

Building the Church as a Family



GARY GRANT

FOREWORD DAVID TENSEN

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Foreword

In her 2012 book *The Great Emergence*, professor and author Phyllis Tickle outlined a pattern she had noticed in the development of The Church over its lifetime. That is, every 500 years or so, The Church undergoes a major change which includes a major split of sorts. A messy and noteworthy split, generally converging over a single final issue. We are 500 years from Luther's reformation now.

Many markers indicate The Church is in the midst of a serious makeover or should we call it for what it is, a crisis. A crisis that has been on its way for around 100 years. Jesus followers are leaving conventional church communities. It's struggling to find and equip healthy young people for staff and ministry roles. Pastors are breaking under the immense pressure it takes to run an enterprise so many Christians expect to be part of today - their mental health is at risk. In short, things have stopped working for so many people, including the pastors.

You hold in your hand a book that will either affirm or frustrate your theology, thoughts and intuitions on where we find ourselves today. It ends with Gary asking a myriad of exceptional questions, inviting relational discussion. And this, in my opinion, is the kind of psychologically safe, critical thinking the church needs today. In fact, if my recent University research degree in organisational leadership serves me well, the most progressive and successful organisations today are moving away from the hierarchical, objective, do-as-I-say models of leadership to a more relational, dialogical one. One may say, a more Eastern way of doing things.

On a personal note, I have known and grown, loved and been loved by Gary, his wife Debbie, (their dogs) and the church they lead for years. I've witnessed the outworking of the theological and ecclesiastical concepts in this book and I have travelled with Gary to India where it is working on mass. Like intentional and sacrificial parenting, it's not easy or instant however, it works and is incredibly transformative.

I wholeheartedly commend this book, its author and its invitation to dialogue to you.

David Tensen

Author of *The Wrestle*

Endorsements

THE CHURCH... Ask a room full of Christians what The Church is and you would get many different answers. Some would say, "It's where I go every Sunday". Others might say, "It's where they serve me and my family". There might even be someone brave enough to admit, "Hey, I go for the girls!" Ok, that last one was my main reason many years ago...I'm sorry. But what really is The Church and why is it still around? What are we building? Is it the same as what Jesus is building? Is it more than a venue to occupy, a weekly event to attend or a place to catch up with mates?

I remember reading the Book of Acts for the first time and I was left speechless at how they journeyed together through the many changing seasons that they faced. I still recall the joy of discovering that I was now a part of that and the expectation of seeing that reality played out in my new-found faith was exciting... Oh, that was until the Westernised version of it sucked me into its world of performance, conformity and pressure. Now as a Pastor who has been involved in Church-life for over 20 years, I am restless. I am eager to discover more and re-capture the awe and wonder of what Jesus intended when He birthed His Church.

So, I have to ask, Is there something missing? I really do think there is and I am so thankful that Gary has taken the time to share his heart with us in this book and renew the heart-cry of the Church today - our heart-cry. We all want more of what God intended, even if we don't yet fully understand what that "more" is. That's why I believe that what is contained within these pages

provides a blueprint and it's almost like dusting-off the old plans that seem to have been lost for so long. Thank you Gary for pioneering the Family movement in our generation.

I know for me and The Living Room Church family in Melton and Torquay, we will be digging into this together because we can't go back! We will all be better off for this and so will the people around us because everyone longs for family, everyone has a need to belong and everyone wants to find home.

Mark Jurisic

The Living Room Church, Melton & Torquay, Australia

Gary's observations and questions have always been on the crest of the wave that moves hearts and minds into God's next revelation and transformation. 'Building the Church as Family' holds the same keen insights. He fearlessly names the past expressions of Church structure, as many of us have seen but have struggled to change. Gary asks focussed questions that challenge the established theological perspectives and core values of a Church which has drifted into a business-like machine. Maybe this is one of our generations 'Temple money table tipping' events.

This book holds the key ideas that I've heard Gary ruminating over and attempting to build around him over the past seven years. This material will help those who want to question the status quo and reimagine a new future for leadership in the Church family. Gary beds his opinions down in a Biblical framework and invites his readers to question their past and explore their future options from a refreshed perspective.

Reverend Bruce Ollington

St. Luke's Anglican Church, Mulgrave, Australia

Gary and Debbie have been very much instrumental in our journey in so many aspects. We wouldn't be pursuing what we are pursuing now, but for their influence. Gary once asked me, "Jesu, what's your vision?" I answered him, sharing my dream for the ministry and how I would like to impact the society at large. After patiently listening, he pointed to my son who was barely a month old at that time and said "Jesu, right there is your vision". He also took my hand and looked into my eyes and said "if you can't journey your wife, forget about journeying the Bride of Christ". He brought the whole 'vision' squarely right to the family. When God wanted to make earth look like heaven, He didn't start a church or a university but He started a family! Family is the only strategy that God has. We have tried every other thing and have built institutions and finally have begun to wonder why it's not working.

This book that you are reading right now has the keys to put you on the right track so that you don't look back with regret after years of pursuing the Babylonian glory. I want to conclude by saying it's not just a teaching or a doctrine shift that he is presenting. Anyone can teach. But not everyone does love one's spouse. Gary loves Debbie and has worked out his relationships and he is a proud grandad right now. So listen to him. You might not be able to agree with everything right now but definitely you won't continue to see things the way you have been seeing all along.

Jesudian Silvester

The Fathershouse, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

There is a new reformation sweeping the globe. The Church is waking up and rediscovering the supernatural power of the Family of God. In this book, Gary shakes off the trappings of the modern expression of Church and uncovers the glorious blueprint of Church as Family, Church as God intended.

James Thompson

Friends First Church, Beaconsfield, Australia

Thankfully, Gary does not give us another organizational 'model' for the Church, but rather explores the roots and life of what it means to be in authentic relationships with one another. This little book is a powerful antidote to the poisons of performance and transactional theology in which many of us were raised. Wrestle with the ideas; you are worth the work.

Paul Young

Author of *The Shack*, *Crossroads*, *Eve* and *Lies We Believe About God*

Ephesians 2:19-3:21

2:19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20** having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, **21** in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, **22** in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

3:01 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles- **2** if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, **3** how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, **4** by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), **5** which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: **6** that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, **7** of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. **8** To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable

riches of Christ, 9 and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; 10 to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, 11 according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him. 13 Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. 14 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height- 19 to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, 21 to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Introduction

The church is right in the middle of one of the greatest reformations it has ever had. I'm convinced the history books will document this era as a time of great 'cultural makeover' as the church leaves behind all of her religious rituals; she is sick of glorifying man-made rules rather than embracing a relationship with her loving creator. God is at the centre of this makeover.

All over the world the institution - the business - of church is losing its hold. Holy Spirit is no longer contending with this lifeless religious form and many are sensing it.

Meetings held with religious ‘goods and services peddled for profit’, people gathering around a task or a vision statement made up by the elite few, or sitting in chairs like they are in a ‘concert venue’ with a bunch of stage craft performances; when all the while we have a world crying out for mums and dads, fathers and mentors. People everywhere are looking for purpose and destiny, struggling to comprehend what life is all about. People with unanswered questions are looking for somewhere to process their disconnected hearts.

The western church says you must be ‘saved’ from going to hell, as if anyone these days even cares or understands. Say the ‘Sinner’s prayer’, to the applause of the crowd and all will be okay. And yet hundreds of thousands have walked away, confused, hurt, disconnected, untrusting, fumbling around still in love with God but staying well clear of the ‘church’ or rather the ‘gathered crowd’. Still others keep their distance as they have heard the stories of abused friends who have criticized the ‘industry of church’.

“What the heck is going on?” church leaders say. “You must be more committed”. Huh, why? And to what? To the weekly concert? Putting our money in the tin, sitting in chairs and applauding a ‘message’, when all the while being kept at arm’s length, disconnected, lonely and looking for answers to our own lives.

Yes, I understand we have a world crying out to be reconciled to their Heavenly Father and reconciliation is most definitely the Fathers ultimate cry, but can I say for the most part, our modern church methodology has found us making sandwiches Jesus never ordered. People are not interested; our message is cold and meaningless, it lacks connection and warmth. It lacks a space for dialogue, connection, empathy and the valuing of people’s hearts.

So how did we find ourselves here? That is a huge topic but let us just say that we monetized church. We turned it from a family into a business whilst calling it a family all along. Confused? Yes, my gosh, major confusion! We preach family whilst drawing a hopeful crowd, only to treat them like a commodity as we bury them in the foundations of the ‘movement’ our egos or pockets are building.

