a division devised by man, to allow some to rule over and thus conquer others, not God's idea at all. No - one has more access to God than anyone else — no - one. All members of the true church of the twice-born, are equal and on exactly the same footing before God. There's no difference in God's sight between any of us. There is no clergy or laity with God, we're all His sons and daughters. God accepts no man's person or title.

Matthew 22:16 "...for you regard not the person of men".

The use of any title to indicate that someone has any more spirituality than another person is absolutely contrary to Jesus' express words and example. How dare anyone come between us and God — he is big enough to govern His own true church by himself. He doesn't need our's or anyone's assistance.

James 3:1 "My brethren, be not many masters {teachers} knowing that we shall receive the greater judgement".

But there's still another facet to this subject, the usage of titles by the religious world to control the flock. In my experience, one particular church comes to mind where the mention of the word 'pastor' brings instant submissiveness - its effect is awesome to behold - the mere mention of the title instantly brings the person or situation 'into line'. This rule by title through fear, is what God is against. He alone rules and guides his church and flock by love and he should be allowed to do such. And so the door is opened for spiritual abuse, and worse besides. Titles are important and vital tools in the hands of many religious hierarchies for control of their little empires here on earth, not God's kingdom here and beyond. Actually, religious groups could not do their job of ruling

and controlling without the use of titles - take them away and then God is free to speak and guide each person individually — and that's the awesome and fearsome thing the enemy doesn't want to happen - just read the book of Acts again!

Titles are dangerous both to those who have them, and to those naively respecting and using them. Avoid them like the plague - they come from mankind's fallen Adamic nature, and bring God's judgement, not His blessing. We should disregard all spiritual titles, no matter how inoffensive they may seem — for instance, pastor, (which simply means 'feeder' or 'shepherd'). They only serve to falsely split and divide the body of Christ, and allow some to control others.

So, they aren't just a mark of respect after all, instead they are a danger, and an offence to God, whom no doubt we are all or mostly trying to serve. As for me, I'll settle for "well done, good and faithful servant".

1 Peter 2:9 Ephesians 1:1

But I'm also a priest, and a saint through the finished work of Calvary and as a servant of God, I'm a minister too! But to serve others, not for them to honour me. Pause and consider brother, sister but please don't call me or anyone else, anything else!

Ministers should be a 'flame of fire' - not the organisers of church bazaars. **Hebrews 1:7**

the system

Systematic instead of inspired, regulated instead of spirit-led. Structured, controlled, programmed, ordered. The system of religion.

Perhaps we can consider it on a personal level first, how it affected me and mine. Three meetings each Sunday; morning, afternoon and evening. Two midweek evenings on Tuesday and Thursday nights, often something on Friday night; men's group or visitation. Young peoples get-together on Saturday night, often working bees on Saturday, camps away over long weekends and at Christmas holidays.

Five meetings a week minimum,
x say 50 weeks per year = 250
Through winter & summer
x 25 years = 6,250 meetings!

Now that's quite a tally of time, effort, petrol, dollar's given - all basically to help keep the system ticking over, and ourselves occupied. It's a time consuming, energy sapping, religious way of living. But this is how countless numbers of people all over the globe experience it, weekly, yearly, continually until they drop! Let's consider this 'religious' system viewed from the outside.

James 1:26

Did you realise that this word *religious* is only used once in the entire Bible, and then in a bad sense. Read what true religion according to God is, and be amazed.

James 1:27

But the religious system is; controlled, regulated, programmed, ordered, performance orientated - its easier to just watch and listen to the performers isn't it? Run by professionals, theologians, paid clergy, with hierarchy and structure, boards and committees, with membership lists or perhaps a 'phone list'. Constitutions, creeds, beliefs, ritual, forms of godliness, a system. Told what to do, and how, and when to do it, to worship on cue, then stop, always with one or more people getting between you and God.

The whole purpose of Jesus' redemptive work on Calvary was to get God the father and us back on personal speaking terms, to have an intimate relationship from that point, as Adam and Eve enjoyed with Him in the garden!

John 10:27 Jesus said "My sheep hear MY voice...and they follow me"

1 Timothy 2:5 "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus".

Why then do these religious hierarchy professionals intervene between us and God, become middle-men, mediators, priests, clergy, etc? Jesus' main problem while He was on this earth was with the

religious system. Just read Matthew 23. He didn't get grief from the ordinary people, who received him, loved him, and followed him. All of Jesus' conflict was from the religious system of his day, and they eventually 'nailed him'.

From the ten commandments given to Moses on Mt Sinai, until Jesus arrived on earth, the religious system of the time had added 1,000 statutes and ordinances, until only a devout pharisee could hope to know them all, let alone keep them. They'd turned the old testament house of prayer into a market place, and they still do just that - making a living out of religion.

John 2:15 "So Jesus got indignant, and made a whip, and chased them all out of the temple".

Time consuming, energy sapping, religious activity, things basically haven't changed much. Did you realise that when Jesus died, the veil of the temple was rent in two by the hand of God, signifying that the way into the holy of holies, the inner court of the temple, was now open and available to all without any high priest save Jesus. So when this happened, as Jesus died, guess what the religious hierarchy did - they stitched the rent up and carried on as before!

And so the religious system continues all over the globe. It seems man can't help getting between us and God, imposing order on God's sovereign dealings with us, controlling our attempts to reach out to God, dictating our times and mode of worship, regulating our individuality, even our dress, ordering our response to God's spirit, collecting our offerings, then deducting expenses and salaries, playing church, doing God's work for him, building natural visible churches, not the true invisible church of the first-born, meddling, interfering in God's personal workings with us.

All in absolute contrast to how Jesus went about helping and ministering to people where they were at. No wonder his ways were so contrary to their own that they just had to get rid of Him — it's a wonder His ministry even lasted three years! It's simply too simple for religious people, and what's more - there's no money in it! Being spirit led, and spirit taught is awesomely simple.

1 John 2:27 "You need not that any man teach you...the same anointing teaches you of all things, and is truth...abide in Him".

Galatians 1:16,17

Saul / Paul after his Damascus road experience with the living risen Jesus, went into the desert for three years - no theological system training for him. But natural man, and religious people, simply can't and won't resist putting their fingers into God's working in individual's lives. Dear God, forgive them...and forgive us for having been seduced so long by them!

The religious system is the greatest curse on this globe - bar none. The wars that have been fought by it, and over it, the blood that has been shed because of it, the first murder of Abel by Cain is where it all started. Since then there's been big trouble in families, tribes, nations. Even as I write I think of Ireland, Kosovo, Afghanistan - most any and every nation on earth. And it continues to be illustrated on many a street corner in our own land, the religious system that sucks in, chews up and spits people out.

