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UNDERSTANDING OUR TIMES

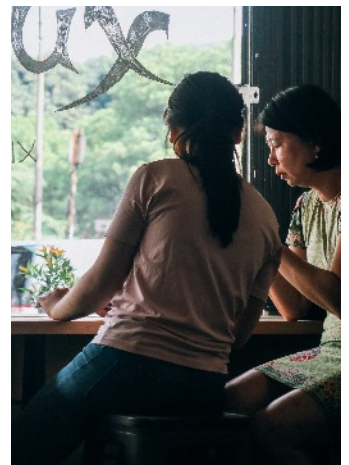
The Bible speaks of the Men of Issachar who understood the times and knew what Israel should do. (1Chron 12:32). In Australia today more than ever, we need men and women who understand the times and have a vision from God of what we should do. It seems to me and to others I talk with that we are living in significant times. May Jesus return soon!

Our freedoms are being taken away – witness the blockage of the freedom of religion Bills - freedom of conscience, speech, the rights of parents to shape the values of their children what they are taught, their identity etc. Socialists, Neo Marxists and other activists are pushing their agendas, seeking control over our culture and children. Our culture is falling apart and becoming captive to determined and well resourced political elites who want to radically control and change the western world. Reading the daily news can be a depressing exercise! But we need not fear or conform to the agenda of the PC (political control) of the elite in the media, education etc.

1. Be radical but loving non-conformists. In our context of growing hostility towards Christianity, and Christian values, simple church/missional communities make even more sense as places to nurture and expand Christian faith and presence. Like early Christianity we need to work from the margins of society and provide a radical and even subversive alternative to mainstream society and culture. The Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness have a different vision for people. Only the Kingdom of Light will bring true love and peace and genuine acceptance into the lives of all. What should be the response of followers of Jesus in this context? We need both courage, wisdom and to be led by the Spirit

2. It is time to be bold and not ashamed of the Gospel of the kingdom – which involves Jew and gentile together: a genuine non-racial and non-discriminatory community bought about by “Christ in us, the hope of Glory” (Col 1:27) This grows from a personal relationship with God demonstrated by the power of God. As I’ve pondered and prayed the following has become clear to me... Jesus said that the KOG is like a lady that put yeast into the dough which leavened the whole loaf (Matt 13:33). This cannot happen from without of the loaf, but only from within. We need to be genuinely engaged within our society and communities – nationally and locally.

3. We need to be good listeners of people’s stories and to validate their experiences and identity. A friend told me a few days ago, of how she was involved in serving food in the Vic markets in Melbourne and meeting many people with various sexual identities. She didn’t judge them but accepted them, listened and talked with them – something they told others that they appreciated! We must remember to separate identity and behavior. God loves every person regardless of their (Continued on page 18)



OIKOS Australia

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CHANGING THE WINESKIN IS NOT ENOUGH

The shift from traditional church to house church results in many changes. The meeting is now held in a home (or school or office building) instead of a church building. The church is small with no intention of becoming large (the plan is to start other small churches instead of growing one larger church). The church is led by an “average” Christian instead of seminary-trained clergy. The meeting is participatory. Everyone gets to contribute something – a teaching, a song, a prophecy, etc. So the wineskin (the container) is changing, but I believe that the Spirit is saying this is not enough. The tendency is to import the old wine into the new wineskin.

What is the old wine? It can best be expressed by the word “programs.” Programs are the artificial alternative to living by the Spirit. They represent our best human efforts and plans for accomplishing God’s purposes. Programs make sense. They are the “obvious” steps to take in order to create community and accomplish mission. However, as attractive as programs may be, they are really poor substitutes for relationship. A healthy marriage can’t be reduced to a program. What Jesus did with His disciples would never be described as a program.

The Spirit is saying that the new wineskin is designed for new wine: the life of the Spirit. This life is always fresh, unique, unpredictable and often counterintuitive. It is life that flows from intimate conversation with Jesus. All genuine community and all genuine mission grows out of this conversation in ways that can never be reduced to a program. However, as attractive as programs may be, they are really poor substitutes for relationship. A healthy marriage can’t be reduced to a program.

What Jesus did with His disciples would never be described as a program. Intimate relationship and conversation with the Father was the key to the life and ministry of Jesus when He was on earth. In John 5:19, He reveals His central operating principle: *“I’m telling you the truth, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.”* Jesus developed no programs. His entire strategy was to find out what the Father was doing and do that. He taught his disciples to do the same.

John Wimber explained listening to the Spirit as it applies to evangelism. He distinguished between “programmatic evangelism” (the old wine) and “power evangelism” (the new wine). *“In programmatic evangelism, Christians witness to everyone they meet, in obedience to the general command of Scripture to ‘go and make disciples.’ In power evangelism the same command is obeyed, only differently. Each evangelism experience is initiated by the Holy Spirit for a specific place, time, person, or group... In programmatic evangelism, the Christian says, ‘In obedience I go. Holy Spirit bless me.’ In power evangelism, the Christian says, ‘As the Holy Spirit tells me to go, I go’”* (Power Evangelism, p. 46). So, what is the Holy Spirit saying to the emerging house church movements? He has said it many times before. *“Leave the old wine of programs behind. Fill the new wineskins with the new wine of life in the Spirit.”*

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Alex Absalom

What Is Missio

We worship a missionary God: the Father sends the Son, and the Son sends the Spirit. Together they send you and me, to go and be representatives of Jesus in every place and relationship we enter.

"Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.'" (John 20:21)

Christians have reflected on this via a Latin phrase, 'Missio Dei', which means 'Mission of God'.

And this is not a mission that is stuck back in the pages of the Bible – it is a mission that continues today...

The Purpose Of The Church

Being human we tend to be very me-centered (or at best us-centered), including in our understanding of the purpose of the church. So often we talk and act as if the church exists for our benefit, with decisions driven by our preferences and desires. Thus results a local church that is primarily focused on serving and feeding her members, with just the occasional bolt-on mission activity that is

an optional up-grade for the especially keen.

Missio Dei reminds us that the mission (or purpose) of the church is a subset of the mission of God. We don't get to chose why we exist – Jesus has already shown us! We are to join God in his great mission of restoring all things to him. *"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."* (2 Corinthians 5:20)

It's not the church that has a mission, but the mission that has a church

To put it another way, Missio Dei reminds us that it's not the church that has a mission, but the mission that has a church!

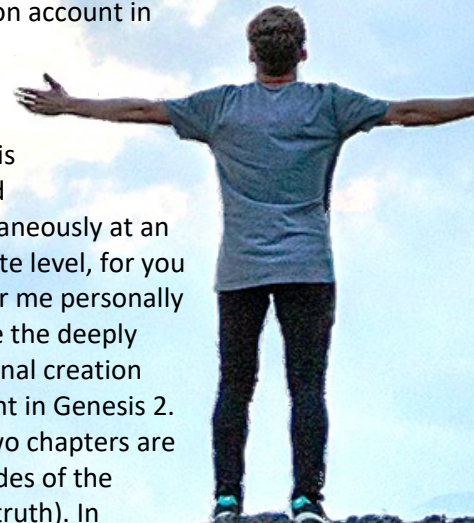
Understanding Missio Dei

What is God's mission? He is constantly seeking to reveal who he is to us,

and to invite us (back) into deeper relationship with him. He shows us his heart, his character, his ways, his intent for creation – and invites us to respond by faith. And as he blesses us with his presence and love, so through us he will transform the wider world. As God says to Abraham in Genesis 12, *"I will bless you... and you will be a blessing."*

This revelation comes both at a cosmic whole-of-the-universe level (see the majestic creation account in

Genesis 1), and simultaneously at an intimate level, for you and for me personally (hence the deeply relational creation account in Genesis 2. The two chapters are two sides of the same truth). In other



Dei?

words, this Good News impacts both individuals and the culture.