Folks, God wants His family back. He wants His family to be all it was created to be, with Himself in the centre of it all. The church family (community) connected in an intimate relationship with Him, the community of God or people of the Way. This is what the world is craving to experience: To belong before they have to ‘believe right’, to be loved, to feel connected. This is the cry of the human heart and the family of God (*ekklesia*) has been commissioned to infiltrate like yeast. Yes, it is not all doom and gloom, it’s exciting! Finally there is an opportunity to once again make the main thing *the main thing*. I most definitely think the best years are ahead for the true family of God. We are slap bang in the middle of a great global reset in the western church.

Here I am writing in the middle of a lockdown, it is October 2020. Church venues everywhere are closed, we haven’t had a ‘church’ meeting since early March and probably won’t for another few months yet. We are facing a global pandemic, COVID-19, which is not going away any time soon. This has created immense challenges across the board for everyone. Churchgoers are figuring out that they don’t need the concert anymore, but they are reconnecting with their families again. Church preachers are going broke scrambling to keep their ‘ministry’ alive as they try to make their money work. And all the while I see my heavenly Father smiling as He shuts all the business of church down, brings it to zero and presses the reset button....

Now let me be clear, I am not against the ‘church’ at all, in fact it is the only thing that makes any sense in this world of ours. It is the bride of the living God, a people tasked with ushering in His kingdom, the ways of God. So, however it meets together, with whatever structure, etc. it is still His beloved bride. Therefore I am certainly not ‘attacking’ the bride but rather I am questioning the ‘system’ or the ‘methodology’ we have come to adopt as church. I have gladly spent all my life serving in various capacities within church structures and therefore now in my later years feel confident to say, I think there is a much better way or more truthfully, a ‘forgotten way’.

I have searched scripture trying to understand the context or culture of the time into which it was written. I have concluded and firmly believe that the manifold wisdom of God, the mystery of Christ, can certainly only be FULLY expressed through a close and intimately connected people, or the FAMILY of God (Ephesians 2:19 through to 3:21). It is because of this conviction that I write this book.

I believe the genius of our God is in the simple structure of firstly, the family unit and secondly, gathered families led by parents, not masters or lords, but loving parents. Parents that nurture, parents that teach, parents that can instill kingdom values, etc. I do understand however, that the metaphor of ‘parent’ can be unpalatable for some, especially if your own personal experience growing up has been difficult (ie. abusive parents or dysfunctional family of origin). If we take time to understand the ways of God we will understand that in no way, does it diminish the person who is metaphorically the ‘child’ or for that matter, promote the person serving as the ‘parent’. We will come to understand that rather than a hierarchy of some kind, these are ‘roles’ that we play within a healthy family in our journey towards maturity. First a child (*teknon*), then a son (*huios*), then a son set in place (*huiothesia*).

Before we look at this in more detail I have taken some time to drill into, not exhaustively, three ‘truths’ within the first three chapters, which will set us up to reconsider our ‘gospel’ message. I certainly feel that we have misunderstood some of why Jesus (God incarnate) came. This will hopefully open you up to dialogue with others as you reconsider some of the methodology or practices we have come to accept as ‘God’s way’ of doing life.

I have a brief look at the ‘heart journey’. Simply put, it is the journey of salvation which all of us embark on once we start dialoguing with Jesus. I then look at the best ‘vehicle’ we have to do this ‘heart journey’ and indeed steward this beautiful message of the ‘good news’. The outworking of all this as each of us join together, is the building the of true ‘*ekklesia*’ or nation of God, necessary to redeem all mankind into its rightful inheritance and relationship with a loving heavenly Father. Yay!

At the back I have a section on who should lead the church and the role they need to consider. I have quoted a ton of scripture for study if desired. I am a firm believer that male and female represent ‘eldership’. I certainly do not think women are second class or need to be led by men or vice versa. Both male and female in a parenting capacity complement as they play their roles in raising healthy children to in turn, parent the next generation. There is no one dominating the other, rather assisting or helping each other. I think the words ‘head of’ (Ephesians 5:23) quoted by so many are incorrectly used. ‘Source of’ is a better translation of the Greek word, *kephale*.

I am not a prolific writer but I am a deep thinker and I love the scriptures. I realize that the scriptures were not written to us but *for* us and therefore, I have spent many years trying to hear the writers through the correct 'cultural' lenses so as to understand the 'ways of God'. These pages are my attempt to get you thinking. Thinking, I believe, in a more inclusive Godly way as you partner with Him in reconciling all mankind to Him. I trust you will be enriched in your inner man as you read and my greatest hope of course, is that you fall deeply in love with Jesus.

God bless you.

Free Choice

A few months ago Ravi Zacharias died. I have only recently become aware of some of the dreadful things Ravi did towards the end of his life and as a result take a more cautious view of his ministry. We have to all acknowledge the hurt Ravi has caused to so many, Jesus said the things done in secret will be declared from the house tops (Luke 12:3) and thankfully what was hidden has now been fully exposed. It was Ravi who started me on the journey of understanding the gift of 'free choice'. I am certainly one of many who wish Ravi had finished well and lived out his amazing revelation; tragically this was not the case. I guess what I am saying is although Ravi presented the truth of the matter, he failed to live it out. The words of an old mentor of mine ring in my ears continually, "Gary, it's not how you start that matters but how you finish, and what you are remembered for". So true and yet many fail to live this way. Nonetheless, Ravi had a way of presenting the truth of God in a way that everyone understood and could not wriggle away from.

A university student said to Ravi, “If your God is who He says He is, why is there such sickness in the world? Why are there wars? Why is there such poverty? Why are people killing each other? Surely this God of yours if He is real, would do something about it?”

Ravi seemed to ignore the student’s question and went on to talk about a passionate loving God who created an amazing universe, a God who is grieved at all these things man is doing, a God who longs for His creation to come to its senses and stop doing all these terrible atrocities. So the student interrupted, “But if He is this all-powerful God, He could stop these acts surely?”

Ravi looked at the student, now trapped exactly where he wanted him to be and hopefully positioned to fully comprehend the point he was about to make. He replied, “Yes young man, I fully appreciate your point of view, in fact I have thought of your question a thousand times, but let me talk about something I discovered about my God.”

Ravi went on to describe a God who took a great risk creating humanity to be just like Him, with the ability to love, and if to love, then the free choice to *choose* love. He said **without freedom and the free choice to respond to any relationship, there can never be true love.** If God created us as ‘things’ or ‘objects’ that would be a different matter. But God created us in His image and in His likeness, thus fully like Him. God’s intent was that we, as His children, would have the freedom to choose Him, thus making it true love. One of the highest attributes of mankind is his or her ability to choose their destiny. Thus God has and will always protect, humanity’s free choice.

Ravi then went on to say it is not God that chooses these atrocities but man. If God protects man's ability to choose, then man should come to his senses and choose a loving relationship with God. And in so doing, man would ultimately turn from their wicked ways because God is against these things. Further he said, it is only the man or woman who chooses to love God and come into relationship with God through an act of their free choice that is changed within. God's intention has and will always be a relationship with all of humanity. Humanity in a right loving relationship with God that they have chosen, would most definitely not endorse or commit the atrocities you have mentioned.

Good answer!

Free choice: I often say, "The decisions you make is the life you end up living". I think many of us don't fully comprehend the gift that we have been given by God - the ability to choose. Our choices matter and reveal what we trust and believe, Jesus said, "Forgive them for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). The power of free choice, even though encumbered and restricted by culture, trauma, heritage, experience etc. Free choice, it is what sets us apart from all other created species on the planet! Men and woman through the centuries have fought for freedom, their God given birthright to choose the life they want to live; after all, it is one of the pillars of the free democratic world. We can often lose sight of what forged the western world we now live in, our forefathers' pilgrimage under God to bring a God culture, God's ways, God's thoughts and ultimately God's kingdom, Kingdom culture.

Kingdom Culture

Let me describe who you are according to scripture. You are a citizen or ambassador of the Kingdom of Heaven, sacred set apart ones, saints of the kingdom of light. You are a broker of another world, the Kingdom of Heaven. Your words become spirit when you are saying what God is saying and when that spirit is released, the plough of Heaven is released to transform the condition of the hearts of the people that you touch. You are a living revolutionary, you were impacted by Light and you became light, the light of the world. You were thirsty and you drank from the river of 'zoe' life, you are now the drink of God so that the thirst of others can be forever quenched.

This is who you are. Your purpose for being here has shifted. You are a broker of the reality of heaven and God is looking for human agreement that He might invade this world you have been asked to steward. You belong. **You belong to Him and you are the family of God, the agent of God in this physical dimension, earth.**

So how do we now respond to that? Are we living like the rest of the unbelievers, unanchored, like sheep gone astray? Has the culture of this world taught us how to respond to every news announcement made, with panic and uncertainty, whilst ignoring what the scriptures teach? From my observation, I think so. We should note that every discussion, thought or decision we make where Jesus is not at the centre, is by nature demonic. Bill Johnson has spent his life bringing this truth to the body of Christ. Holy Spirit is committed to you relationally and is looking for your permission to take you out of a darkness culture and bring you into light, the culture of the kingdom of God. Free choice!