And it can get really spiritually abusive: when its structural pyramidal shape is made evident.

There's the perpetrator (top-dog), co - conspirators (the inner circle), enablers and helpers, victims and then finally the out-casts.

All God wants is his own relationship with us without any-one's interference - just like any parent with their child. Direct communication and fellowship, God directed, spirit led, in truth. Who is behind the religious system? Who's its real sponsor?

John 8:44 Jesus knew the answer! And so will we if we recognize and know his voice.

John 10:5 "(His own sheep)...a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him, for they know not the voice of strangers".

leaders

Ever tried lifting a full can of paint using only one finger? I did once, because I had something clutched in the other fingers. Anyway, it hurt - the wire handle almost cut the circulation off from that poor struggling finger. Using four fingers and a thumb is heaps easier, let alone using a whole other hand and arm.

Many churches, seem to use only one finger to do the work. The leader with his gift, often seems to do most of the ministry on his own. But God's gift to his church is a five-fold ministry team; apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, helpers.

Ephesians 4:11

How many churches, especially smaller ones seem to have only one of these operating. If its evangelism or teaching then watch out flock, there'll be little pastoral caring, tending, nurturing, visiting and contacting. Sheep primarily need shepherds, feeders - just ask any sheep, especially the hurt, weak, bruised, dirty ones. Like midwives, evangelists are necessary when a newborn baby is birthed, but then the newborn infant should be given to the mother who supplies milk from the breast, at the right time, consistency and temperature.

Mothers know best. They know how to change nappies, clean up mess, discipline - all from a God-given caring heart. God-given pastoral hearts are similar as they reach out to tend, support, care and encourage. Someone has said evangelists 'blow in, blow off and then blow out', leaving those with pastoral gifting to ensure the growth and development of the newborns.

With evangelists as leaders, there'll be lots of altar calls - even every service. Groups with teachers leading, regardless of charisma or personality will not heal hurts or tend to aching bumps and bruises. For complete care, we need four fingers and a thumb.

And so, I ask you a question: who around you, sharing your ministry, are those who have a gift, complementary to yours? Not the same gift - if two apostles are together, they can tread on each others toes, and tend to compete - likewise two prophets, instead of flowing together. There's often an abundance of those who can teach and and there's usually many helps, bless them all, for they're the unsung heroes and backbone of any group. But there never seems to be enough true pastors, for they all have plenty of tending to do, their in-built caring for the welfare of the sheep over-riding any temptation to compete.

An interesting point in the hand illustration is the central finger in God's list is the evangelist - on either side is the pastor and the prophet. It could be read the pastor and the prophet are the necessary side-supports to the evangelist and from my observations that's very much so.

So, save crippling your one finger, and seek out those around you with complementary and differing gifts, and get into teamwork as much as possible. See how effective a complete hand can be in his service.

God raises up men - not committees. Men raise up committees - to try and help God.

religion versus christianity

What's the difference, and what difference does it make? Isn't it just splitting theological hairs? Isn't Christianity just another form of religion? Isn't it a theological matter to sort out? Well, I'm afraid it does make the most colossal difference to us all. It's the difference between light and darkness, the difference between God's favour and his condemnation, the difference between heaven and hell in fact, for each one of us.

Lets go back to the book of Genesis - the book of 'beginnings' for a peek at this vital difference. God had created Adam, and then Eve, the perfect pair in marital bliss - and soon Eve got in the family way. It turned out to be a boy, what joy! They called him Cain, and the second boy Abel. So they had two sons - the first happy family unit.

But that old spoiler - the serpent worked his mischief and trouble was soon to appear in this blissful family setting. The boys grew up, and started to think about God. Now that's a great thing you'd agree. Each decided to make God an offering of appreciation; Cain was a farmer, specialising in crops so he brought God a sacrifice from his crops. Abel was a shepherd, raising flocks of sheep so he brought God one of the choicest young lambs from his flocks as his sacrifice. But, a strange thing happened, God accepted Abel's sacrifice of the first lamb from his flock but rejected Cain's offering of the efforts of his hands. Cain had forgotten that God had cursed the ground, and the fruit of it, for mankind's sake!

Cain's response to the rejection of his hard work and offering was anger and wrath - the first mention of anger in the history of this world. Why was Cain's self effort to try and please God rejected? Thinking he'd been very hard done by, he got angry with God Himself, and then with his brother, who somehow had got this offering / sacrifice business right first time. What was so special to God about a lamb sacrifice anyway?

Well, Abel's lamb sacrifice was really looking forward to the sacrifice of the 'lamb of God' for the sins of the world. Cain's offering from self-effort typified religion. Abel's sacrifice of an innocent young lamb typified Christianity - thousands of years in advance.

This is where the essential and vital and astronomical difference between religion and Christianity all began. And the result was anger, and then murder. Cain waited for his opportunity - he would deal to his younger brother for somehow getting it right. For God accepting Abel's useless sacrifice, and not his own hard-worked offering. He waited for his moment, and when it came he killed his own brother! The first murder had been committed. The first family now had a tragedy on their hands, their oldest son had killed his younger brother. This first murder can be typified as the difference between religion and Christianity. Religion is simply man's best self-efforts. God's law requires a sacrifice be made for sin, and to be acceptable to him, an innocent must suffer and die for the guilty! The two are an eternity apart, as far as God's concerned.

But that outburst of anger and murder was only the beginning - the rest of the old testament is a saga of the continuation of the same essential difference, and its eventual consequences — anger and murder. The basic reason for conflict had been established and within a perfect family unit at that.

Now shift the clock forward 4,000 years or so: Jesus the son of man, but also the son of God, had appeared on earth, and was walking around the Middle East performing miracles. Cain's descendants - the Pharisees, were firmly entrenched in the temple and its ritual. Still carrying on the same way, they'd turned the keeping of the law and the commandments into a formalistic collection of self - effort acts to try and please God. Outward pomp and show - no real heart experience.

They were trying to impress and dominate their brethren, while making a tidy living from it at the same time - long prayers in public - to be seen and to make them look good. Having everyone acknowledging them, made them feel important, giving them flash titles, how they loved it all - wearing bits of the law on their foreheads would you believe? Long gowns, flash garb, they had all the outward show, but inwardly — they had the same spirit as Cain had.

When Jesus appeared, and performed miracles, and got the response of the ordinary people, and obviously had God's blessing, their response was exactly the same as that of Cain: anger and murder. They repeatedly tried to kill him, to grab him, throw him off a cliff etc, but God intervened until exactly the right moment — at the time of the Passover feast, when an innocent lamb was to be killed by each household, and its blood sprinkled over the doorposts. And so religion reared its ugly head once again - its fruit is always the same: anger and murder. "Why is my self-effort offering not acceptable to God" cry out the spiritual descendants of Cain to this day.