The Father's goal is to redeem and transform, to set us free from sin and sickness and evil and death. The Kingdom of God is aggressively advancing now, to restore all of his creation into right relationship with him, which is where we find fulness of life. "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10). Missio Dei is about walking with Jesus who is the source and fuel for all true life.

We Join God's Mission Through Relationship

As we hear about God's mission, there can be a temptation to see it purely as a task list. These neighbors of ours need to be converted; such and such institution needs to be transformed. Yet that cannot happen in the absence of relationship with God, whose Fatherly love is both the means to and the end of this renewed creation.

We as God's people are constantly holding together a pull to draw closer to the heart of God, to know him

more deeply, and a drive to go and represent Him in the world, to represent Jesus wherever we go. Actually, like many, I have found that this pull empowers the drive, and the drive deepens the pull. Together they are how we are to live, and they frame our mission. By drawing close to God, and thus his people, we are empowered to bring the lost into rich relationship with their Creator.

This rescue plan is carried out

personally, as Jesus the great missionary comes to earth in human form, to show us how to live in right relationship with the Father, and then to deal with all the sin and evil that prevents us living like that. It is the love of the Father that drives this – hence the most famous verse in the Bible: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16)

After Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, God's empowering presence, the Holy Spirit, is made available to all believers. This is not just to give us warm fuzzies, but so

that we now can scatter and spread throughout time and space, representing our missionary God in every nook and cranny of culture and society where we live, work and play. We are the ones called to go and make disciples everywhere (see the Great Commission of Matthew

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28). Yet this scattering is to be done as part of authentic Christian community – the church – as a place where we reveal to the world how to draw closer to the Father and be empowered as agents of the new creation.

The Challenge Of Missio Dei

The challenge for the church is to keep recognizing that God is at the center of mission. In other words, church leaders have to help Christians shift their focus from a church-centered

mission to a mission-centered church. The church's agenda must be defined by the heart of God for his creation, rather than by our inherited activities. As you can imagine, the implications of this are far reaching for each one of us.

Ultimately, though, all mission is God's work, and what we do occurs in response to what the Father is already doing and we simply join in the fun! By doing it that way, the Spirit even provides all the resources that we need, so we don't have to rely on our own strength and power. Jesus models this for us in John 5:19: *"The Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do*

what he sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."

You are called to join God in his great mission to the world, his Mission Dei. How are you going to live that out today?

ALEX ABSALOM Originally from the UK, Alex and Hannah Absalom were called as missionaries to America in 2007. They currently live as a family in Long Beach. Together they have overseen the planting of over 110 mid-sized missional communities. www.dandelionresourcing.com





CONSTANTINE & The Institution

by Neil Cole

My wife and I spent a couple days in York, England recently. While there we saw a statue to Constantine erected just beside the main cathedral in the area--the York Minster. While beautiful and impressive in many ways, we were reminded by the cathedral of how far from the original intent of the church people had taken her.

The early church was organic and a movement for the first couple of hundred years. Driven under-ground by waves of Roman persecution, it remained a viral movement that could not be contained or stopped. Though many tried to stomp it out all attempts only made it stronger.

All that changed in 313 AD when the emperor Constantine declared that the empire would not only tolerate Christianity but restore to the church all lost property. He was the first "Christian" emperor and Christianity went instantly from

ANTHONY

Institutionalization of the Church

the margins to the mainstream and everything changed. Christianity became the state religion and the church did not change much from that point on. Our enemy, the devil himself, learned that if he cannot stop the church, he might as well join it and change it from the inside so that it is ineffective and less a threat. But for occasional breakouts of remnant expressions he succeeded. He used Constantine to launch this sinister attack.

Over the centuries, after Constantine, the Western church has evolved in many ways, but none have been a significant systemic change. There was the establishment of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church and for hundreds of years there were very little changes. The Reformation split the Western church into the Roman Church and the volatile protestant church. But as an institution, in spite of the differences, the institutional system remained mostly unchanged. The Anabaptists were set loose by the reformation (and persecuted by it) but quickly would institutionalize as well.

Whether the church adapts to reach coal miners in the 18th century England or postmodern pilgrims in the 21st century, most of the changes have been minor shifts. Whether you are talking about high church or low, Pentecostal or Presbyterian the church has remained institutional in its approach. From Baptist to Brethren, from Mennonite to Methodist, the changes in the system are relatively untouched over the centuries. Music or no music? Pipe organ or electric guitar? Tall ceilings with stained-glass windows or meeting in a box building without windows, the actual system of church has gone relatively unchanged.

You have the priests or pastors, the Sunday service with singing and a sermon, the weekly offering, the pulpit with pews and the church building. These have been constants since the

fourth century. Even if you move the whole show into a house instead of a church building, if the system hasn't changed you have only shrunk the church, not transformed it. Changing the style of music does not upgrade the system. Turning down the lights and turning up the volume is a simple patch to the same old system. Choirs and hymns or praise bands and fog machines, kneeling or standing the system is changed very little. Sermonizing with topical messages or expositional ones is not changing the system just making minor adjustments. Sunday Schools or small groups as secondary learning environments are not a systemic change at all, just a variation on the same old operational system.

Constantine was declared Caesar while in York in 306 AD. Today, near the spot where he was named the emperor is a statue of him beside a large cathedral, which I find quite symbolic. Constantine turned the church into an institution and in that state it remained for 1700 years. He is now remembered beside a very institutional expression of what church is--the York Minster Cathedral. Today we are seeing a rapid shift back to organic and viral expressions of ecclesiology. We should remember Constantine so as not to make the same mistake. We must begin to awaken once again to the true nature and expression of Christ's body, not as a building, a program, an event or an organization, but as a spiritual family called out on mission together. We must come to realize once again that the form of church is not the issue, but the way we relate - to God, to one another and to the world.



NEIL COLE was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA. Neil travels around the world sowing the seeds of God's kingdom, catalyzing the development of organic church networks and coaching leaders. Catch his blog at cole-slav.blogspot.com

A Brief History of Called Out Peoples

Chip Brogden

Throughout history, God has continually called out a people, a remnant that will represent His heart and mind in the midst of universal deception and decay. To answer this calling, God's people have always been asked to leave where they are and travel through an unfamiliar, lonely place – a wilderness – in order to reach the place He has prepared for them.

This happened twice in the history of Israel, and it has happened twice in the history of Christianity. By looking back on how God has called His people out in times past, we can better see and appreciate the significance of the final exodus that is taking place at this time.

Israel's First Exodus: God Called the Hebrews Out of Egypt

We have already seen that Moses established a “church in the wilderness” by leading the Hebrews out of Egypt and into the Promised Land by way of the desert of Sinai. This exodus is recorded in our Bibles, not just for its historical significance, but for us to learn by: “With most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us...” (1 Cor. 10:5,6). We see how they were tested in the wilderness, and how they failed many of the tests, and failed to enter into the Promised Land because of doubt and fear. We also see how many of them were tempted to go back to Egypt.

All these things are recorded so that we will recognize this tendency in ourselves today and not make the same mistakes they made. So this first exodus establishes the spiritual principle of God calling His people out and is the key that unlocks our understanding of how God goes about the difficult work of calling and setting apart a chosen people for Himself.

Israel's Second Exodus: God Called the Jews Out of Babylon

Once the nation of Israel was established in the Promised Land, they began a slow and steady moral and spiritual decline, occasionally punctuated with godly kings and periods of repentance and revival. But eventually the wickedness of the nation called for judgment, and this judgment came in the form of Nebuchadnezzar, who conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, killed most of the people, and took the remainder as captives with him to Babylon, where they lived in exile for 70 years.