Yes, you get to choose each day to embrace this new kingdom culture as you deepen your relational connection with God. What I mean by this is you are deepening your authentic participation as your eyes are opening to the reality of your union with God.

So culture, what is it? and how does it come about? Obviously, another huge topic. It is not always easy to get your head around this because no one challenges their own belief systems when they live, mix and have relationship with other likeminded people. Travel to another country, another culture and you will understand what I mean as their ways/belief systems clash with yours. Who is right, who is wrong? Which is the correct way? These are questions that have been asked for decades. Thank goodness, God doesn't answer these questions at all, but rather poses a different perspective; I think, a kingdom perspective, which is the pursuit of a deep loving and intimate relationship. Huh?

When our pursuit becomes 'connection' through a deep loving and intimate relationship, our journey automatically shifts from a right and wrong paradigm, to one of removing all obstacles that are blocking that ultimate goal, a deep intimate connection.

You see, who is right and who is wrong, is trumped by this pursuit of intimacy.

This enables us to invite God or others into firstly, identifying the blockage and secondly, remedying the removal of the issue blocking the intimacy/connection. Rather than an isolated journey of first becoming 'right' so that you now qualify to engage relationally, working on an issue together, over time, creates a deeper connection. Suffice to say the right versus wrong paradigm breeds disconnection, whereas a deeper relational pursuit working on issues blocking that goal creates deeper connection.

Culture is a collection of heartfelt belief systems or sub-conscious agreements or autopilot (default) responses.

Most of our current culture is mimicked behaviour we observed growing up relating to those around us. To adjust this culture to that of Kingdom or any culture, for that matter, takes time. It must be done relationally, in a safe and loving environment, our hearts need to be honoured, heard. The process has to have the pursuit of intimacy as the goal, rather than who is right and who is wrong. The journey requires experiences of acceptance, nurture, love and connection.

If we look at scripture we see mans greatest cultural makeovers happening because they became 'friends' with God. Abraham, Moses and David, who were all called friends of God, did the most outrageous 'wrong things' and yet grew closer to God. I think it is because they were not consumed with doing it right or for that matter doing it wrong, their pursuit was one of intimacy/deeper connection with God, working on their challenges together with Him as they chose to invite God into their personal worlds.

This leads to some relational questions I like to ask folk:

- What does it mean to live a life of full exposure with someone you love?
- What are your fears?
- What are you anxious about?
- What are you working so hard to hide from everyone?
- What is freedom after all?
- What if your internal belief system, your 'autopilot' or culture is keeping you away from the truth of God's Word?
- How would you even know?
- Where could you go to find out?
- What kind of journey would you be willing to go on to experience a cultural transformation of your inner world?

I think people around us want to talk about these deep issues in their lives. Obviously they need to feel safe, have a trusted place and person to share with etc. I think Jesus met people this way. Jesus was intimate, He provided safe spacious places, Jesus honoured hearts and brought freedom to people. **Kingdom culture is a culture of love, of safety, a place to belong, it's truly coming home and it is highly relational.**

Contractual vs Covenantal

The culture of the kingdom of God is framed by covenantal living; nowhere do we find a contract or a set of arrangements or any rules to uphold, to have relationship. You see, **true covenantal living has connection as the goal rather than who is right and who is wrong** (as mentioned in the previous chapter). It has intimacy: knowing and being fully known. Vulnerability is celebrated, relationships are trusted, love is top priority, nurture is essential and deep connection is valued. Task is always secondary and not the reason for any relationship.

I did not understand this for most of my life as I grew up with the understanding that relationships worked on a reward system, as opposed to a pursuit of deeper connection/intimacy. I understood there were 'silent' rules of engagement, a way of doing things to stay connected. Although this is true to a degree, once love and connection become your goal, these 'silent' rules become superfluous; you see, a pursuit of intimacy always trumps these 'silent' rules. As we set our pursuit towards a deeper knowing of each other, we begin to truly see each other for the first time. We are no longer jostling for position or striving for one-upmanship as we protect ourselves because our pursuit has shifted off ourselves and onto the person we are pursuing connection with. The best example would be in a marriage. If the pursuit is a selfish fulfillment of the individual, then the marriage will be by nature contractual, rather than covenantal (with the pursuit of intimacy, deeper knowing and deeper connection). **In the kingdom of God this is how God relates to us and how He desires we would relate to Him and each other.** Yes, this is difficult to comprehend, so foreign to most of us and indeed possibly contrary to our experience of how life works in general.

Jesus says in John 17:3, "And this is eternal life, that they may **know** You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. The word 'know' is *ginōskō*, a Jewish idiom for making love. This is intimate language Jesus uses which He repeats time and time again through scripture. At first this is confusing because we think of 'sex', but what if we didn't focus on the 'sex' and thought more about intimacy being a deep connection or allowing ourselves to be fully seen, exposed, fully loved. Eternal life is a deep intimate knowing of God, like a husband and wife should experience in a marriage. This is what Jesus is saying to us: eternal life is being covenanted to Him, the bride coming close in an intimate embrace, the bride allowing herself to be fully seen.

I don't know how many times over the years I read that scripture, only to move on with my striving to be loved and accepted by God. Gosh, I certainly have jumped through many hoops in my life; driving myself to make sure I was not only included but accepted. Why? Possibly because my culture dictated I did so. My whole life I did things and was rewarded for it, I did the right things and I was accepted; the wrong things and I was banished to my room, etc. I was parented this way, schooled this way, immersed in a culture of right versus wrong and therefore I became accustomed to this as 'normal'. I certainly never questioned it, after all everyone around me was living this way; it was my 'inner culture', my lens through which I interacted with everything around me. Everyone I connected with, every relationship I encountered had this hidden understanding embedded in it. You were included if you kept up what was expected of you. As a result, I related to others through this well-entrenched lens of doing life contractually. Yes, contractually! If I held up my end of what was expected then everyone around me should do likewise and if they didn't, well then I was better than them, more accepted, holier, more righteous.

A number of years ago I was in a series of lectures looking through scripture at the covenants God made with His people. We looked at the covenant He made with Abraham and how Abraham presented the pieces of animal (Genesis 17). I was taught Abraham had to uphold his end of the covenant and God would uphold His part. This went on and on as we looked at many scriptures to reinforce this idea, that this covenant was a contractual agreement, of sorts. This most certainly was unquestioned as I studied and indeed interpreted these scriptures through my well-engrained understanding of do right versus do wrong. Of course, God is holy and I am journeying towards holiness, which I will achieve one day but in the meantime, if I present myself by doing right I will be upholding

my side of the covenant and therefore, all should work out just fine. As the series of lectures continued we looked at many other covenants with God plus covenants made between people, like Jonathan's covenant with David, the slitting of the palms of their hands and allowing the blood to mingle, etc. I simply never questioned this.

The problem was in my relationship with God, I could never uphold my end of the 'deal'. So in further discussions with other more 'theologically savvy' people: I re-looked at the covenant with Abraham and thought, well God foreknew Abraham would never be able to uphold this agreement so He upheld **both** sides of the agreement... Of course, this puts us in a losing position as we forever struggle to feel like we belong, are safe, or are home with our heavenly Father. I learnt if we weren't too careful we could even lose our salvation, scary stuff! And so, on I went going to church, doing relentless meetings, and good works, just to try and fulfill my end of the commitment. How sad it is to live like this! This is not kingdom life at all, it is not the culture of the kingdom. It is not how God relates to us at all and all it can ever produce is death, darkness and disconnection.

In Matthew 9, Jesus is accused of socializing with 'sinners' ie. folk that were drunkards, prostitutes and the like. Jesus responds quoting a verse from Hosea, "I desire mercy not sacrifice". We could move on as I have, for decades, after reading Jesus' response, without understanding that in Jewish custom when one verse is quoted to you as the hearer, your job is to read the entire scripture or bring it back to memory at least. It was common practice for Jews to memorize scripture in those days. Hosea, a type of Christ, is told by God to marry a prostitute. It is a tough ask for Hosea as he makes covenant with Gomer, journeys with her, has children with her and yet all the while experiences her relating to him as if their relationship was

a contract. Gomer understandably goes back to her old life of prostitution because she believes all relationships are done this way. Of course, Hosea had every right to deal with her lawfully or by the rules of the day, he could have severely punished her for leaving him and going back to prostitution. Doing so however, would require Hosea firstly to move from his covenantal position, where the goal of the relationship was an intimate connection, to a contractual position of who is right and who is wrong. Secondly, he would have to violate Gomer's right of free choice to respond. Should Hosea have enacted a contractual stance, yes, Gomer may well have been with Hosea in a 'marriage' of sorts, but it would be under duress, a facade 'together' but with no substance, a contractual arrangement with a violation of her free choice and therefore, completely void of true love and intimacy.