Corinthians 2:14 "But the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, neither can he know them, being spiritually discerned".

Cain, and the pharisees, were spiritually blind. Religion and Christianity are really an eternity apart. They're sworn enemies. Cain's spiritual descendants were the murderers of each of the apostles, Paul, and countless others through the last 2,000 years - just read the book of Acts or watch a TV news broadcast.

But unfortunately, religion and Christianity are so intertwined and mixed up that most people simply can't detect the difference and many get turned off both at the same time!

Only God can separate the tares from the wheat, and he will. But the difference between religion and Christianity is always found in the inward attitude to God - anger and murder versus peace and acceptance of God's sacrificial Lamb, Jesus. The bare fact is religion and Christianity are actually diametrically opposed to each other - each is the absolute and the greatest enemy of the other - always has been, always will be! Religion is the attempt of fallen mankind to work out his own salvation for himself, to avoid God's provision of Calvary and it inevitably produces anger, then hatred and murder.

James 1:27

Did you realise that the word religion is only found once in the entire bible, and then "pure religion" is described as visiting orphans and widows, and turning from worldliness. A bit of a difference from what we see these days, would you say? The entire bible is about Jesus the Christ and his mission, prophetically in advance, then his life, then his true Church after his death/murder.

The subtlest form of bondage can be religious beliefs. Consider the Pharisees of Jesus' day
- some things never change...so today!

size and numbers

Ask any businessman or accountant and they'll say big equals successfull - small equals unsuccessful. When churchmen or ministers gather at conferences, the all-important question invariably comes up: How big is your congregation these days?

Often, the answer generates the status of the minister and they're pigeon-holed as either a success or as an 'also-ran' - their opinions valued and judged by the size of their church.

Pastor Yoggi Cho's Korean church is estimated at 750,000 members - is this the ultimate benchmark to be strived for?

God's perspective on this subject is different to vain mortals and according to his Word, he does see things differently.

As we've seen Jesus had a 'church' - a group of 12 close followers and one of those turned out to be a traitor. On numerous occasions Jesus stopped to minister to just one person at a time. Even when hungry he ignored racism and prejudice by speaking at length to a despised Samaritan woman at a wellside. This great sermon on the topic of living water was delivered to an audience of one.

John 4

We read Jesus' ministry was frequently small in scale, one to one with young, old, rich, poor, male or female, people of all races and classes.

Someone has said "One with God is a majority" and we could well ask Elijah about that.

1 Kings 19:10

By earthly standards John the Baptist could hardly be rated as a raging success - he only had a small band of followers and he lost some of them to Jesus. Then he was be-headed while imprisoned for rebuking a King. Still Jesus upheld him as "greater than any other born of women".

Matthew 11:11

I would suggest the judgement of a person's ministry or assembly by numerical size is so far from God's reckoning as to be laughable. God's calue of one human soul is weighed against the gain of the entire world.

Matthew 16:26

And remember when David numbered Israel the result was God's severe displeasure and the death of 70,000 men!

2 Samuel 24

I believe God's perfectly capable to keep scores Himself, and has His own book of life - that should be enough for you and me. So what is Christendom's hang-up with congregation size?

It would seem it simply comes from vanity, from ego, from the natural and carnal Adamic sensual nature, unbecoming of a true follower of the Lamb.

John the Baptist's aim was to be but "a voice" and he had the awesome realisation that he must decrease in order for Jesus to increase. Numbers of followers were not his aim, nor his measuring standard.

John 3:30

Would to God, John the Baptist's attitude was evident and communicable within Christian circles today.

"Good men must do their deeds in the minutest particular.
Any who talk of the general welfare are scoundrels, flatterers and rogues" - William Blakeley

the parable of the bus

While 'channel-surfing' the television recently, I heard the end of an infomercial featuring one of the world's best motivators. He was asked a leading question - "out of all the famous and ordinary people that you have helped, why are some not helped?" His answer: "they won't get off the bus".

Imagine one of those long city buses that are so difficult to get past. An expensive bus with big windows, powerful turbo engine, many seats, advertising panels, or maybe the whole unit resembles a moving bill-board!

But imagine another bus is rather old and merely drives around inside a large warehouse and occasionally in the yard outside the building. Round and round, in between the columns, dodging foods stored in the warehouse and the people who work there, round and round, up and down the same aisles, doing the same circuit over and over, inside a warehouse trapped like a bird in a cage! Occasionally it ventures outside, but the confines are so limiting, and any nasty weather soon drives the bus back inside the warehouse.

The passengers on the bus slowly forget the bus was really designed for the open roads and the motorways, where it could 'stretch its legs' and cover long distances, carrying heaps of people around to wherever they were needed, to be really useful in service.

Sometimes the passengers on the bus get fed up with the restrictions of the warehouse, "this is boring and frustrating — this bus wasn't designed for just driving around inside a building, I'm getting off!" But there is a feeling of security inside the bus, and the warehouse building does keep it nice and clean, away from any storms or cyclones.

The bus is under the control of a seemingly experienced driver who determines where the passengers will go. This sure saves having to think for oneself, and that's OK for a while, but not all the passengers are happy with just how the driver is actually doing the driving, in fact it often seems like he has his own agenda!

So, one passenger waits until the bus stops for fuel, and seizes his opportunity, jumps off the bus and escapes the building. Now he's really free, to ponder his next move, to chat to other pedestrians (before, he could only talk to the other passengers on the bus as it was speeding along). Now, he can take in the wonders of creation close-up, pause as desired, find where he can work and use his individual gifts, take a taxi if he needs to get around fast, and besides - taxis will go where he wants to and when he wants to!

And, what's more, when he got off the bus, he left all his old luggage behind, all his old scruffy cases and old ill-fitting clothes - he can now get new better gear as and when he needs it.

Have you worked out the parable of the picture yet? The warehouse building is the religious church scene. The bus is the circle or group of friends within the church establishment. When the necessary courage is summoned to get off the bus (and believe me, it usually comes down to just that - 'intestinal fortitude' or guts), the freedom brings the need to seek and get into a personal

relationship with the Father himself, to really get to know Jesus and his word, our very spiritual life depends on it.

And that's how it should be - us and the Father in direct personal communion, abiding in the vine, walking in the Spirit, standing on the promises, resting in the finished work of Calvary, trusting in the faithfulness of God, daily, continually - awesome. Our gifts, calling, worship, service, financial giving, etc, all under the personal direction of the Lord of the harvest, the managing director Himself.