After that, the Lord once again called them to come out – to leave Babylon, journey back through the wilderness to Jerusalem, and rebuild their Temple and their city. The significant thing about this is that most of the Jews stayed in Babylon. Out of an estimated Jewish population of greater than one million people living in exile, only 42,000 returned. The vast majority preferred the comfortable bondage of Babylon to the uncomfortable, uncertain future of rebuilding their nation. The significance of this is extraordinary. Just as the young nation wanted to return to Egypt, the nation in exile wanted to remain in Babylon.

Photo: CristinaGottardi.unsplash

So we have two exoduses in the history of Israel that provide us with spiritual discernment into what follows after. Let us now turn to the two exoduses in the history of the Ekklesia.

Our First Exodus: God Called the Christians Out of Judaism

A remnant of Jews did return from Babylon. They rebuilt the Temple and inhabited Jerusalem once again. Having paid the terrible price of their idolatry, they resolved to never disobey God again. But in their zeal they went to the opposite extreme of fanaticism. What eventually developed was a religious system and a hypocritical priesthood obsessed with outward appearances and obedience to the letter of the Law while overlooking mercy, grace, righteousness, faith, and love.

Into this atmosphere our Savior was sent, just as Moses was sent to Pharaoh with a mandate to bring God's people out of bondage and into the Promised Land. And, just as Pharaoh resisted Moses, so the religious leaders resisted Jesus. Undaunted, Jesus promised another "church in the wilderness" that would stand forever, and charged His disciples to take this message to "all nations" and "to the uttermost parts of the earth." Even with this clear direction, it would take many years for the truth to sink in: faith in Christ was not compatible with Judaism. Peter struggled with preaching Christ to the Gentiles and was rebuked publicly by Paul. James, based in Jerusalem, tried in vain to make Christianity fit in better with Jewish ideology. But once the Gospel was preached to the Gentiles, it marked the beginning of something new. The Way, as it was then called, was no longer a mere sect within Judaism. The Gentiles heard the message, and thanks to Paul, understood that faith in Christ has nothing to do with obeying the Law of Moses.

Now followers of Jesus were forced to make a decision. Were they going to "come out of Judaism" and be "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a set-apart people" distinct from Judaism, or, would they cling to their Jewish traditions and the teachings of their elders, all of whom rejected Jesus as the Messiah?

The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jews struggling with that very dilemma. After demonstrating conclusively that you cannot enjoy the benefits of the New Covenant while clinging to elements of the Old Covenant, the author concludes: *"We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin, are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through His own blood. Therefore let us go to Him outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured"* (Heb. 13:10-13).

Once again, when offered a choice between comfortable bondage and uncomfortable freedom, we find many chose to stay "within the camp." They were known as the Ebionites – Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah but insisted on obedience to the Jewish laws and customs in order to be saved. Of course, they also rejected Paul as a genuine apostle. This group flourished within Jerusalem until it was destroyed by Titus in A.D. 70., after which they established themselves in Pella. They persisted for some time, but by the fourth or fifth century they were no longer in existence.

Our Second Exodus: God Calls the Remnant Out of "Churchianity"

By that time, the followers of Jesus were recognized as something springing out of, but totally different from, Judaism. For about 300 years the followers of Jesus practiced their faith in simplicity and in obedience to the teaching of the Holy Spirit, even when enduring fierce persecution from the Romans and the Jews. Eventually, Rome accepted Christianity and made it their state religion. Masses of "converts" poured in. Pagan temples were converted into "Christian" churches, and more church

buildings were constructed. An elaborate hierarchy of bishops was established and a religious system was organized that soon exceeded the Jewish religion, both in numbers of adherents and in material wealth. Christianity became institutionalized into three main sects: Catholicism, Orthodox, and Protestantism. Out of Protestantism, Christianity was further splintered into thousands of denominations. So we see that Israel's history has repeated itself in the history of Christianity. Just as God called the Hebrews out of Egypt to form a new nation, so God called the early Christians out of Judaism to form a "new nation" of

kings and priests. When Israel rebelled against God and committed idolatry, they were led away to Babylon for judgment. In like manner, when Christendom rebelled against God and created an idolatrous system of worship "in Jesus' name," they were also brought to judgment; the chief difference being that God did not send them away – He simply gave them over to their own devices, and they were quite content to proceed under the assumption that God was endorsing and blessing the works of their hands.

This brings us to the present time. Just as God called out a remnant of Jews to leave Babylon and journey to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, God has in these last days called out a remnant of Christians to leave "Churchianity" and take a journey through the wilderness. What is He bringing them to? Not to a temple made with hands, but to a house of living stones. Not to the Jerusalem that is below, but to the Jerusalem that is above: the New Jerusalem, the Heavenly City, whose builder and maker is God. It is a "Church in the Wilderness" – not a building, but a body of people in transition between the religious system and the spiritual fulfillment of God's original intention for the Ekklesia.

When offered a choice between comfortable bondage and uncomfortable freedom, we find many chose to stay "within the camp."



CHIP BROGDEN is a best-selling author, teacher, and former pastor who shares "real, simple, truth" about a Christ-centered faith that is based on relationship, not religion.



Simple MISSIONAL

Simple missional forms of church were used in the first century – and are proving relevant today. Here are insights gleaned from the New Testament and history on these easily reproducible biblical forms.

1. All New Testament churches met in houses. Early Christianity was a house-church movement. The first churches that the apostle Paul specifically planted and addressed letters to were at Philippi – one in the ‘household’ (oikos) of Lydia and the other in the ‘household’ (oikos) of the jailer. The earliest church building – at Duro Europos on the banks of the Euphrates River between Syria and Iraq, was a modified house. It dates from 200 years after Jesus (235 CE). Before opposition broke out Jerusalem believers could celebrate in the temple courts, but they regularly met in homes to share the Lord’s meal, pray and fellowship. (Acts 2:42-47) All the

churches that we read of in the New Testament met in houses.

2. There were multiple churches in each community. In Rome, the homes in which most lived were very small – somewhat like bedsits, with space for just a few people. In other cities, excavations reveal homes with space for 20 to 25 people – with some luxury homes in Corinth having courtyards that may have been large enough for 40-45. There were at least five house churches in Corinth (in the homes of Aquila and Priscilla, Titius Justus, Crispus, Erastus and Pheobe) and five around Colosse (in Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colosse, and in the homes of Nympha and Archippus) – and, these are just those mentioned. There were no doubt others, in other ‘relational streams’.

3. They were in close proximity to the people. Even if every church in Jerusalem met on a roof-top, an ‘upper room’ able to accommodate 80+ people – and that is unlikely, there would have been more than 100 house churches for the 5,000 believing ‘men’ (Acts 4:4) plus women and children. If each church was

10, 15, perhaps up to 20-25 people – but rarely more; there may have been 400-500 gatherings (churches) in Jerusalem alone. This meant these churches – sharing ‘the Lord’s supper’ with praise, fellowship, discussion of the apostle’s teaching, and meeting each other’s needs – were accessible to their neighbors. In those times personal space was limited, with houses crowded with extended families and open to others in the community.

4. There was a high level of participation. Paul provides a window into the house churches of Corinth: ‘When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All these must be done for the strengthening of the church’. (1 Cor 14:26) Anecdotal evidence indicates that greater numbers in church result in increased numbers of spectators – not participation. A common question asked of me is: ‘How can we get more people involved in witness – and church?’ When I ask, ‘How many attend – and how many are now involved?’ The responses display

a pattern: '30 attend – and 15 are involved'; or, '80 attend – and 15 are involved'; or, '300 attend – and 15 are involved'! NT house churches fostered participation.