Hosea 6:6 says, "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings". Jesus' quoting of this verse from Hosea, in Matthew 9:13, plainly suggests that He desires to intimately know you.

A covenantal culture has the pursuit of deeper knowing, closeness, safety, trust, acceptance, belonging, and an honouring of free choice or the ability to freely respond.

Imagine being at our heavenly Father's dinner table, free to be yourself, where everything you are thinking is seen, you are fully exposed, yes, 'the good, bad and the ugly'. Yet you are loved, you are included, you belong and your performance does not change His affection towards you one little bit. This is where freedom is found, a place of trust is cultivated and finally you are able, through free choice, to truly repent. You are able to come out of agreement with everything that, is not kingdom, the sin that has entangled your soul, the lies you have believed, etc. as your loving Father embraces you, and helps you walk into freedom.

When we relook at that scripture in John 17:3, Jesus is saying eternal life is to know God - with no barriers, no pretence, nothing hidden, a life of Light, Life and Love, full exposure at an extremely intimate level. To become one with God. He never said eternal life is or a belief system, or for that matter, a set of rules to follow. Eternal life is to fully experience, know (*ginōskō*) God. Beautiful isn't it? Why would humanity not want this? Surely Jesus at the centre of every human life would be abundant life, a life of freedom, finally a coming home, a relief... Quite possibly then, we have our gospel message in the western world, a little skewed; maybe a little contractual?! Just maybe the very message of good news meant to take the world by storm, has been altered a fraction. Maybe it doesn't sound like good news, lacks embrace and love, is at arm's length and is simply too hard to do.

If you are fully engaged with me right now you are thinking, yes, but we can't do whatever we feel like, surely there are rules? Indeed, but doing whatever you feel like is contractual by nature because it is all about you. So once again think this through, if you are to do life covenantally, your goal being deep connection, then why would you ever do whatever **you** feel like? Surely you are laying your life down for others, preferring others, looking out for others, etc. Surely your life is a life of giving, loving, embracing those around you. Surely you are a safe person to be with, a generous person, you are not at all sin-focused or works-focused. You see brokenness in others but you search for the gold in them and call it out. You are an encourager, the atmosphere you set is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Galatians 5:22).

The True Gospel Message

If you have skipped the first few chapters then you may well read this chapter thinking I have lost my mind, so please go back and read what I have written on **Free Choice, Kingdom Culture** and **Contractual vs Covenantal** living.

A year ago I was journeying some students through how to present the Gospel; they were all expecting the same 'mantra' the western church has been dishing up for centuries. I took my time to talk about free choice, kingdom culture and covenantal vs contractual living. We invested considerable time pouring over scripture after scripture. I then got them to look at the well-entrenched message and way we have all presented the Gospel. One after the other they said but this doesn't make sense. They realised as I have, that **we have been violating the free choice of people, have presented something contrary to kingdom culture and have made it a contractual arrangement with God.**

If you have been in church circles for as long as I have, you will know that the goal in presenting the Gospel is to get the person whom you are presenting it to, to say the 'Sinner's prayer'. The prayer is how I used to believe I transitioned from 'unsaved' and going to hell if I died, to 'saved' and now going to heaven. I used to believe prior to being 'saved', that God the Father could not have anything to do with me as He saw me as unclean, a sinner, unholy and someone whom He had banished from His presence. I used to believe Jesus came, lived under the Mosaic law, lived a perfect life, the life every human should live to be 'accepted' by God. I used to believe Jesus then went to the cross and 'took on' all my sin (evil that needed punishment) and that God punished Jesus with His full wrath so that He was now satisfied and could receive me, should I make Jesus Lord and Saviour of my life. Simply put, God killed Jesus on a cross so that humanity would now be free to have everlasting life with Him.

Now, yes, most definitely it starts with a commitment to Jesus which is a free choice or a response to a wonderful invitation of intimacy. The bridegroom asking will you marry me and the bride freely choosing to respond. However, there are a number of problems with this way of presenting the Gospel. Let me explain myself.

1. You get yourself saved

You decide at some point in time to say a 'Sinner's prayer' that automatically repositions you from death or darkness to life and light, transporting you from a destiny of hell, to a destiny of heaven. I don't know about you but for me the fear of dying and going to the flames was all I needed to make up my mind and say that sinner's prayer. My options once presented to me this way were pretty dire: hell and everlasting torment or heaven and everlasting bliss. That decision was instant.

Considerations here:

- I decided to be 'in' rather than 'out', rather than me being reconciled into a deep relationship with my heavenly Father (2 Cor 5:18).
- I certainly did not exercise my free choice; rather I fearfully succumbed to what was hardly a 'choice'.
- I did this contractually without any consideration of a covenantal relationship; it seemed the best option given the circumstances. Subsequently, I am still disconnected from the relationship with my heavenly Father.
- It left me a little nervous about Father God, happy with Jesus, but very unsure about where to from here? This set me up for a life long struggle to be good enough to be included in a relationship with my heavenly Father.
- It was all about certainty after death, ie. Heaven, and so making sure I did 'right' was extremely high on my agenda, although I often had long seasons of doing my own thing until someone reminded me. The end goal was to keep my 'getting into heaven card' rather than understanding eternal life has started now (John 17:3), I am already seated in heavenly places (Eph 2:6) and I have full access to an intimate embrace now because of my relationship with my heavenly Father (Heb 4:16).
- The pursuit of intimacy with God never featured, rather the pursuit of keeping Him happy so I didn't lose my salvation. Once again, keeping me disconnected.

2. God killed Jesus

All through the centuries there was blood sacrifice; blood was spilt to cover sin. To be fair, this is a rather meaty subject and one I most definitely could not do justice to here. However, let me say that every pagan festival also requires a sacrifice, yes, a blood sacrifice. This kind of practice is to demons though. Life is in the blood and when you actively choose to sacrifice a living creature to demons, it increases their power and authority. To think God requires sacrifice in this way would make our loving Heavenly Father belong to the same camp as the demonic world. We would have to wrongly assume that God needs more power, etc. Of course this is ludicrous, as He is the creator of all and the sustainer of all, in Him all things consist and have their being, He created all things visible and invisible, He holds all things together and He is the beginning and the end of all things (Col 1:15-17).

So then why would a sacrifice be needed? Good question and a more substantial answer is needed here as I mentioned earlier, which I am unable to unpack right now. However, let me say that the practice of humanity was such and our God, who honours free choice, steps into our culture, steps into our lives covenantally (remember Hosea and Gomer) and transforms us as we respond to Him. He also demonstrates the ways of the kingdom, the culture of heaven which is Light, Life and Love. So, did God kill Jesus?

Considerations here:

- God was in Jesus reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19 and Col 1:19-20). If God was in Jesus as scripture says, then He would have had to kill himself! So no, God did not kill Jesus.
- God cannot kill 'a part' of Himself (ie. Jesus) because He, (*Elohim*) is Father, Son and Holy Spirit (1 Cor 8:6). God is one, He is not separate, but one.

3. God could not look at you because of sin

God's wrath against evil and sin needed to be satisfied. As with the statement "God killed His only begotten son Jesus, therefore killing Himself" which is incorrect, we need to understand what God's wrath is and what it is against? To do this let me tell you a story of a man, a loving father and his son, similar to what Jesus did with His parable of the prodigal son.

A father raises two sons and has the best relationship with them, but over time one of the sons begins to mix with his university mates, begins to question his father's beliefs. And so over time the son walks away from his father's 'ways' adopting new 'ways' of living life. As time continues the son, no longer deeply connected with his father, now with different values and culture, is living a very different life. The other son however is with the father, living connected with the same values and culture.

Our western gospel interprets this scenario the following way. The father disowns his wayward son, casts him out and wants nothing to do with him because he is sinful and cannot come close to him because he is holy. Then the father comes up with a plan: He sends his holy, righteous son as a sacrificial scapegoat, and punishes him by beating him and ultimately killing him

so that the wrath he had for the wayward son is somehow appeased. He now is able to accept the wayward son, should the son come to his senses and accept his brother's ultimate sacrifice of death.