But, and there's often a but...

Some dear people, just won't get off the bus. They haven't the necessary guts, or they sense they'll miss the security of the bus and its engine noise — after all, it is moving, even if it is just going round in slow circles, religious circles. And so they resign themselves to life on the bus forever. But that old bus will run out of fuel one day, and conk out with everyone in it, and the doors may not open for them to get off.

Others do make the necessary effort to get off, but then make the mistake of taking their old baggage off the bus with them - the old familiar baggage of prayer times, religious attitudes, religious interpretations and doctrines, religious traditions, forms and ceremonies and programmes and structures and titles and tithing and ways of doing everything — religious baggage indeed, that's so difficult to have to carry around!

Life in the spirit can really be just as in the book of Acts but brought up-to-date. A whole new way of looking and living is involved; walking in the freshness of the spirit, looking for his anointing on the word, hearing his voice and promptings, following his leadings and guidance in all matters, finding our very own calling and giftings, and where and how to put them into operation.

His church, his way or not at all !

I must add also, that after 25 years on one closed-door bus, and another 10 years on an open-door bus, now that I've gotten off buses, my old religious baggage life is very much like 'peeling the onion' - I no sooner have stripped off one layer of religious baggage, and I feel so free of it, than very soon another layer is made evident and it too has to be peeled. How many more layers are there still awaiting my eyes to see, and my fingers to remove? The religious system sure leaves us with plenty of baggage to leave behind doesn't it?

So, let's get off the bus, familiar though it may have become, and leave our old baggage behind. Let it continue its religious journeying around in those small 'safe' religious circles. Good riddance old bus and baggage!

See ya later bus - but only from a distance!

Labels aren't important - contents are.

Orthodox religion today has largely substituted religious activity for personal holiness.

quicksand

Sticky stuff I've heard - not very common around the world, fortunately, but treacherous stuff from all accounts. A soft, yielding, oozy sand that looks quite innocent, until an unwary victim ventures too near. Silently it envelops and sucks, until a victim is totally immersed, and then vanishes from view altogether. In spite of frantic efforts to extract, its suction powers are frightening and total - definitely not a pleasant way to die.

Could it be that it has many similarities to a very common institution of our time and age - the structured church scene. Like quicksand, this is so easy to get into, one step will do it, maybe folk get led into it by other well-meaning folk. Some are even born into it! It doesn't really matter exactly what the circumstances were when one ended up in it, the outcome is invariably the same - total envelopment.

It's almost impossible to get extracted without assistance. One's own frantic efforts are usually not sufficient. A lifeline needs to be thrown from someone, somewhere, somehow, to overcome what can become a life and death struggle.

Have you been caught up in the quicksand of a particular church group? Involved, immersed, your individuality submerged, till you hardly know what you are really like, surrendered not only to God, but to a particular presentation of Christianity, conforming to the group thing, in dress, speech, and attitudes, indistinguishable from the other members, having become virtually another clone of the group, fearful (full of fear)...sound at all familiar? Sounds like me for 25 years.

And then hurrah, a chink of light cuts through the haze. Enlightenment, insight comes, events occur, outside assistance perhaps, a lifeline is thrown, a hand is extended - whatever. You summon the necessary guts to wriggle out. And you've got a leg free at last!

Its awesome - this freedom, to make your own decisions, without worrying what the group will think, to concentrate on your relationship with God alone without interference or having to submit to group approval. And you seek another church group for security, solace perhaps, to recover from your mixed up head, to receive simple, plain help. Maybe even to prove to yourself, or the members of the previous church perchance, you haven't 'slipped away' or 'gone back' at all, or heaven forbid 'back-slidden'.

So, you put some time in there, to recover and enjoy the new found freedom, all is well for a while but then doubts arise, the 'temperature' begins to change in the group. "Oh no, here I go again!" Surely not you think, "this can't be happening to me again - there's something wrong - is it with me? Have I been the one with the problem all this time?" Then another light slowly dawns..."my other leg isn't free at all!"

I was still partially stuck in the quicksand of religious church structures, the quicksand of denominations and some man's empire building. When God had me extracted the first time, he wanted me totally free. For me, the first leg was freedom from a particular group, the second is freedom from the whole structured church system.

Freedom from the same religious system that in old testament times killed each and every prophet that God sent to Israel - and eventually crucified God's only son, our beloved saviour. Organised, institutionalised, structured churchianity.

Freeing the second leg took me another ten years, would you believe? Only then could I really walk, run and jump - move in the precise ministry and calling that God has for me, give exactly where it fits, where the precise need is (as Jesus himself did). No more giving to help keep a structured church in business, no more spending energy on man's programmes, no matter how wonderful they may appear to be. No more dead-lines, stress, hassles.

Just the freedom to live one day at a time, spirit led, spirit accountable (and to others when / as necessary of course) - a direct line to God operating. Meeting with other members of his living church of the firstborn in small groups, with no fuss, sharing, combining as necessary. As free as everyone that's born of God's spirit. A living stone in his church, his called-out assembly. Made up into a building not made with hands but eternal - as Israel was before they demanded a King.

It's wonderful indeed to have both legs free - that'll do me / us!

It took 25 years for us to get out of the church system, then a further 10 years to get the church system out of us!

It took God one night to take the children of Israel out of Egypt
- but 40 years to get Egypt out of the children of Israel.

withdrawal symptoms

I've never been a dope addict, nor have I had any of the other obvious and miserable addictions that seem to plague the human race, but I did smoke heavily for a while in my teen years, and I can well remember what that was like to quit. And then there's coffee addiction, or is it to caffeine? Even sports watching, and TV itself perhaps?

There are many types of subtle addictions around if you think about it - but that's not the point that caught my mind recently. Addictions were the subject, and the pain that goes with 'kicking the habit'.

Withdrawal is the word they use and 'withdrawal symptoms'. Which brings us to our subject - we found we experienced many and varied withdrawal symptoms when we left the organised structured church system a little while ago. We'd been in the system for 25 years at one particular legalistic church. Amid much trauma we left, and were fortunate to receive assistance and recovery time at another church.

It was good for some years, then, it went the same way as the first place, the same legalistic elements showed themselves, and we again moved on, albeit in a more 'normal' way. We slowly realised that perhaps God was leading us away from the church scene altogether - I recall my wife sensed this before I did. Used to Sunday being the busiest day of the week, it was quite hard for me to let go of the Sunday routine and habit that I had formed for 35 years!