5. Early Christians were urbanites.

First century churches were primarily urban. It is difficult to imagine the squalid and dangerous conditions. The 150,000 in Antioch, the base for Paul's missionary journeys, lived in an area less than 5 square kilometers. With public buildings (forum, agoras, temples, etc) taking up to 40% of the city, residential sectors were crowded beyond the extreme. Water and sanitation were limited. The stench and filth of the city would have been smelt kilometers away. Open fires for cooking filled the city with smoke – and the danger of fire. Poorly constructed buildings frequently collapsed. Knowing their crucified Lord had risen from the grave gave Christians courage to risk death while serving neighbors stricken by deadly disease and plague.

6. Church was on the path of life.

Church was on the path of life. Church was not a building Christians went to, nor an institution or denomination they belonged to. They were church in their cities and communities. They lived within their extended families – parents, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins; some as slaves, and others with servants and slaves. (35-40% of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves.) Animals (sheep, goats and donkeys) sometimes shared their homes. They mingled in their communities, aware of the needs and hurts of all, serving as 'the body' and 'presence' of Jesus' – doing what he would do if he were physically present. (John 14:12) As church – the 'two or three' gathering in the name of Jesus (Matt 18:20) – they lived and witnessed on the paths of life.

7. They had natural inbuilt

leadership systems. Households provided natural leadership for the home churches. Lydia would have been the natural 'leader' in her 'household' (oikos), as was the jailer, Jason, and Aquila and Priscilla in theirs. (Acts 16-18) It is only natural that Crispus facilitated the church in his home; as would Titius Justus, Pheobe and

Archippus in theirs. The oikos church did not need appointed leaders. However, with many such churches in a town – Paul appointed 'overseers' to foster these networks. These were mature believers, not given to power-seeking – but encouragers, able to facilitate disciple making and the planting of new churches in unentered relational streams.

8. They were revolutionary conversational communities.

Churches were conversational communities – eating, serving, sharing. In the early years, where synagogues welcomed them, Christians shared in Sabbath fellowship, scripture reading, and prayers. However, early churches reflected their households (oikos). As in families, their shared meals were testimony to their Saviour. Expressing gratitude for their 'bread' and 'drink' as symbols of the crucifixion of their 'Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ', family meals were revolutionary statements. Jesus Christ who had been crucified on a Roman Cross and was now alive as evidenced by the living presence of the Holy Spirit, was their Lord and Saviour – not Caesar, who loved these titles!

9. They were 'zero dollar' – but 'high cost' church plants.

Money was not spent on promotion, programs, or buildings. First century believers shared faith with friends and neighbors, inviting them to their homes; and today, simple missional communities avoid expensive programming and the purchase or rental of buildings with utilities costs, insurance, maintenance, parking, etc. The most effective church planting today is 'zero dollar' planting, but there is a cost! It is the sacrifice of time and energy to share faith in family and social networks – and 'offerings' help with the rent for someone

who has lost their job, provide food for a struggling family, assist a single mum with school expenses, or support a justice mission project in their or another community!

10. Their structures were simple.

Jesus cultivated his movement on four simple invitations – (1) come & see, (2) follow me, (3) come & be 'fishermen', (4) receive the Spirit; and his commission to 'go and make disciples of all ethne' – all relational streams. He did not institute a complex organizational plan or structure, rather it was experiential, relational, participatory, and Spirit anointed. He handed on a relationship with himself and the Father through the Holy Spirit. (John 14:12-13) We easily fall for the trap

that the spread of the gospel needs our complex corporate-like systems for success. But neither Jesus nor Paul were enamored with such systems that elevate a few to positions of status and authority over others. They believed in the 'priesthood of all believers'!

11. They were easily

reproducible. Disciples made disciples and baptized them, and, in turn, they made disciples and baptized them! Jesus modeled a simple plan. When you find a receptive person (person of 'peace') – one of reputation and influence: (1) eat with that person, (2) as you eat, heal, and (3) as you heal, say, 'The kingdom of God is near.' (Luke 10:6, 8, 9) As the gospel is shared and takes hold in a new relational stream or

social network – such as that of the Samaritan woman (John 4), or the family of Zacchaeus (Luke 19), Nympha (Col 4:15), Philemon (Phile 1, 2), or Phoebe (Rom 16:1, 2); and new disciples are fostered – a new church is gathered. Without complex systems or structures, people gather around food, the Word, prayer, service and worship.

12. There were supportive

networks. Jesus chose from his 'large crowd of disciples' twelve that he designated apostles (Luke 6:12-19) – sent to multiply his movement. Paul, an apos

*Jesus modeled a simple plan.
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(Luke 10:6, 8, 9)*

tle, selected and appointed ‘overseers’ in cities where numerous household (oikos) churches were being planted. The term elder was an appropriate term – for they were to be experienced Christians. Local churches were led by household leaders, but the overseer was to network – to keep the various home churches connected, to encourage them to multiply. They needed to be generous, mature encouragers. The story of Acts indicates Luke was left by Paul in Philippi, maybe to fulfill this role; and Paul wrote to Titus on Cyprus asking him to ‘appoint elders in every town’. (Titus 1:5)

13. There were no hierarchical systems.

The house churches of the first century were radically counter-cultural. The hierarchies of Greco-Roman society were not reflected in the communities of believers. There was no place for a privileged upper-class kleros (clergy) of philosophers and politically powerful over an ignorant common laos (laity or idiots) class. Jesus indicated the models of Rome and religion were not his, saying, ‘You know the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you.’ (Matt 20:25, 26) The model for the house churches of the first century was God – ‘just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.’ (Matt 20:28)

14. Parents take responsibility for their children’s spiritual growth.

There is only one reference to kids being part of New Testament church life, a natural reflection of the idea of church in homes. When believers from the Mediterranean port city of Tyre gathered to farewell Paul (the apostle) and his traveling companions, they all – men, women and children met and prayed with him on the beach. (Acts 21:5) In simple forms of church parents and households take responsibility for the spiritual development of their families.

Kid’s love house churches where the spiritual instruction of families is not delegated to others, and where children, teens, and youth – cross generational and mixed ‘families’ (not only nuclear) – are the church.

Simple church is built upon conversation and involvement, exploration of the Word of God and its application to life in the context of food, fellowship and mission.

15. Teens connect with the ‘big vision’ of simple churches.

Early worship times involved every member, open participation, spontaneity, freedom, vibrancy, unpredictability – two-way conversation. Clement of Alexandria (150-215) was the first to mention the idea of one-way speeches or weekly sermons in early church history, observing even then that they did little to effect change in the lives of believers. Simple church is built upon conversation and involvement, exploration of the

Word of God and its application to life in the context of food, fellowship and mission. More than that, the ‘big vision’ of global mission – planning and involvement in cutting edge projects locally, regionally and internationally (Acts 1:8) – gives teens and youth a sense of God’s heart.

16. There is no tensions over music, culture or ethnicity.

Believers in Jerusalem churches shared many things in common – dress, food, drink, literature, songs and dance; but when the gospel reached into Gentile cultures, people gathered to worship Jesus as Lord and Savior – dressed differently, around very different meals and drink, reading entirely different literature, singing different songs and dancing to different music. The variety in our communities is enormous – no longer the homogeneity of the baby-boomer era when all understood the same illustrations and enjoyed the same music. Simple church provides opportunities to ensure faith is shared in relational streams in ways that

people can understand and appreciate – that they can share with others.