I don't know about you but I have always struggled to fully understand that. How do you reconcile that a loving Father by killing his only son, a son who is righteous and pure, somehow appeases His wrath; a wrath against sin that has to be satisfied? What is so loving about that? How does that even make sense? What kind of God is that? Anyone I know in this natural life that did such a thing so that their 'anger' or 'wrath' could be satisfied would be a monster. **God is no monster, God is love (1 John 4:8) and therefore God is a lover. God's wrath is against the sin not the person.** Should the father's son come to his senses and come home (free choice), surely the father would embrace him, yup, sounds like Jesus' parable to me.

I know, what about Isaiah 53? What about Jesus crying out, "My God why have you forsaken me?" I have looked at Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 repeatedly. My friend and work colleague James Thompson put it like this:

¹Jesus on the cross said, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34). These words are taken from Psalm 22 verse 1.

This passage prophetically foretells the scene of the cross.

- It predicts people mocking Jesus (v7)
- Jesus being thirsty (v15)
- Jesus hands and feet being pierced (v16) and
- Soldiers gambling for His clothes (v18)

At first glance it does look like Jesus has been abandoned. After all, He did say, “God! Why did you abandon me?” But as we read on through the Psalm we read something interesting...

“He (God) has not hidden His face from Him but has listened to His cry for help” (v24). Throughout the New Testament we are reminded of the faithfulness of Jesus. We read that Jesus is a faithful high priest who intercedes for us (read Hebrews). This lines up perfectly with the prophetic picture of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. In Isaiah 53:6 we are told that the iniquities (perversity, depravity, darkness) of the world were laid on Jesus. The prophet uses two main pictures to describe how these things came upon Jesus.

- The first is “plagued” (v4 and 8) - but note that is often mistranslated to mean punished when is used as plagued every other time in the OT. The idea is that Jesus was infected with our sin-sickness. This is how Jesus also describes sin in the gospel accounts.
- The second is a word *pâga* is simply translated as “laid” in verse 6. However this word does not go far enough in English. This same word is used later in verse 12 to mean “intercession” or praying on others’ behalf.

Here we see what happened to Jesus on the cross. Jesus experienced our sin-sickness, our darkness and despair as He died upon the cross. He was plagued by our sin. But it wasn’t His. This darkness was laid on Him as a prayer burden. A burden we could not carry. But Jesus took it on Himself and defeated it for us.

His declaration of Psalm 22:1 from the cross was saying that He felt our pain. He experienced what we go through with our fallen worldview. Yet, instead of succumbing to the darkness, He took it to the Father in faith. Just as Psalm 22 verse 1 and the predictive verses were fulfilled, so was verse 24. Jesus fully experienced our pain and darkness yet remained faithful. Just as we can carry a prayer burden to the Father on our friend's behalf, Jesus carried our burden away so we don't need to.

Considerations here:

- God's wrath is against the lies we have come to believe that have taken us away from Him (Col 1:21 - enemies in your own minds against God).
- Jesus took on the burden of sin (*harmatia* - missing the mark) (2 Cor 5:21). Jesus interceded for us; He took away the barrier keeping us from the Father.
- Jesus reconciled us back to His Father and our Father.

I have traveled to India many times over the past 16 years; it is a diverse land with a massive population and an incredible history. The culture there is very different to ours here in the west and therefore, it takes a while to fully comprehend the differences. Before one of my trips a few years ago, a friend prophesied that I would receive a great revelation, something I had never seen before. I believe it was this that I write about here, the true gospel, the good news of the kingdom of God. I learnt that when a westerner preaches their western gospel message as I've spoken of (penal substitution); they will never ever get true new converts. They will only ever be perceived as talking about another 'god' because the culture in India is polytheist and every

god requires a sacrifice, it's simply a way of life there. Therefore, when we present our western gospel message as a God who requires sacrifice and Jesus was the sacrifice, they simply say oh yeah, I'll take Jesus as one of my many gods.

But when your message is about a God that has never forsaken or banished you, a God who has pursued you all of your life, a God who loves you and wants to be close to you well, that is extremely good news to an Indian and every person then wants to listen! Every god in India requires a sacrifice (demon god that is), with the promise of a better future life, a life after death that is superior to this current life. However, when we reread the scripture with a new understanding that God is a friend and a lover, a God who wants His children back, back into a close intimate relationship, then we see that future life, eternal life starts now because our lives are reconciled to Him. In India when you preach this, they come out of slavery, creativity goes to a new level, superstition falls away and people begin to truly live. **This is good news, the good news of the kingdom, Jesus' Kingdom now. Reconciliation to our heavenly Father, inclusion and home once again.**

God stepped into humanity, taking on human flesh, and whilst honouring my free choice He befriended me, defeated death and anything that stood in the way of me fully knowing Him (as my heavenly Father). Jesus then invites me to a banqueting table and all I need do is RSVP. This is really good news! This is the true Gospel.

2 Corinthians 3:18

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

The Heart Journey

What is the 'Heart Journey'? And where does this fit into what I am talking about? For some it may bring up thoughts like 'inner healing', maybe a Sozo, a cleansing stream or one of the many 'products' the western church has come up with to deal with the human condition. For me, **the heart journey is simply the transformation process of our inner cultures from where we find ourselves currently, to that of kingdom.** More succinctly, the journey of transformation into the image of Christ ie. from "glory to glory", a journey of constant decisions to put off your false self and put on the new (Eph 4:22-24).

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."

2 Corinthians 3:18

Scripture calls this journey 'the journey of salvation' (Philippians 2:12), 'the journey of sanctification' (*hagiosmos* - set apart) (1 Peter 1:2). Paul writes that we are to 'renew' our minds (Romans 12:2), choose to 'put on' the kingdom and 'put off' the ways of the world (Ephesians 4 & Colossians 3). **Either way the heart journey is in essence a cultural makeover so that we think like our heavenly Father thinks, doing life or rather processing life like Jesus did and therefore, living like Jesus modelled for us.**

Obviously, once again, this is a huge topic and one we may struggle to get our heads around initially - especially when you come to understand the sub-conscious mind (heart) along with worldview formations it has learnt from childhood, as well as the understanding that the heart is a gate through which all spirit life flows, ouch!

Suffice as to say, what vehicle would humanity need to journey this transformation?

If we jotted down some thoughts around this and what spaces we may need, they may include:

- A space where you could be authentic
- A space where you could take off your mask off and be vulnerable
- A space of validation and not judgment

- A space where it is about you and the condition of your heart, where you are accepted and loved unconditionally
- A space where relational equity is valued, where interactions are of a covenantal nature rather than a contractual one
- A space where your voice is heard, valued. Where you felt included.

The list could go on. So if we agree with scripture that we are required to embrace the kingdom, become a nation of priests or be transformed (metamorphosis) into the image of Christ, then where would one go to experience this? Most would not go to a Sunday church meeting, but they would go to a FAMILY meeting.

Families are messy but they embrace children because there is no better place to go for them, there is love, intimacy, acceptance, etc. Jesus modelled this so well for us, He was attentive, gentle but firm. He always went to the heart of the matter; He talked about the heart all the time, starting His ministry quoting Isaiah 61,

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”

Isaiah 61:1

Yes, this is salvation (sozo), but then what is salvation? Is salvation a journey from malfunctioning (dysfunction) to becoming fully functional? Is it done over a period of time? Is it a journey or a one-off event? I never asked myself these questions in my younger years as I was told I was unacceptable to God the Father but now through Jesus was acceptable. To me salvation

was what Jesus did to reconcile me back to my heavenly Father. This is true, but it is only a small part of the truth. The heart journey is a continuum as you, in relationship with God, through your free choice, respond to letting go of your old man (culture) and embrace your new man (culture of the kingdom).

“That you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

Ephesians 4:22-24

The heart journey, the journey of salvation or the journey of sanctification is only possible if Jesus is truly at the centre of your life. What I mean by this is, that each day you are pursuing a deeper more intimate connection with God, you are in love. You choose to respond to His leading. You talk to Him 24/7. You value exposure, walking in the light with no hiddenness. The heart journey is NOT optional it is inevitable, it is your makeover journey from darkness (hiddenness) to light, from death to life and from disconnection to love. Embrace it!

A personal little piece to explain some of my own heart journey. In February 2019, I was to preach at a gathering with Paul Young (author - The Shack). As Paul got up to introduced me that day, he began to tell a story of his son. He loves to tell stories and so on he went. Paul spoke of his son who felt he did not belong and the journey he went on until he realised he not only belonged but was safe, included and home. Paul then looked at me with such compassion as he handed me the microphone, he hugged me and said, “Gary you belong”.

What a moment that was for me, I felt seen, understood, loved and overwhelmingly bold and all in a split moment. It was like my heavenly Father was embracing, endorsing and encouraging me to share my testimony and so I did. I spoke of that dreadful and yet defining day in my life that changed me forever (some of you know my testimony).