Withdrawal pangs set in especially when I could hear the neighbours cars start up and drive off to their respective churches. What was I doing? Not in my Sunday garb, not rushing to get out the door and into the familiar routine sequence that Sunday normally held. "I've been in this city for over 35 years, and hardly been to any of the other churches," I thought..."I don't know any of the other assemblies and their leaders at all - they're just names that I occasionally hear of".

So for several years now, I went off each Sunday to a different church, to those I'd heard about that were supposed to be 'alive'. Often I would go back to a church, if the usual minister was away, or if I wasn't able to get all the 'vibes' the first time. I soon found friendliness and 'meet the stranger' are not very high on most churches lists of attributes.

Again and again, I found myself feeling invisible - the regulars would walk past me, or around me, with hardly a word or smile. Occasionally some would make polite conversation, then the classic question: "and where is your regular place of attendance?" I could see their mind ready to pigeonhole me according to my answer - lets get a handle on this fellow, they were thinking. And so, I grew adept at not giving the answer they were seeking. "The church of Auckland" I sometimes answered - that one really threw them. Or "I'm just a Christian" but that invariably was just not good enough an answer, and further probing would ensue!

After several years of this, I wondered if I could really fit in anywhere again - there seemed to be rampant legalism and churches going through the motions all over the city. I must admit that I grew rather disheartened with my search— was there really no place my wife and I could serve the Lord without having to endure a structure and system that we were both heartily tired of?

Eventually, the penny started to drop - God was calling us away from structured churches, and had been trying to get us to see this since he led us away from our first church scene and the 25 years of full-on involvement there. So, we have ventured out of the system towards the uncharted waters of a wide ocean.

But back to the withdrawal symptoms. I had so much habit-formed church and programme addiction, that it was hard to throw it off. The tendency to want to get involved, the keenness to see immediate and visible results, the itch to get into activities on a Sunday.

And the biggest item of all: to be a do-er instead of a be-er. To somehow earn God's favour by action for him. The notion that religious activity is fulfilling. I felt lacking somehow if I wasn't involved in some Christian activity or meeting, or programme, or whatever. I found it's harder to wait for God's timing to move and allow him to direct the programme and action, than to stir it up myself, or to follow others as they organise events.

This religious attitude of good actions at any cost can be very hard to withdraw from. I now know God approves of his 'men and ladies in waiting', even as the Queen of England has such people around her constantly. Waiting on him before taking action, awaiting him to organise and go ahead, before we move, to avoid the trap of organization. To concentrate on simply being, rather than endless doing.

Not that we aren't busy, but without the effort to structure it all, and the resultant stress level, and the frustration, and the reactions. It's really become so simple, building his church, his way. As for withdrawal and its symptoms - like everything else - they'll pass!

Not overwork - but overflow. There's a vast difference.

two or three

Matthew 18:20 Jesus speaking..."For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them".

For all my Christian life, till a few weeks ago, in all the Christian books I'd read, in all the sermons I have listened to, I've only thought this verse signified the smallest size possible for a church to be - it has always been portrayed as the minimal 'excuse' for a Christian gathering. Sort of like, "well, we really tried for and expected a much bigger number to turn up, but I suppose, if no-one else shows then we trot out this verse, and get the occasion over and done with as quick as possible. Is that how it's been viewed by you?

But all my Christian life, I've always appreciated the small groups, and have loved one-on-one discussions. With one or two others, I can always participate, say my piece readily, or when I can get a word in with some people, you know the type! I can ask probing questions, have a free discussion, really find out what makes another tick and get into their mind - and spirit, and share, share, share! For me, this has always been more satisfying than a larger group, when it's listen, listen, listen. But recently, having exited from the structured church scene, this verse took on a whole new focus and depth.

Two or three people aren't the lowest excuse for a church group, but where Jesus actually hangs out - with any two or three Christians sharing openly together in his name, there he is. He really doesn't need the big crowds, or the large structured gatherings, or the pompous occasions, or the organised and arranged events. A few of them have their place...evangelistic rallies have done their work in largely by-gone eras, and preaching has its undoubted role.

Of course Jesus preached out in the open most times, in the high-ways and by-ways - he went where the people were, or rather, they came to him when he was in their locality - but quite different from structured, organised, formal, regulated services.

"Where two or three are gathered *THERE I AM*" he said.

Luke 24 As Cleopas and Simon found to their surprise, as they walked along the road to Emmaus, Jesus himself..."drew near and went with them". And they ended their walk and talk over a meal, at a cafe! This is not the miserable lowest excuse for a meeting, but the means that Jesus actually uses for us to edify and encourage each other. And Jesus has promised to bless such chats with his presence - a fact that I can testify to on countless occasions over the years.

How natural and beneficial is chatting over a meal? It's a recognised medical fact I'm told, that sharing food, a shared meal, helps the digestive system. Lonesome meals are definitely not as pleasant - just food intake, not spiritual intake, or the fellowship that our spirits long for and crave. We're very much social animals, and shared meals combine to meet our physical and spiritual needs - we get built up on both levels simultaneously. So where does all this lead?

Our so-called need for large structured gatherings is not so real after all - we get 'built up' and more edification out of a simple chat with a spiritual fellow pilgrim or two, better still over a cup of

whatever! I realise now that this yearning has been present with me all my Christian life - which is probably the reason I went to and endured organised camps over long weekends, holidays etc - the moments of genuine sharing one-on-one I had were worth all the negative aspects of those events.

Just two or three people - so simple and real. No structure, long-winded arrangements, harrowing organising, tension, stress, dressing-up, collections, listening without daring to interrupt, condemnation preaching coming at you, clock watching, time controls, one person performances, pre-eminence of any person, looking at the backs of heads, whatever!

One-on-one, eyeball to eyeball, as long or short a time as you both agree, to and fro discussion on any topic. You can ask "now what exactly do you mean by that?", "what do you think about this situation?", "how's it going - really and truly?" There's freedom correct each other, to get things ironed out, speaking truth. And, consciousness of Jesus' presence so often!

I believe this is how Jesus has chosen for his church to operate and bless each other, in twos or threes. On reflection, I believe that I owe more benefit to such chats with people of God than to all the meetings I have ever attended - I can remember many of these chats so vividly and the characters of some of the people have made lasting impressions on me. Jesus often had the right person at the right time, to say the right things to me, and perhaps me to them!

His people, his church, his blessing, his way - hey mate, got time for a chat?

But, I hear someone ask, what is the place of the larger gatherings, the huge evangelistic rallies of previous decades? Indeed, what about any groups or meetings or big indoor gatherings of Christians?

The new testament is delightfully vague about such events - after all, the early church was still in its infancy, with no structure at all - how blissful that must have been. Most gatherings were home-groups, limited by the number that someone's house could hold. There are so few references to any large gatherings at all, except for the noisy crowds and riots that Paul seemed to attract, and they were generally in public places, not in hired halls.