17. They are inclusive. The transitions stories of Acts are inspiring and confronting. Although Jesus had modeled ‘the kingdom of God’ encompassing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, ‘slave and free’; and commissioned his disciples to witness to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), it was difficult to acknowledge Samaritans (Acts 8:14-17), the sexually different (Acts 8:26-40), or Romans (Acts 10:1-11:18) as fellow believers and members of church. This caused tensions across boundaries proscribed by religious Jewish policy – but in simple churches all could be included without tension. They know the neighbor who comes is a Sikh, uncle who asks questions about grace is inter-gender, the new family present are struggling migrants – and they are to be ‘the body of Jesus’ to all!

18. They are good environments to hand on faith. No one can argue about the challenge of handing on faith to next generations. Although in churches most kids ‘accept Jesus’ by 14 years of age – by their early 20s, 50-80% turn from the faith of their parents. Sociologists point out – (1) the more complex a faith, the more difficult it is to hand on, and (2) faith is always reinterpreted by recipients – so faith systems keep changing, much more that most religious people like to admit. Simple churches provide a good environment for handing on faith: a safe place in which to reinterpret faith – and importantly, a model of church that they can reproduce for their next generation friends. Participation in defining faith and handing on faith are critical factors for receiving faith!



Peter & Judy Roennfeldt have lived in Australia, Papua New, New Zealand and England where Peter has served as a church planter, pastor, evangelist, seminary teacher & ‘pastor to pastors’. He encourages church planters & pastors in 50+ countries –

equipping disciples who make disciples, cultivating church planting movements, supporting insider faith movements (within Islam and Judaism), and facilitating church planting & evangelism study opportunities. He enjoys the creativity and commitment of church planters (many, young adults) who are cultivating a spiritual revolution and planting a diverse range of missional churches to lead post-postmodern & post-Christian friends to Jesus.

www.newlifechurch.com

The POWER of PRESENCE

Jay Stiegemeyer



I think the best way I can talk about the "Power of Presence" is to share a story from my own journey. Let me tell you about my Life Transformation Group and how the Power of Presence has allowed us to plant kingdom seeds in people's lives.

In the summer of 2011, my friend David led my friend Harry (both part of this group) to Christ at a table in a Chipotle restaurant close to our neighborhood. Since that night, a group of guys has been meeting every single week in that same Chipotle. We bring our Bibles and simply talk about what we've read that week and what's going on in our lives. We don't come with a hard agenda and we aren't particularly flamboyant. What we are is consistent. We are there every single week.

Over the months, we've gotten to know many of the staff and even developed friendships with some of them. It's been fun to watch the relationships grow. I remember the first time I realized that they had taken note of our consistent presence. It was Christmas Eve, and I strolled in there by myself to get my wife and I some lunch to go. One of the people there asked if our group was meeting early that day because of the holiday. Then, she stopped herself, and said "Oh, wait, it's not a Thursday." I knew then that they had come to expect us at that same time on that same night every single week.

Fast forward a few months to early spring time. There is another young staff member that works there named Alona. We'd gotten to know her and she'd started routinely giving us free drinks/chips (another benefit of the Power of Presence!). Anyway, she slowly moved from friendly chit-chat to actually asking us questions and showing interest in what our purpose is for being there every week. I could talk a lot more about Alona, but, suffice to say, she now has a Bible and has agreed to read the gospel of John with us. Please pray with us that God would speak to her heart and she would make a decision to surrender her life to Jesus, the Messiah!

Fast forward to a couple of weeks ago. There is another middle-aged woman who works there named Shelby. We haven't been able to get to know her as easily, but she's definitely come to notice our consistently being there. A couple of weeks ago, she took her break outside at a table close to where Harry and I sat. I didn't think anything about it really, but I do remember wondering what she must be thinking as we sat there talking about the Bible and things in our lives. Well, that brings us to this week's meeting. She made a comment to Harry as he was going through the line that she was sorry for eavesdropping but that she couldn't help but listen in and be encouraged by the incredible conversation that night a couple of weeks ago. Harry told her that she was always welcome to join in the conversation any time.

Well, sure enough, an hour later she came and sat down close by our table for her break and wasted no time in sharing her story with us. I know we've only scratched the surface of her story, but she shared about the addictions that she's been able to overcome, about her father who is dying of cancer, about her criminal background, and about her dreams and aspirations. In her 15 minute break, we got her to title her autobiography for us (literally - it was the word written on her first hit of heroine).

Anyway, I could go on and on about this... and obviously this story is far from over. But, I believe in the Power of Presence. It directly led to Alona being drawn to the Lord and to His Word. It led directly to Shelby feeling comfortable enough to share her story with a couple of guys willing to sit and listen. And I didn't even tell you about Aaron, the high-schooler who started meeting with us after seeing us in Chipotle one night as he ate with his friends. Who knows what God will be able to do with our group as we continue to show up and be obedient?

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Tales From Manly

We are a small band of Christians known as the 'Manly Disciple Makers' who meet in each other's homes or the local park for fellowship together. My husband and I have a strong vision to make disciples of Jesus and to that end we often get out on the streets of Manly to talk to people and share Jesus with them.

We usually go in pairs and one Sunday my friend Pam and I approached a lady sitting on a bench overlooking the sea (you may have read some of this story in the last Oikos Magazine). The conversation went a little like this: "Hi, we're out and about talking to people about spiritual things and offering to pray with them, is there anything in your life you'd like prayer for?" She pleasantly thanked us and said she was fine and that she found hope in Buddha, etc. We noticed the novel she was reading and chatted a bit about that and soon we had a Bible out reading scriptures to her (which reminded her of her childhood where she had heard some of them before) and the gospel was shared, we prayed for her, she was interested to meet again and learn some more about what we believed! Pam and I went away elated and full of expectation for our next meeting with Pearl. Needless to say, many prayers were ushered and she called into the local book store a couple of times where I work and we swapped numbers. Our next meeting was on that same park bench at the same time the next Sunday and then Pearl invited us to meet with

her at her place for a cuppa and it became a weekly thing, chatting, reading the word, answering her many questions as best we could, praying and often singing together! It only took a few months before Pearl made that momentous decision to make Jesus her Lord and Pam and I had the privilege of baptizing her in Little Manly Cove.

Pearl is growing in her faith and has shared with her friends and family what has taken place in her life. She has had a few ups and downs as we all do, moments of doubt, etc. She has been up to our place and met some of the others in our group but at this stage prefers to just meet with Pam and I on our own and we respect her wishes and her boundaries. And we have a new friend in Christ and she's a bundle of laughs and makes a great cuppa!

Being intentional about sharing Jesus has brought us in touch with several residents of the local housing commission. Having desperate needs these people are open to the gospel and we often find ourselves down at their place (Alcatraz, as it's affectionately known) hanging out with them in a smoke-filled room, reading the word, chatting and praying.

Here is a snap of us having a BBQ down there with a few of the people we've met plus any

extra's the Lord brings along while we're there. As you can see the Manly Housing Commission is in the most amazing location right on the water front, not a hard place to serve the Lord!



We continue to pray about the people at Alcatraz and know that the Lord is capable of setting people free from depression, alcoholism, gambling and the list goes on.

We've found the DBS (discovery bible study) method really effective when making disciples. It's basically asking each other how our week has been, have we shared with anyone, heard from the Lord in any special way? And then selecting a small passage, usually from the gospels to read together asking the following questions:

- What does it say?
- What does it teach us about the Lord?
- What does it teach us about the people in the passage?
- Is there a command to obey or an example to follow?
- Who can we share this passage with this week?