My friend David Tensen was in the front row seated next to Paul. You see David is the reason I am still functional today, he helped me in my darkest moments to rediscover the light, to rediscover what it is really all about and to clean up the mess inside my heart that I had unknowingly carried around my entire life. I was unknowingly driven for all the wrong reasons until those wheels drove me into the wall. After preaching on the heart journey for so many years, I actually began to understand what I was indeed preaching about for the first time, first hand! As I was sharing through some tears, Dave wrote this poem. He shared it immediately after I was done talking, it really touched my heart it is a beautiful poem.

A blessing for the HEART journey - David Tensen

*Today, fellow fallers,
recoverers, rescuers,
winners, losers,
famous and infamous,
I bless you.*

*The runners and the lame,
the bankrupt and billionaires,
the saints and sinners,
the lost and lonely,
I bless you.*

*I bless you with knowing
that the journey of a thousand steps
will be paved by
potholes,
sinkholes,
assholes,
and whatever
it takes to make
you whole.
Because you are human.*

*I bless you with knowing
that the invitation
to face the world
with an unveiled face
may be done at your pace,
or never at all.
Because it's an invitation.*

*But know this:
By love and choice
Trinity's unmasked face
shines upon you
and is gracious to you.
Trinity lifts up their faces towards you
and offers you peace.
Because you belong.²*

² 'The Wrestle - poems on divine disappointment & discover', 2020, David Tensen

John 17:20-21

**“I’m praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in me. Because of them and their witness about me. The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you”
(The Message Translation)**

Family, God's Design

The word family has been used in so many contexts over the millennia that I'd like to define it from the outset. Most current definitions denote people who are related through blood or marriage. The Latin origin of the word actually refers to the servants of a household, 'famulus', which then became 'familia' or household servants. 'Family' as we know it is a late Middle English definition. For our purposes, we are going to go further back, to the persons from whom all families have been formed, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. What does the relationship between Father God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit teach us about family?

Let's begin with some questions. Firstly, how do we think about the Trinity? Elohim? Are they in a hierarchical structure with the Father at the top, the Son in a subservient position and the Holy Spirit floating around somewhere in between? Or, are they equal participants in the Godhead, with different roles or functions? Let's take a look at the words of Jesus:

"I'm praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in me. Because of them and their witness about me. The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you"

John 17:20-21 The Message

A good friend of mine, Jesudian Silvester has developed the helpful image of the Godhead on an equal plain, holding hands, with us at the centre (*perichoresis*). We become one with them, even as they are one. We can think of the three persons of the Godhead as different expressions or manifestations of the one identity, God. They are in constant relationship. Each member of the Godhead is equally God, contributing uniquely to the whole. They have always been together. They are the ultimate Family; they exude life itself, zoe life.

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."

Ephesians 3:14-19 NASB

This passage gives us not only the confirmation that it is from God that every family, tribe and nation derives its name, but that each member of the Trinity is contributing to the family. The Father grants us strength and power through His Spirit, so that Christ may dwell richly in us. Each member of the Three-In-One glorifies and supports the others and all for our benefit.

As Timothy J Keller so eloquently puts it in his book, *King's Cross*, "The Father, the Son and the Spirit are each centering on the others, adoring and serving them. And because the Father, Son, and Spirit are giving glorifying love to one another, God is infinitely, profoundly happy." Think about this: If you find somebody you adore, someone for whom you would do anything, and you discover that this person feels the same way about you, does that feel good? It's sublime! That's what God has been enjoying for all eternity. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are pouring love and joy and adoration into the other, each one serving the other. They are infinitely seeking one another's glory, and so God is infinitely happy.

We are made in the image of this glorious, equal, other-centred family. **What we understand of God and how we relate to the persons of the Godhead will naturally determine how we relate and flow in the relationships around us.** In our society however, the context for family centres around spouses and children, moving out toward the extended family, community and more broadly, the nation. But I believe the model for family has to be the Trinity, each member acting out of love for the others, together working towards a unified purpose. After all, no person in the Trinity insists that the others revolve around them.

Within marriage each participant is unique and should be able to develop as an individual. The difference is that they now do it within the context of marriage. If one dominates in the relationship, or there is co-dependency, the true identity

of that marriage will be lost and the people within it will be diminished. **In its intended and purest outworking, marriage will embrace and celebrate the uniqueness of the two and together they will create an identity that is greater than the sum of their parts.** In this union, there is no room for hierarchy, but for mutual respect and a coming together for a common purpose. The individuals should flourish within the framework of marriage, each working out of love for the support and betterment of the other. It is into this oneness that children are to be born, raised and nurtured to maturity.

So where do children fit in this picture?

While the union of marriage reflects the union of the Godhead and is the perfect image and recipe for family and community, the reality is often very far from this. Couples and families struggle to flourish in a self-absorbed, task-oriented society where people are defined by what they do, rather than who they are and the uniqueness they bring to the world. It is interesting to note that the preoccupation with task and 'being defined by what we do' is partly rooted in the Industrial Revolution. Before the Industrial Revolution, many worked in family businesses, with family playing a far more central role in their lives. With the rise of corporations, requiring workers to be task focused to ensure output and therefore success, generations found themselves as being little more than a cog in the wheel of industry.

Having children can also be something people just 'do' out of tradition or some unspoken obligation. It's easy, therefore, to fall into the trap of simply 'getting things done', or being task oriented, when it comes our families. Oftentimes the easiest way of doing tasks efficiently is to establish a hierarchy. **In a hierarchical environment, children are quick to learn who is in charge of resources like time and money in order to get their needs met. Time and money become a source of**

power and control. Children are tempted in a task-oriented atmosphere to take control, challenge authority and ‘be the boss’ so they can determine how the resources are allocated. Even though many family decisions revolve around time and money, to God who is the Alpha and Omega all resources are in abundance. God’s emphasis has always been on relationship rather than resources. Jesus does not require us to do anything in order to be provided for, but at the same time he is ecstatic about the tasks to which we set our hand, because he loves who we are and what we bring through our unique, God-given personalities.

In a context where relationship is of primary importance and ‘getting things done’ is secondary, everyone is valued for who they are and what they bring to the family, rather than for what they do. This automatically removes the need for hierarchy in order to ‘get things done’. The individual members of the family will have different functions within the family in order for the family unit to function effectively, but it is done in the context of mutually self-giving love.

When children grow up in this environment, they are free to develop into themselves rather than into an image of their parent’s making. Parents are free to focus on empowering their children rather than making clones of themselves or living vicariously through them. **This is an environment where uniqueness and individuality can flourish, where parents are equippers and enablers. It is a place where children can go on a journey of the heart.** It is a place where they can dream with God and learn to walk in the freedom that Jesus offers.

In this environment, family members champion each other. It is a place where the development of people is not a movement through a vertical hierarchy, but a horizontal expansion of love and uniqueness. Within a healthy family the unique identity of

each person is allowed and encouraged to develop. God is, as a triune being, our perfect example of completely individual identities being expressed, with each member joyfully pursuing the best for the others.

Where and how we derive our identity is particularly important when it comes to understanding how the family structure can be established in a community context. In a society where self is glorified and ‘we are what we do’, we must ask ourselves where we derive our identity and worth. Is it found in the work that we do? Is it tied up with the position we hold in an organisation? Or do we derive worth and identity from our gifting and assignments? While we would all love to answer differently, the truth is that most people spend more time and energy at work than they do with their families. So, unless this priority is resisted in our minds, it is our careers and workplaces that have the greatest potential to define our identity. What is the most common question one asks a new person that he or she meets? “So, what do you do?” It is the sad reality that what we DO has defined us more than who we ARE.

This has implications for our families, but also our communities and nations. When people apply their task-oriented mindsets to their families, communities and churches, we end up with hierarchies building identities and tasks measuring worth. This conflicts with Jesus words:

“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.”

Matthew 11:29-30 The Message

The freedom conveyed in Matthew is in stark contrast to the pressure attached to the task-oriented life. All of this is not to

say that there are not tasks that need to be done in order for a couple, family, community, or nation to function properly. But I would question the motivation behind the tasks. Are they born out of relationship and a desire to see others become all that they can be? Or, are they driven by the need to find and establish our own identity and worth? Are families primarily driven to do things or are they primarily driven to be places of nurture and development? Are church families gathered to fulfill the purposes of God or are they primarily to display the Nature of God? In both cases there is a be element and a do element but without careful intentionality, the do has the potential to overrun the be.