Large gatherings take organisation and finance, arrangements and agendas, then clean-up and aftermath. I really wonder at the amount of effort, time and finance that goes into the programmes of most established churches to keep people involved, and just how beneficial they are when viewed long-term by God. Again and again I return to the benefit of the small groups, and the personal building-up that participation by every individual brings.

All I dare say about large gatherings in hired or purpose-built halls, is simply this: let them be spirit led and directed totally and not just some mortal's well meaning idea, let them be organic, naturally supernatural, let them be as simple as humanly or divinely possible, let them be specific and for as short a period as possible and finally LET THEM BE FEW!

Or we're right back in the religious system yet again, and we will find yet another religious tentacle at work seeking to plant and take root...dear Lord, spare us!

Jesus leads, Satan drives - there's a vast difference.

john twenty-one

Can you picture this scene: Jesus had died on a hill called Calvary and there were reports that he'd been seen alive. Simon Peter was discouraged, upset that he had denied His Lord, and at all the traumatic events of that first Easter weekend.

John 21:3 "I go a fishing" he declared. Time out was needed to think, and to ponder his next move, so he returned to the fishing boats Jesus had called him away from - poor Peter! "We're coming too" said six of the other disciples. So they all climbed into a boat, and returned to their old familiar ways of fishing but for all their efforts they caught nothing, not even a sprat!

John 21:5 A man appeared on the shore, and called out to them "have you caught anything?" They answered grumpily "NO!"

John 21:6 The man gave them some explicit instructions: "cast the net on the right side of the ship!" Who is this fellow?, they must have thought, and what does he know about fishing - they were the professionals after all! But, they did as he said, maybe there was a certain tone in his voice they responded to. The result - they caught so many fish they couldn't draw the net in. The beloved disciple John, reporting the story, recognized it was Jesus who had directed them.

John 21:7 "Peter" he said, "it is the Lord". Peter was so thrilled and excited to see Jesus that he jumped overboard [naked] and got to shore real fast. The other disciples brought the boat to shore, with 153 fish - yet the net wasn't broken! [Question - who would have bothered to count the fish?] Jesus had a fire going, and already had fish on it, and bread also.

John 21:12 "Come and dine" he called to them, then fed them, ate with them, and afterwards shared with them tremendously. I have just read this story again, for the umpteenth time, but only now have seen a great truth within it. This is a picture of how Jesus operates after his resurrection, with his new covenant church. Now, today, even in this present time and age. No buildings, no structure, no thing added. Just Jesus and six disciples having a BBQ on a beach, then sharing.

What a fantastic picture of the new church scene - an example of a new testament church group. Meeting together, fellowshiping, on a beach! Just a handful of believers, with the risen Lord, around a fire - the very first 'home group' get-together I reckon. Jesus' own example of the church he left behind; simple, powerful, naturally supernatural. What mugs we are to add anything else to the basics! It's all so simple if we follow his very own example.

Jesus said: "Feed my sheep" - not amuse the goats!

living stones

Has it ever come to your notice that born-again children of God, are sometimes described as 'living stones' in the word of God?

1 Peter 2:5 "You also as living stones are built up into a spiritual house". Stones of a wall that God himself is building!

Hebrews 11:10 "A wall of a temple that God is building and making for himself, for his own indwelling". Not made with hands, natural man's hands that is. In fact, completely without our help - this will come as a shock to many religious people - God himself is the architect and the builder.

1 Corinthians 3:11 "Jesus is the foundation, as well as the chief corner stone" — that's where the rest of the wall gets set out from, it keeps the construction of the rest of the wall nice and straight.

Genesis 11:3,4 There was another tower or temple that mankind built a long time ago, called Babel (which means 'confusion'). Its constructors tried to reach the heavens, but they used bricks as wall materials, not stonework.

Genesis 3:17 "The bricks they used were made from clay, of the earth that God had cursed, (for man's sake) and mankind formed them themselves". This is a type of religious activity — useless to God and themselves! And guess what they used for mortar - slime! Imagine what God thought of the use of that material?

Genesis 11:7-9 God eventually confounded the project and scattered the builders afar. The message here is God won't accept our self righteousness, nor self effort, nor indeed any sort of bloodless religion without sacrifice.

So, God himself is the stone mason of his very own temple and he uses 'living stones', from rock that he himself creatively formed in the beginning, definitely not 'dead' man-made brickwork. Stones that are spiritually 'alive' — born-again, bonded to each other by the 'mortar' of the Holy Spirit. Does the symbolism and allegory of this thrill you, as it does me? It's so simple yet profoundly deep.

But, there's more: 'living stones' are flexible, growing, active, enlarging, therefore the mortar between each stone and its neighbour, must be sufficiently fluid and elastic to allow the stone to expand or move, take up the resultant movement and allow for the growth of the stone. God's wall therefore is of individual stones that are pulsating with life - each one alive and vibrant, and the mortar of the Holy Spirit allows for this. Religion, in sharp contrast, seeks to cut God's living stones into nice square or oblong shapes - with no allowance for growth nor to allow the stones to be individually 'alive' — dead rigidly symmetrical bricks are easier to build man's types of walls with.

Consider those pair of short-haircutted dark-suited collar and tied young men on bikes, that come regularly to your door, for a prime example of cloning - each one virtually a replica of the other, as though they've been produced in a huge factory somewhere. They even talk the same, like a tape playing, each with the same trained and cloned arguments, reasonings and doctrines. But, most

religious churches and groups have some degree of the same cloning as these urban missionaries - people are easier to handle and utilize if they are beaten into the same mould, with their individual corners knocked off.

But here's the main point: in God's wall of living stones, each stone only relates to four other stones - one on either side, one above, one beneath, four in total, and only four, unless the wall is multiple thickness, when another two would be neighbours on both front and back also, which would make a total of six.

Get the message in all of this? A child of God need only to closely relate to four or six other living stones — we don't need to try and intimately relate to more than four or six other pilgrims — we don't need to be too concerned about the rest of the wall that we can't really see from our position in the wall anyhow — we just leave all that to the master mason. It's his wall, and his building, and his workmanship - his responsibility! Doesn't this take all the strain and stress away? Not having to conform rigidly to a church group and doctrine, and attitudes — or be considered a 'rebel', too individualistic, a loner.

Jesus had a travelling group of 12 disciples, one of which eventually was a traitor. His call to service was simply "follow me" and they left all to do so. He didn't have to build an earthly building, nor earthly empire, nor have a church roll, nor encourage regular attendance, nor any of the things that we see around us in denominations of all varieties!