And then we pray for one another – simple! And at some stage we hope to see disciples who have learnt this simple method to then disciple others and so on and so on – a movement. Serving Jesus outside the 4 walls of conventional church is sometimes messy and tricky and sometimes even lonely but it is so rewarding. We have a couple who have stepped out of a church where they've been for a very long time and now they are doing things differently they feel so alive and useful to the Lord! If you want to know more about Manly Disciple Makers or to help us in the harvest here please get in touch, Michael and I would love to hear from you and to help you in any way.

MICHAEL & SALLY BUTLER
nobrokenreed.org





A Humble Story of MISSIONAL *versus* TRADITIONAL

Recently, Tom and I were walking through a community that we had visited many times early in our marriage. We even lived in this community for a summer over 24 years ago. I had not been back since 1990, and neither had Tom, but for a few days last January. I was surprised at those things which remained the same over the years, and yet seeing these years had also brought about many changes. One of which was no more outhouses behind each house! Plumbing and sewers had finally eliminated their necessity!

The wind was blowing the dust of the street into our faces and the clouds were threatening rain. It was cold for May, even this far north. We had the endless series of dogs guarding their section of the street, running up to our heels sniffing to determine if we were friend or foe, and also the occasional "Hey Tom" or "Katie!" from some window or doorway, causing us to wave back and take a few minutes for a visit as we'd make our way over to their home. We walked into many homes during our long weekend there.

Our purpose in our walk was not to check out the new changes, but *rather to make ourselves available to people and God for encounters* that would hopefully lead to prayer, encouragement, affirmation, healing, counsel, correction and sweet fellowship between old and new friends. We had wonderful visits! We saw the Spirit of God among us

working to strengthen those who belong to Him, and gently "woo" those who had not yet joined the family of God. We saw Him heal wounds and encourage hearts. We saw Him draw people to Himself. We spent most of our days like this - *seeking out opportunities, listening and watching for what God wanted to do.*

God is a seeking God - and is always at work (Jesus' words), so those of us who follow Him must be doing the same. That is being missional. It's not anything else - and trendy as the word may be these days - it is simply getting OUT THERE and letting God use you to touch people with His Presence.

That's missional, simple and organic. In the home we stayed in, there was another visitor. This man had also been invited up by our hosts as they were exploring what simple, organic and missional life and fellowship looks like, and had invited us up to share on it. They wanted this man's input about what we were sharing. He was familiar with the community, having come up previously a number of times to do the classic "outreach meetings". These are meetings with the usual mission protocol -i.e. billed with a speaker who is known for: healing, teaching, signs and wonders, deliverance, etc. etc. The message is "come and encounter Jesus at this meeting!" (Now, I'm not saying these mission venues are wrong or bad. I have done them, and will likely will do these style meetings again at some point if that

is what God directs.) My point is not to trash these venues - but rather challenge the paradigm a bit.

The paradigm of sitting in one place waiting for people to come to you.

This man sat in the house for five days, with the exception of a of couple long fishing trips, mostly talking with the couple who were hosting, their kids, Tom and I, and a couple of people who came by one day for a barbecue. His paradigm was, "I'm here, come to me." Few did. In contrast, Tom and I had the paradigm of, "We're here, and we're coming to you!" Traditional versus missional. Now, please hear my heart. I'm not trying to trash this man, his ministry in serving God for many years, nor any fruit that may have come from it. But the contrast of his sitting in the house day after day *waiting for some opportunity to come to him*, and Tom and I walking our of the house many times during a given day **to go and SEEK those opportunities** is the point of this blog post today. So much is being said about "missional" these days which is convoluting the real meaning. Let's get it straight - missional means "get out there!"

See what God is doing and **join Him in His mission** "to reach those who are lost", bringing the Presence of "Christ who lives in you to will and work according to His good pleasure", and to "strengthen those who are struggling".

That's simple, it's organic and completely missional.



OIKOS National Conference 27 - 29 April 2018

Yarra Training Centre, Lillydale, Victoria

Mark this in your diary now. This bi-annual event is not to be missed. Plan to come along, make new friends, connect with old ones and be inspired by seeing what Jesus is doing in the simple church tribe across Australia. Go to oikos.org.au for more info



John Eldredge

FELLOWSHIPS OF THE HEART

The family is... like a little kingdom, and, like most other little kingdoms, is generally in a state of something resembling anarchy. (G. K. Chesterton)

Going to church with hundreds of other people to sit and hear a sermon doesn't ask much of you. It certainly will never expose you. That's why most folks prefer it. Because community will. It will reveal where you have yet to become holy, right at the very moment you are so keenly aware of how they have yet to become holy. It will bring you close and you will be seen and you will be known, and therein lies the power and therein lies the danger. Aren't there moments when all those little companies, in all those stories, hang by a thread? Galadriel says to Frodo, "Your quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all. Yet hope remains while the Company is true."

Seriously now — how often have you seen this sort of intimate community work? It is rare. Because it is hard, and it is fiercely opposed. The Enemy hates this sort of thing; he knows how powerful it can be, for God and His Kingdom. For our hearts. It is devastating to him.

Remember divide and conquer? Most churches survive because everyone keeps a polite distance from the others. We keep our meetings short, our

conversations superficial. "So, Ted, how's everything going on the Stewardship Committee?" "Oh, just great, Nancy. We've got a big goal to reach this year, but I think we'll be able to get that gym after all." No one is really being set free, but no one is really at odds with each other either. We have settled for safety in numbers — a comfortable, anonymous distance. An army that keeps meeting for briefings, but never breaks into platoons and goes to war. Living in the community is like camping together. For a month. In the desert. Without tents. All your stuff is scattered out there for everyone to see. C'mon — anybody can look captured for Christ an hour a week, from a distance, in his Sunday best. But your life is open to those you live in community with.

However, there are two things you now have that you didn't have before, and they enable this sort of fellowship to work.

First, you know the heart is good. That is the missing key in most fellowships. Your heart is good, and the others' hearts are good. This makes it so much easier to trust and to forgive. Whatever may be happening in the moment, whatever the misunderstanding might be, I know that

our hearts toward one another are good, and that we are for one another. Craig says something that stings. If I thought, You know, he meant that; he's trying to hurt me, it would pretty quickly trash the relationship. But I know that is not his heart toward me; that is not who he truly is. If I thought it was, why I'd turn tail and run.

Second, we know we are at war. The thought that says, Oh, brother, here goes Frank again. Why can't he just drop it about his mother? What is it with these people? They're not really my friends. I'm

outta here. That's the Enemy. You must remember that the Enemy is always trying to pull everyone else to do to you what he is doing to you. As I said earlier, he creates a kind of force field, a gravitational pull around you that draws others into the plot without their even knowing it. Gary walks into the room and, suddenly, I'm irritated at him. It's not me, and it's not him. I have

to know that. His lifelong assault has been, "If you can't get it right, we don't want to be with you." It's a lie. It's the Enemy. I don't feel that way toward him really. But unless I live with this awareness, keep a watchful eye out for it, and resist, I'll get sucked into the pull,

A word of encouragement can heal a wound; a choice to forgive can destroy a stronghold.

start making agreements with it, and there goes the friendship.

FIGHT FOR IT

Be kind, for everyone you know is facing a great battle. (Philo of Alexandria) A true community is something you'll have to fight for. You'll have to fight to get one, and you'll have to fight to keep it afloat. But you fight for it as you bail out a life raft during a storm at sea. You want this thing to work. You need this thing to work. You can't ditch it and jump back on the cruise ship. This is the church; this is all you have. Without it, you'll go down. Or back to captivity. This is the reason those small house fellowships thrive in other countries: they need each other. There are no other options.

Suddenly, all those one another's in Scripture make sense. Love one another.