Graham Cooke says that many Christians operate two rungs above the state of their development. This means they are punching above the weight of their own spiritual maturity. It also means we are far more likely to engage in getting purposes fulfilled than developing the nature of God in our lives. When this state of being infiltrates our family relationships, we are in danger of creating an atmosphere absent of the very things we crave; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The Message Translation puts it beautifully:

“But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.”

Galatians 5:22-23 The Message

Family matters. It is at the heart of the Godhead. Father, Jesus and Holy Spirit have invited us into the centre of their eternal dance. How cool is that?

As C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*:

“What does it all matter? It matters more than anything else in the world. The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us... (joy, power, peace, eternal life) are a great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very centre of reality.”

The final word goes to Paul as inspired by Holy Spirit,

“The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit. Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, ‘I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand,’ that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, ‘I am not part of the body because I am not an eye,’ would that make it any less a part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything? But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you.’ The head can’t say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you.’ In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So

God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it."

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 NLT

"He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love."

Ephesians 4:16 NLT

The Local Church and Leadership

A church community should look like a family in every aspect if it is to reflect the nature of God. There should be no governing boards or hierarchy in any form whatsoever. The local church is not a business; it is for all intents and purposes a loving, connected, and intimate *family*. It is a family of multiplication and not addition; the nurturing and inclusion of one relationship at a time is the primary focus, not growth in numbers, each person matters. The focus is around intimacy and connection with one another and the Father of the family, God. The goal is to develop each member into his or her own unique call and assignment from Daddy (abba) God. The goal is to allow each person to *belong*, before they have any need to believe or behave a certain way.

When we look at the leadership of the local community, it is imperative that the entire framework be based purely on family. Family is close to God's heart. From the beginning, when God created man, He said, "It is not good for man to be alone," and so He created woman as a "helper comparable to him" (Genesis 2:18). Interestingly the word 'comparable' is *neged* meaning 'part opposite'. Then He blessed them and told them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth," (Genesis 1:28). Even after they missed the mark and fell into sin, God continued with His plan for families, and even spoke prophetically of the salvation that would come through the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15). Later, after the Flood, He reiterated His plan to Noah and his sons, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth," (Genesis 9:1). God continued His plan when He chose Abraham and miraculously gave him a son in his old age (Genesis 21). And so it continues, all the way down to the "fullness of time, when He sent forth His Son" (Galatians 4:4) to be born in human flesh (God incarnate), to be raised by parents and to live and to die to reconcile the people He Himself had created.

Throughout the ages, God's plan and desire has always been for parents to raise up their children to know and love Him and walk in His ways. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, God told the Israelites to keep His commands in their hearts and to teach them diligently to their children, talking of the commandments throughout the day in every circumstance of life.

The family of God looks like a family with a Father (God) from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named (Ephesians 3:15). But, what does Godly leadership of that family look like?

"To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons..."

Philippians 1:1 NASB

This is to say, with analysis of the Greek:

“To all the *hagios* (morally blameless/saints) in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the *episkopos* (overseers) and *diakonos* (servants/deacons)...”

Paul is addressing three groups within the local church community. The first is everyone in the community who are in Christ Jesus (saints). The second is the oversight (leaders) of the community, and the third group are those serving (assisting the leaders) in the church community. **We do not see ‘governing boards’ as we would see in the business world and some churches, and we do not see ‘hierarchy’ either; we see family.** In both the Timothy and Titus letters where Paul is asking Timothy (in Ephesus/Asia Minor) and Titus (in Crete) to appoint leaders; his language is family, parents (*episkopos*).

As clarification, it is important that we understand what the term elders means in our Bible translations. We see the following: Rulers/Elders (*Presbyteros*); Shepherds (*Poimaino*); Overseers (*Episkopos*); Steward (*Oikonomos*). All these terms describing the function of the elders, are used interchangeably.

The emphasis is on leaders of family (fathers and mothers) who are:

- **Experienced** (*Presbyteros*) - seniors with life experience, grandfather
- **Shepherds** (*Poimaino*) - protectors, persons who nurture, mother
- **Overseers** (*Episkopos*) - guardians, persons who provide, protect, father
- **Stewards** (*Oikonomos*) - managers of household affairs, parents
- **Deacons** (*Diakonos*) - servants

*“So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “**Bosko** (keep/feed) My lambs.” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “**Poimaino** (tend/nuture) My sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Bosko (keep/feed) My sheep.”*

John 21:15-17 with Greek interlinear

Jesus' heart is for people who do not have a shepherd, nurturer or parent to guide them. Therefore He asks Peter in this redemptive moment to keep, feed and nurture His sheep.

*“The **Presbyteros** (elders) who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow **Sympresbyteros** (co-elder) and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: **Poimaino** (shepherd) the flock of God which is among you, serving as **Episkopeo** (overseers), not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief **Archipoimen** (shepherd) appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”*

1 Peter 5:2-4 with Greek interlinear

Peter, when addressing leaders, continues with the same heart Jesus had by using similar language when talking about church elders or oversight.

*"It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of **Episkope** (overseer), it is a fine work he desires to do. An **Episkopos** (overseer), then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, and able to teach."*

Timothy 3:1-2 NASB with Greek interlinear

Paul's language is family, with qualified parents who are doing a great job with their individual families and community life in general. Here, Episkopos means parent, guardian or overseer.

*"For this reason I left you in Crete that you would set in order what remains and appoint **Presbyteros** (elders) in every city as I directed you."*

Titus 1:5 NASB with Greek interlinear

*"For the **Episkopos** (overseer) must be above reproach as God's **Oikonomos** (steward), not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain."*

Titus 1:7 NASB with Greek interlinear

Paul writes using the language 'experienced parents' (*Presbyteros*) and then continues in verse 7 to say 'parent, guardian or overseer' (*Episkopos*), following with the word 'steward' (*Oikonomos*). Here we see clearly the model of family: parents parenting sons and daughters, and managing household affairs.

Genesis 1:26-27

26 Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” **27** God created man in His *own* image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

God and His Family

We know artists by their most renowned creations: Leonardo de Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Michelangelo's *ceiling of the Sistine Chapel*, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, Bono's *I still haven't found what I'm looking for*, Walt Disney's *Mickey Mouse*. Each masterpiece reveals something of its creator. The same is true of God. We catch a glimpse of the Artist at work by reading the first two chapters of Genesis. He spoke galaxies into existence, formed the mountains, filled the oceans, and planted forests with a magnificent range of colour and variety. His playful, imaginative personality is evident in creatures such as humming birds, ostriches and echidnas. But **the masterpiece that reveals more about God than anything else is *the family*.**

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’. God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

Genesis 1:26-27

It is always important to look in scripture to where a thought is first introduced, because you will always find that God will build upon that thought as the scripture unfolds. The first mention of community in scripture is when God said let *Us* make man in *Our* image and likeness. The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit in community with one another decided to make mankind just like them.

God then proceeds to make mankind, spirit first, and then He puts mankind's spirit into an earth suit He made from the red earth, *adamah*.

“And the Lord God formed mankind of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”

Genesis 2:7

God breathed into mankind's nostrils the breath of life, הַנְּשָׁמָה *nešâmâ* meaning the spirit of mankind. Here we see God completing His intent, to make us exactly like Him. Like Father, like son. **Adam, the first of mankind was exactly like him: masculine and feminine in one body.**

“He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created.”

Genesis 5:2

With the woman inside the man, He then puts the man to sleep and fashions the woman from the rib as the English translation says. The man awakens, looks at the woman who was taken out of him and says, “She is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:23-24). We then see Adam and Eve having children, reproducing after their own kind in the image of God, Cain and then Abel (Genesis 4). They were the first family in community living on earth in God’s image and likeness - a family.

Two essential elements of family, marriage and parenthood, reveal God’s character unlike anything else in Creation. It is important to understand that creation reveals a creative process. Day one to day six is a sequential process whereby God creates in a unique order. As a married man of over 37 years and a father of two amazing young adult men, I understand that throughout life there are many necessary seasons. I created safe places to provide for my family, enabling my two boys to grow up healthily so that they could become the men they are today. **God designed us to live in family. The love between a husband and wife provides a glimpse of Christ’s passionate devotion to us as His bride.** In the same way, the difficulties of parenthood offer a compelling picture of God’s tenderness and patience toward us as His children.

Family does more than reflect God’s character. It provides a safe place where children can experience God’s love through their parents and learn how to love other people. Even Christ was born within the context of a family. ‘God in the flesh’ submitted to an earthly Mum and Dad to model what it means to honour parents and to benefit from their loving direction. It was within the nurturing care of His earthly family that, “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men” (Luke 2:52). Our children need to know that God has a special purpose for placing them within a family.