Dear Lord, forgive us, please forgive us, for trying to do your work for you.

Excuse me please, I'm just off to ring up one of my four close 'living stone' mates that I can really share with. Don't let anyone get the chisel out and try to 'square you up' into a regular sized stone. Keep being a 'living stone' made and fashioned by God himself! And one day we will get to see God's total finished wall and temple - won't that be party time!

hands off!

Isaiah 55:8,9 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts”.

Zechariah 4:6 “....not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts”.

Recently, as I've reflected on the uncharted waters of life after exiting the structured church system, I've pondered on how God and his Holy Spirit move in our relationships with other folk - a vital and unending subject of course, constantly occurring

His ways are so contrary to ours aren't they? My natural way to solve a problem is to cut it up into manageable sized pieces and systematically work through it. This usually works, all-be-it sometimes with fretting and fuming, but I usually get the satisfaction the solution eventually brings.

But some of our problems and relationships are simply beyond our natural and earthy methods - his ways are so different. We consider the problem, we wait on him to get his perspective and will on a matter, we commit a situation to him totally, then we wait and continue to do so in absolute and total faith for as long as it takes, while he seems to do nothing [not-a-thing] at all. Indeed, often the problem or situation actually gets worse instead of improving. What's the story?, we ask, why hasn't he heard me, why this seeming inaction, why oh why isn't something happening, didn't my prayer get through? Our thoughts race and panic comes at us, and then, when we think that he has no interest in the subject at all - he answers in a flash, in his time, and the problem's solved perfectly. Without our involvement, with absolute ease seemingly. This way he gets the glory alone.

And so it is in the uncharted waters. We await his prompting, his moving, his co-ordination, his networking. Meeting in twos or threes or more whenever, wherever, however. His way, his timing, his choosing, the Lord and master of the occasion - the 'managing director'.

As for us: hands off the steering wheel totally. We shouldn't be daring to manipulate people or circumstances, fouling things up by our natural efforts, straining and stressing - or doing whatever. We surrender to him and his creativity - the new born nature within as the helmsman. His church is invisible and universal, built by him, his way or *not at all*. To him be the glory alone.

Each and every problem or situation should be brought to him for his solution, with unquestioning, restful faith. We need to let go, take our hands completely off and give completely to him. They couldn't be in safer hands: the nail-scarred hands of the Nazarene carpenter - the miracle working man of Galilee, Lord of the harvest, and of the harvesters! Our God and his Holy Spirit working, still creating on our behalf. Wondrous indeed.

A channel needs to be open at both ends.
Inflow and outflow are both required and should be equal.

my goal

My goal is God Himself, alone.

First acknowledged as Creator, then known as Father, then experienced as a friend - simple.

I'll work with him as the managing director. His church built his way. Otherwise, forget it.

"Except the Lord build...they labour in vain". **Psalms 127:1**

Life's way too short for us to build anything in vain! We've got to let him be God over his own church, God himself. Simple indeed, but like the Christian walk, not always easy.

"This people have I formed for myself" says God in **Isaiah 43:21**

"My heart and my flesh cries out for the living God". **Psalms 84:2**

"My soul thirsts for you, my flesh longs for you in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is".
Psalms 63:1

"My soul follows hard after you". **Psalms 63:8**

We're talking about intimacy, friendship, with the almighty one.

"The Lord spoke to Moses, face to face, as a man speaks to his friend". **Exodus 23:11**

"Our God...Abraham, your friend for ever". **2 Chronicles 20:7**

To be led by his Spirit and his word, like Jesus who walked through a full hospital to heal one man who had faith, we should be following Jesus and his word / voice. To know his followers, by his spirit in them, to see past appearances, to know others by the Spirit of God in spirit to spirit fellowship. Being transparent but watchful, open - which means being vulnerable sometimes, scary eh?

A be-er before a do-er.

Waiting on him, before anything else at all, is so often the hardest thing to do, trusting, resting, abiding in him, not just in word. As those choice souls in ages past learned the secret, and then saw God himself move! Living one day at a time, no structure, programmes or performances, no agendas apparent or hidden. No empire building, nothing of self that would bolster pride or ambition. Self dead but oh, it won't always lie down!

My goal is God himself because that's all there'll be in eternity; God and people, and that's where our focus should be down here. Get the picture? Selah and shalom.

"Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you...O Lord?" **Psalms 85:6**

the vision of the cracked vessel

At a camp recently, a woman shared a vision that I thought was quite beautiful and illustrative. She saw a beautiful clay vessel with a beam of light shining on it. The setting and lighting were wonderful, but when she looked closer, she noticed the vessel was cracked, and badly flawed. What a pity, she thought, the vessel is spoiled, and can't be used for its intended purpose at all. So beautiful a vessel, but cracked, spoiled, useless, to be put aside and discarded - how sad.

Then, a hand appeared in the vision, strong yet gentle and it approached the vessel with what seemed like great tenderness. Just what the vessel needs, she thought, a sympathetic hand, it must be the hand of God himself, he's come to restore the cracked vessel to wholeness. The hand reached out and gently lifted the vessel, the healing process is about to begin she thought. But, the hand applied great pressure to the vessel and crushed it into small pieces and then into virtual dust. "What a tragedy," she cried out, "what have you done, why did you do that?"

Holding the dust, the hand relaxed its grip on the particles within its palm. A breath of wind seemed to come from nowhere and enveloped the particles as they lay in the palm and then the hand began to move and mould and somehow fashion the dust. The caressing and moving of the hand, plus the living breath that enveloped it continued for a time. What was going on? Would the dust be blown away and scattered and so vanish for ever?

Then, out of the dust and by the creativity of the master potter whose hand the dust was in, slowly emerged a new vessel, a wondrous vessel of exquisite china. It was a unique design, somehow still like the former vessel, yet with the image of the master potter himself. It had been transformed into a vessel more suited to the special task of the master and his household, a special piece of craftsmanship that would bring much glory to the master and much refreshment and joy to all whom it was used to minister to.

The meaning of the vision was now all too clear to the woman - she was the clay vessel, and was only too aware of her situation and circumstances and how she'd been spoiled and broken. She thought all she needed was repair, but really she needed far more than that — she needed to be made anew, re-newed, re-born, re-fashioned by the master potter himself into a china vessel fit for his use!

But before this could be done, the religious self-life had to be conquered, to be absolutely ground to dust. Yielding to God totally, no with-holding, surrendering all including self and all its facets; self - pity, self - indulgence, self - seeking, selfishness of every kind. Then God's work within could begin, the breath of God's Spirit could move upon her, teaching her to walk in the spirit, feed on the living word of God, be led by the voice of the good shepherd, follow in his nail-pierced footsteps, he alone her focus.