Bear one another's burdens. Forgive one another. Acts of kindness become deeply meaningful because we know we are at war. Knowing full well that we all are facing battles of our own, we give one another the benefit of the doubt. Leigh isn't intentionally being distant from me — she's probably under an assault.

That's why you must know each other's stories, know how to "read" each other. A word of encouragement can heal a wound; a choice to forgive can destroy a stronghold. You never knew your simple acts were so weighty. It's what we've come to call "lifestyle warfare." God is calling together little communities of the heart, to fight for one another and for the hearts of those who have not

yet been set free. That camaraderie, that intimacy, that incredible impact by a few stout-hearted souls — that is available. It is the Christian life as Jesus gave it to us. It is completely normal.

JOHN ELDREDGE lives in Colorado Springs with his wife, Stasi, and their three sons, Samuel, Blaine and Luke. He is an author, counsellor and teacher. He is the founder and director of *Ransomed Heart*

Ministries (www.RansomedHeart.com) in

Colorado Springs, Colorado, a teaching, counseling and discipling fellowship devoted to helping people recover and live from their deep heart. John is the author of numerous books, including *Wild at Heart* and *Waking the Dead*



I want to touch base with you and let you know what has been happening down here in Tassie.

As I told you, since we spoke with you (Phil Brown) on the phone oh-so-long-ago! (last year sometime), we moved house and have been waiting on God to show us the next step in our simple church journey.

We had some get-togethers with various Christian friends but found we were really not on the same page, except for one dear friend who has wholeheartedly embraced the simple church concept and loves the Lord with all her heart. She is unfortunately living too far away for us to meet regularly. So we kept praying ...

What happened is this. We have moved into a rural area where houses are mostly situated on large blocks of

farmland and far apart. We had been sitting in our lounge chairs day after day reading the Word together and praying about how we can start a missional community with local Christians. I had heard that some friends of mine from years ago that I'd lost touch with had moved somewhere nearby. We knew they had an antique shop in Richmond (8 minute drive away) - so we went looking for them. Long story short, we found their shop, went in and said hello. They asked where we were living - "Middle Tea Tree Rd", we said. Bruce opened his mouth in surprise - "that's where we are!", he says, "what number?" We told him the number, and he exclaimed "We're your neighbours!" It turns out all there is between their house and ours is a small paddock - they are literally our next door neighbours! We were gobsmacked - to think God knew we were neighbours all along and in fact, no doubt, orchestrated it all ages ago knowing what would happen.

Anyway, we met up and discovered that they are in the same place we are spiritually, and desperately wanting to

A BRIDGE not too far

share life in a simple church way. Now we have started our own community with our next door neighbours, doing life together and seeking God for direction. We're meeting for a meal together every week and have begun studying Acts. It is so exciting and refreshing, you know what I mean :) We've been sharing the *Oikos* magazines with them and they are very excited about being part of this move of God. We're beginning to make contact with our other neighbours in the street also - we wonder where this will lead.

Between us all we know of other Christians who are beginning similar journeys out of mainstream congregations and into smaller group settings in homes, and some who are in the initial stages of thinking about it. I'm wondering if you would like to add our group to your website, and Doug and I would be happy to be of any assistance in helping network with other groups that we discover in our area.

Thanks for your time and all that you and the team at *Oikos* do.

DOUG AND SUZIE PYBUS



FROM TABLE TO TABLE: *Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed* - Leonard Sweet

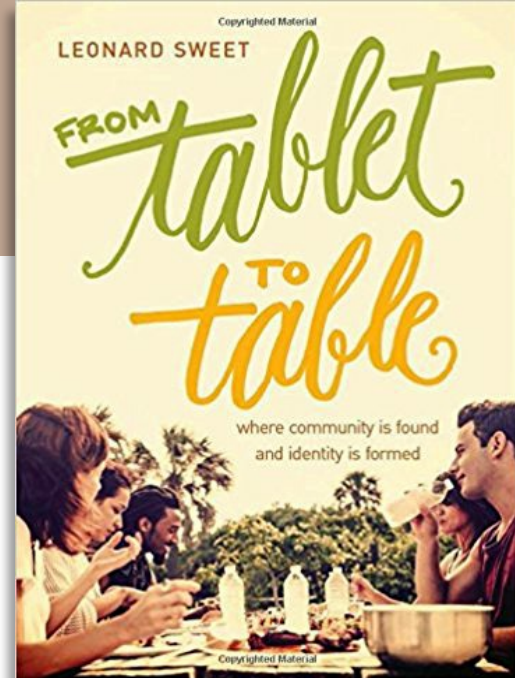
Worship Leader magazine has named *From Tablet to Table* one of the five best books of 2015! What if the Bible were seen less as a tablet of ink than as a table of food? *From Tablet to Table* invites readers to explore the importance of The Table in biblical theology, and what it might mean for us to bring back the table to our homes, our churches, and our neighborhoods. The table pictures the grace of God's provision for all aspects of our lives, a place of safe gathering, of finding identity in shared stories, of imparting food and faith, of playing host and finding satisfaction as a guest. Sweet explores how our failure to understand and appreciate "the most sacred item of furniture in every home" has created

such a deficit in our fast-food, take-what-you-like-smorgasbord, together-but-separate society.

Leonard Sweet's recent release, is a remarkable work. Len, as always, writes with an artist's eye and a brilliant mind. I read everything Len writes and this is an exceptional addition to his collection of work.

Intending to ingest it over several sittings, I started but couldn't stop. I began what I thought would be a multiple meal experience, taking place over several sittings, but ended up experiencing a finely cooked meal with extraordinary company. I couldn't put it down, reading it in one sitting. Like all good meals, it consisted of great food (content), great company (an authentic voice) and lingering conversation.

As a personal recipient of his hospitality, Len and his family do what he



writes in this book and the table is an open and regular part of their life and routine. In a culture wrestling with identity and community, this book is a prophetic call back to the table with a poetic voice. Well done, Len!!!

Don't miss one of Len's most timely and prophetic books!

Bryce Ashlin-Mayoon - Amazon

**UNDERSTANDING OUR TIMES
(Continued from page 2)**

background, behavior or sexuality, and to help people to understand God's fingerprints in their lives. We are not called to correct people as much as to connect them to Jesus who will bring change into all of our lives.

4. Learn to tell our own stories well and distinguish the difference between institutional religion (and the abuses that have been perpetrated by some within that framework and have been exposed in many cases), and a personal relationship with Jesus. I freely acknowledge the obvious wrongs that have been done in the name of religions including the Christian religion. I was recently sharing with a young agnostic woman how this is so different to a personal experience of Jesus in my life!

5. Highlight the supernatural nature of the gospel. God's intervention supernaturally in our lives and families

further confirms the truth of the Gospel for "we cannot help but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). It is difficult to dispute a person's personal experience, even when it includes the miraculous. I think of our eldest son Brayden who broke his neck on the trampoline on his 16th birthday, and was paralyzed down one side of his body. The initial X-rays showed fractures in C4 and 5. As he was being airlifted to Melbourne to the Alfred Hospital we were all sending up many desperate prayers for God's intervention. Amazingly his next X-rays showed dislocation not fractures and he made a full recovery. While not every person prayed for is physically healed, I know God intervened that day for our eldest son Brayden.

The Apostle Paul wrote that his "message and preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1Cor 1:4). God's power will arrest

attention! Sometimes it's in physical healing.

Recently 2 men I know who are always praying for people whenever there is an opportunity, asked a man who was going into hospital in 3-4 days, to have a knee reconstruction operation, if they could pray for his knee. The older man declined saying the operation was all booked in. They persisted however and he reluctantly gave permission for them to pray. A younger man was also present and was very sceptical of this prayer thing. They didn't see the older man with the impending knee operation for 3-4 months, but when they saw him next, he told them that the surgeon had examined his knee just before operating and said that something had obviously changed and that he didn't see the need for the operation! The younger man who witnessed this event, recently had a major shoulder issue and decided to ask for prayer as well! Our friends didn't see him for about 4 months until they met him in the supermarket. He excitedly told

them that the bone that was 'sticking out' had receded back into place and his shoulder was healed. He said that he now talked to this Jesus everyday, and was telling all his mates about this Jesus!

We need also to pray for people to specifically experience God's presence and peace in their lives, and for the greatest of all miracles – for each person to encounter Jesus in a saving relationship!

A friend of mine said that he has seen many kinds of training programs for witnessing, but if people are just "excited about Jesus" it will happen spontaneously as in the example above.

6. Seek to establish Kingdom initiatives that demonstrate Christian community, love and power and to share the love of Jesus. Involving ourselves in kingdom expressions which give people "tastes and glimpses" of the of the Kingdom of God with evangelism can be effective. A friend in Perth is collecting clothing and other items to ship to Africa for some projects he has established there. He is finding enormous good will and favour in the wider community and developing many relationships with a wide circle of people. He is also heavily involved in sport such as triathlons and cycling, and has recently baptized one of the riders! He finds that he has time to



talk during rides and over a coffee at the end of the ride with many other athletes and he is quite open about his work in Africa and his faith. Kingdom type projects (projects that bless people and the community) frequently have community favour, and often see many people from the wider community involved.

My wife Kate has been involved with our neighbor and many others in a project called "boomerang bags" which was started by a lady from Queensland and seems to have caught on around the nation. Bags are sewn from recycled material to replace throw-away plastic bags in shopping centers and supermarkets, which often end up in our waterways and oceans causing much destruction of wildlife. As I reflected on this, I saw a "movement" developing. While it isn't "religious" or "Christian", it is meeting a need to do something practical for the environment, and to change people's thinking and behaviour in a positive direction. I believe we can both initiate and participate in these projects which are so consistent with the heart of the Kingdom of God (Justice, righteousness, deliverance, healing, blessing etc) to bless others and our created world. People's hearts are in the right place - they only need to now meet the King! Out of serving with others in kingdom type initiatives relationships form and Jesus can be shared.

7. We live in disturbing and challenging times but ones that also offer incredible opportunities as the complacency of our society and culture is being disturbed and challenged. The Kingdom of God (KOG) offers something infinitely superior! Sometimes we need to operate from the margins of society, but also from involvement with people at every level and to be faithful in loving people and sharing our experience. The parable of the "Sower and the Soils" reminds us that there are different responses to the gospel seed. We must keep praying continually and sowing faithfully and we will sooner or latter find good soil and a

harvest.

We are living in the "worst of times and the best of times" The Holy Spirit will guide and empower us – let's step forward with courage and boldness and understand the times and opportunities!

bless you, Phil Brown
OIKOS DIRECTOR



From the very beginning, God's way of reaching and restoring the world has always been through what I would call a blessing strategy... how do we in a very practical way that's theologically grounded explain to people how they could bless people in places they are incarnating? We came up with this...

Begin with prayer. We want you to ask, 'God how do you want me to bless the people in the places you've sent me to?'

Listen. Don't talk, but listen to people, their struggles, their pains, in the places God sent you.

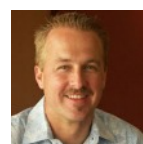
Eat. You can't just check this off. It's not quick. You have to have a meal with people or a cup of coffee. It builds relationships.

Serve. If you listen with people and you eat with people they will tell you how to love them and you'll know how to serve them.

Story. When the time is right, now we talk and we share the story of how Jesus changed our life.

Genesis 12:2-3 says, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Dave Ferguson leads COMMUNITY, an innovative multi-site missional church who have grown from a few college friends to thousands every weekend meeting at



fourteen locations throughout Chicago. Dave packs this short article out more fully on a video at vergenetwork.org

[Making Room for Atheism](#)

Thoughts on the Supremacy of God in a Pluralistic World

By John Piper August 10, 2005 © Desiring God.

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Our church exists “to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ.” That is our mission. “All things” means business, industry, education, media, sports, arts, leisure, government, and all the details of our lives. Ideally this means God should be recognized and trusted as supreme by every person he has made. But the Bible teaches plainly that there will never be a time before Jesus comes back when all people will honor him as supreme ([2 Thessalonians 1:6-10](#)).

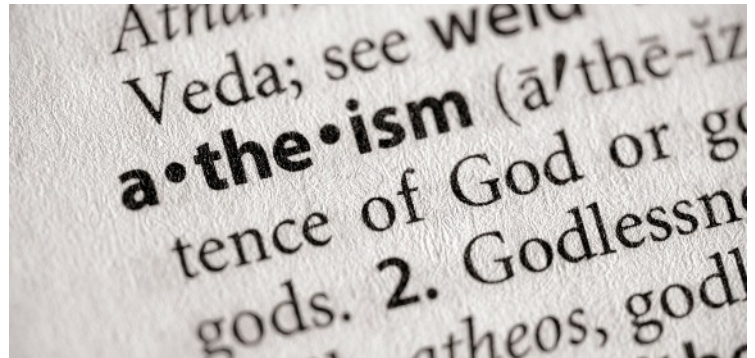
So how do we express a passion for God’s supremacy in a pluralistic world where most people do not recognize God as an important part of their lives, let alone an important part of government or education or business or industry or art or recreation or entertainment?

Answer: We express a passion for the supremacy of God...

1) by maintaining a conviction at all times that God is ever-present and gives all things their most important meaning. He is the Creator, Sustainer, and Governor of all things. We must keep in our minds the truth that all things exist to reveal something of God’s infinite perfections. The full meaning of everything, from shoestrings to space shuttles, is the way they relate to God.

2) by trusting God in every circumstance to use his creative, sustaining, governing wisdom and power to work all things together for the good of all who love him. This is faith in the future grace of all that God promises to be for us in Jesus.

3) by making life choices that reveal the supreme worth of God above what the world values supremely. “The steadfast love of the Lord is better than life” ([Psalm 63:3](#)). So we will choose to die rather than lose sweet fellowship with God. This will show his supremacy over all that life offers.



4) by speaking to people of God’s supreme worth in creative and persuasive ways, and by telling people how they can be reconciled to God through Christ, so that they can enjoy God’s supremacy as protection and help, rather than fear it as judgment.

5) by making clear that God himself is the foundation for our commitment to a pluralistic democratic order—not because pluralism is his ultimate ideal, but because in a fallen world, legal coercion will not produce the kingdom of God. Christians agree to make room for non-Christian faiths (including naturalistic, materialistic faiths), not because commitment to God’s supremacy is unimportant, but because it must be voluntary, or it is worthless. We have a God-centered ground for making room for atheism. “If my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight” ([John 18:36](#)). The fact that God establishes his kingdom through the supernatural miracle of faith, not firearms, means that Christians in this age will not endorse coercive governments—Christian or secular.

This is why we resist the coercive secularization implied in some laws that repress Christian activity in public places. It is *not* that we want to establish Christianity as the law of the land. That is intrinsically impossible, because of the spiritual nature of the kingdom. It is rather because repression of free exercise of religion and persuasion is as wrong against Christians as it is against secularists. We believe this tolerance is rooted in the very nature of the gospel of Christ. In one sense, tolerance is pragmatic: freedom and democracy seem to be the best political order humans have conceived. But for Christians it is not *purely* pragmatic: the spiritual, relational nature of God’s kingdom is the ground of our endorsement of pluralism, until Christ comes with rights and authority that we do not have.

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