And so for all of us.

The exchanged life: Our deficiencies for his sufficiency. Our reserves for his resources.

We should seek not the gifts but the giver. Not the creation but the Creator.

true church versus false churches

As we've seen there's every shape, size, denomination, creed, belief, accent, name, doctrine, persuasion, sect, cult, splinter group, division, branch and break-away church . Some traditional, liberal, catholic, pentecostal, charismatic, fundamental - endless!

What is a true church, and what's the plumbline for determining a false one?

The definition of the word itself is of assistance. Church - *ecclesia* [the called out ones]. Jesus' words are also of assistance, after all, he had a lot to say on the subject and is acknowledged as the founder of this New Testament phenomenon. Perhaps the biggest confidence trick ever perpetrated on the world is the notion the visible church is the true church for which Jesus died. These may seem similar to observers, but in God's eyes are as far apart as east and west, and as far as the earth from heaven!

The visible church is invariably of local origin, although it may have extended branches around the planet. The true invisible church is totally universal, comprised of every born-again believer living on this planet and all those who've died. The only criteria to be member of the true church is to be born-again, to have a spiritual re-birth and regeneration experience.

Hebrews 12:23 "To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in Heaven..."

John 3:3 "Except a person be born-again, they cannot see the kingdom of God" said Jesus.

The visible church has a 'membership roll' of people's names, maybe a church list or even a phone list - whatever the self-imposed rules for determining the membership of that visible church. The invisible church has no earthly list of names - none! Instead, the individual names of all born-again believers are "written in Heaven". Their names appear in "the Lamb's {Jesus'} book of life" on the occasion of personal spiritual rebirth.

Check out **Hebrews 12:23, Phillipians 4:3, Revelation 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 21:27, 22:19**

Many whose names are on the list of a visible church membership list are also in the book of life, but the two lists are not identical . Only God knows the entries in his book, and a person's name can be on one of the two lists, but not on the other. At the final call, whether our names are on earthly visible church lists won't be important at all, but to have one's name written in the book of life is absolutely vital to receiving eternal life with God - this is the only list that matters.

The visible church is usually founded by some influential or persuasive person. The invisible church was instigated, created and brought into being by God himself through the sacrificial death, atonement and resurrection of his only Son, the Lord and messiah Jesus Christ.

John 3:17 Romans 10:9,10,13

A fascinating aspect of the visible church is the importance set on buildings. History is crammed

with endless examples of cathedrals, temples, chapels, sanctuaries, houses of God of every conceivable style, size, ornateness, construction method and character. The building of a visible church has many reasons, and it's fascinating to trace the evolutionary development of church buildings - a kaleidoscopic and rich architectural study in itself.

So you may ask, what is the true purpose of the church that Jesus founded and left to carry on His mission in a hostile world?

When he died he left behind a motley but chosen group of 12, along with thousands of followers his life had impacted by words or touch. Although a carpenter, he never left a church building. Frequently pressured to get involved, he avoided politics and never formed a political party or organisation. Although often speaking for days at a time he never wrote a book or did a column for a periodical. In fact he never did any of the things that would ensure the continuance of his earthly ministry.

Rather than chasing fame and endorsements from the ruling class he lived at serious odds with the established religious hierarchy of his day. He tongue-lashed them in public, caused a disturbance in a temple, upset tables and even physically chastised them with a self-made whip! Hardly the correct procedure to ensure his followers took his message to the ends of the earth.

After his crucifixion, then came the news Jesus was alive - resurrected! His followers were bewildered but encouraged. Death had been conquered! Still, they met in secret to discuss the events and encourage each other. Then came Pentecost and 120 of them were empowered. Persecution began to rage around them and martyrdom became common - God's purposes and promises put to the test.

The future and purpose of the church now seems so perfectly simple: No politicking, no empire building, no structures to divert the attention, nothing that feeds man's ego. His own called out people doing His will, spontaneously with joy, free and responsive. God himself personally directs proceedings through his own Holy Spirit, resident within each believer. After establishing this personal connection with each member of His church, he causes gatherings and fellowship to occur by His personal direction. When, how and where it pleases Him. Each believer's mission is to simply outwork the Father's purpose individually in their own life and in obedience to the indwelling linkage - the Holy Spirit.

What a mission, what a purpose.

No strain, no stress, no bills, no upkeep - His purpose unfolds to achieve a bride for His son for the appointed time when Jesus will return to this planet. This time he won't be born in a remote village's stable but will return as King, triumphant and visible - for every eye to see. He definitely won't be returning to the organisations that carry the name 'church' but to the faithful remnant of global believers who've made themselves ready, washed clean by the atoning blood of the Lamb, with their oil lamps filled, trimmed and ready for the wedding ceremony.

Even so, come Lord Jesus...

"If I leave you as I found you I am not the minister of God" Smith Wigglesworth

further reading

CUSTOM & COMMAND by Stan Firth.
Published by J S Firth, London.

MY SEARCH FOR THE CHURCH by Jack Gray.
LOOKING FOR THE CITY - MY SEARCH PART 2 by Jack Gray.
Self-published, Kaikohe / Rawene.

A WARNING & CHAINS ACROSS THE ROAD by Keith Norman
ONE by Keith Norman.
Published by Flockton, Wanaka.

'ISMS' WITHIN THE CHURCH by Hadyn Olsen.
Self-published, Lake Rotoma.

THE SHAPE OF THE FUTURE CHURCH by Warren Litzman
Published by Christ-Life, Dallas, Texas.

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final words

Amos 5

Hear you this word which I take up against you, even a lamentation, O house of Israel. For thus says the LORD unto the house of Israel, Seek you me, and you shall live: but seek not Bethel, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Beersheba: for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nought. Seek the LORD, and you shall live; lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Bethel.

Seek him that made the seven stars and Orion, and turns the shadow of death into the morning, and makes the day dark with night: that calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the face of the earth: the LORD is His name: that strengthens the spoiled against the strong, so that the spoiled shall come against the fortress. They hate him that rebukes in the gate, and they abhor him that speaks uprightly. I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs; for I will not hear the melody of your violins. But let judgement run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

Jeremiah 1

Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, before I formed you in the belly, I knew you; and before you came forth out of the womb I sanctified you, and I ordained you a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the LORD said unto me, say not, I am a child: for you shall go to all that I shall send you, and whatsoever I command you, you shall speak.

Be not afraid of their faces; for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD. Then the LORD put forth his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, behold I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have this day set you against the nations and against the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, and to build, and to plant.

Amen and AMEN.

About the author:

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