Successful Parents Make Successful Leaders

I believe there is a great need for spiritual fathers and mothers to be role models for others to follow and imitate in life. Lack of 'Godly parents' is one of the greatest deficiencies we have in the Body of Christ and society as a whole. I believe there is a direct correlation between disintegrating families and growing immorality, unethical behaviour and corruption. Divorce is skyrocketing and there is rebellion rising in the Church. Congregations are splitting continually. I am certain this is the result of a lack of parenting. **We have many great preachers, fantastic singers, awesome teachers, but very few parents.** Fathers and mothers are difficult to find because parenting has more to do with care than with charisma. It has more to do with responsibility than with performance. It has more to do with leadership, accountability and love than with fame, exposure and glory. Parenting requires a commitment to nurturing and developing others rather than using and benefiting **from** others.

In the Body of Christ these days, there seems to be a tremendous pursuit of titles. Folk pursue the title of apostle, prophet and evangelist, but we are in dire need of spiritual fathers and mothers more than any of these 'positions'. We have very few people who are willing to lay their lives down for the sake of the development of other people. From observation, **many leaders today have not been properly parented and therefore are struggling to be good parents themselves.** My hope is that there will be fathers and mothers who will be strong enough in character to rebuke, correct and restore sanity to the people in leadership positions who have not been parented.

To be a good parent is not lining folk up and preaching at them week after week. The difference between preaching and teaching is very important to understand. To preach means 'to declare, to pronounce or announce'. To teach means 'to train and instruct for change'. Preaching doesn't change people. Preaching may attract, give information, alert people, even convict people but teaching brings understanding and you cannot change until you understand. You cannot grow until you have information. That is why Jesus *taught* the disciples. He preached to the multitudes, but He *taught* His disciples; He parented them by modelling life to them. He announced the Kingdom to the multitudes, but He *taught* the Kingdom to His disciples.

Looking at Jesus as an example of not only an ambassador for the kingdom but also as a parent to His disciples, there are a number of interesting things we can observe:

- Jesus as God laid down His life for everyone. He prioritised others over himself
- Jesus as God did life with His disciples. He included them in His day-to-day journey

- Jesus as God was tender towards His disciples. He listened and made time for them
- Jesus as God knew His disciples - their uniqueness, quirks, likes and dislikes
- Jesus as God loved His disciples and prepared them for their futures and destinies
- Jesus as God protected His disciples, providing for them, and giving them a hope and a future.

There are many more observations we could make but one thing is for certain: Jesus was a good parent. When He finally left His disciples after His resurrection they knew who He was and who they were as a result. With their identity intact as children of God, they were a prepared group of men and women, full of purpose, with a great future and a destiny. This is how we are to lead. **To be a great kingdom leader you must influence others but more importantly, like Jesus, you need to parent people: transform them from orphans to sons of God, make them secure in their identity and unique call, train and equip them so that they can be just like Him.**

Elders - Leaders

It is important that we understand what the term 'elders' means in our Bible translations. We see many words for leaders in the New Testament: Rulers/Elders (*Presbyteros*), Shepherds (*Poimaino*), Overseers (*Episkopos*), Steward (*Oikonomos*). Most theologians would see these terms describing the function of the elders as interchangeable.

Notice once again the emphasis of leaders being part of a family:

- **Experienced** (*Presbyteros*) - seniors with life experience, grandfather
- **Shepherds** (*Poimaino*) - protectors, persons who nurture, mother
- **Overseers** (*Episkopos*) - guardians, persons who provide, protect, father
- **Stewards** (*Oikonomos*) - managers of household affairs, parents
- **Deacons** (*Diakonos*) - servants

The Office of an Elder

A church elder is a man called by God together with his wife to be overseers, caring and nurturing people (parents).

According to the Bible, elders are to be known for their prayer life (1 Timothy 2:8), modelling Christ-like service (Matthew 20:26-28; 1 Peter 5:2) and being practically responsible in their homes, as well as in the workplace (1 Timothy 3:4-7).

The Qualifications of an Elder

The qualifications of elders are laid out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. These lists are nearly identical. There are two things about these lists that I would like to bring to your attention.

First, these lists are primarily about men living or modelling effective lives. Second, these lists are in large part tied to a man's role as a good father in his home with his family and in his world with his neighbours and coworkers.

Notice that it never mentions a woman, the wife of but one husband, or a woman managing her home well - it talks about men. I do not believe what some do, that God is saying here only men can be elders. God is not for one gender against the other, or one gender being more prominent or dominant than the other. Many would look at scriptures like 1 Timothy 2:9-15 and conclude that when an elder has a wife, she is not involved in the task of her husband's eldership. This is ludicrous to me since the scriptures definitely show Jesus empowering women. My observation of women in scripture shows them leading communities with authority and power. Miriam, Deborah and Huldah in the Old Testament and Tabitha, Euodia, Syntyche, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia in the New Testament all are

powerful, formidable women leading and demonstrating parenthood in their communities.

I believe God is calling a couple - male and female - to truly represent Him, His image and likeness as parents. I do not see an unmarried person being an elder whether they are male or female. To qualify as an elder there is a man and a woman leading a home well, raising their children well, and having a good reputation in the church community as well as the broader community: an eldership *couple*. We might say a couple who are modelling parenting in a Godly way. There are exceptions* (see my last comment).

If we look at the words describing an elder in the Bible, knowing they're interchangeable, we could describe an elder as: an older more experienced person who protects, cares for and nurtures people, a guardian, a parent, a protector, and manager of household affairs. My understanding of these descriptions leads me to believe that this cannot be a single person, but a couple. A father and mother leading in the home - fathers protecting and managing and mothers nurturing and caring.

The husband protects and provides in the home, loving and treating his wife as his own body, giving himself to her in love. The wife provides, nurtures, cherishes and guides in the home, honouring and working alongside (not under) and submitting to her husband in love, mirroring the picture of Jesus and the church (Ephesians 5:22-23). This model shows a team where two people, a man and a woman, become one. God made man in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:27), and that man was Adam (Hebrew - *adamah*, red earth). The man was perfectly made in the likeness of God both male and female. When Adam took his first breath and stood up, the woman was inside him, though not yet formed. When God took his rib (Hebrew - *sé'lá*, female chamber) and made the woman, Adam looked at her

and said, “She is to be called woman because she is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh... we will become one.” God’s image is male and female, one flesh, co-existing, each helping the other in harmony to lead the home. Each bringing their own unique gifts and talents together to make a home and to raise and train children (into young adults) in their identity and in the way they should go, preparing them for life. In this way the Church is built; fathers making sons in the likeness of God, creating healthy offspring who become community builders and world changers.

* I think it is important to note that I understand the difference between the ideal and reality, thus I can therefore accept an unmarried or single person parenting. However, I don’t personally believe it is God’s best. This in no way disqualifies a single person to function in the office as elder but it does mean that that person will find it more difficult to do so, much like a single parent raising children on his or her own.

Church Elders and Overseers

Elder is synonymous with overseer. An overseer is one who lovingly takes care of the church like a shepherd herds his / her flock (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2). An eldership couple shepherds the flock under their care.

An Eldership Couple (called?)

This could be an area of contention as I believe God calls everyone to ‘parent’, it is not only ‘especially called people’, but rather more mature wise people. So who should we appoint as elders? (Acts 20:28). As a church community, we simply recognise what a parenting couple are already doing in caring for people. It is important to emphasise that becoming an eldership couple is not

a promotion in the church, but rather a role needed for the health and well-being of every individual within the wider community.

The Duties of an Eldership Couple according to scripture

Eldership couples fulfil many duties:

- Pray and study Scripture (Acts 6:4)
- Guard and protect (proistēmi) (1 Timothy 5:17)
- Care for people in the church (1 Peter 5:2-3)
- Give account to God for the church (Hebrews 13:17)
- Live exemplary lives (Hebrews 13:7)
- Teach correctly (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2)
- Model praying for the sick to the community (James 5:14-15)
- Teach sound doctrine and refute false teachings / protect the culture of the community (Titus 1:9)
- Work hard (1 Thessalonians 5:12)
- Lead by example / model well (1 Peter 5:1-3)
- Protect the church from false teachers (Acts 20:17-31)
- Become involved in reconciling and redeeming people to each other (Matthew 18:15-17)
- Obey local, state, and federal laws (Romans 13:1-7)
- Train and equip other parents by modelling Kingdom life for them (Ephesians 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 2:1-2).

Eldership Couples should be examined

As mentioned earlier, the community simply recognises who is modelling a parenting role. Not everyone should be appointed as an eldership couple. The men along with their wives who are to be recognised as parents to fulfil this role should be examined. I believe that elders should be appointed slowly and if necessary, removed quickly. This means that we should take our time. The

process to recognise an eldership couple, done carefully would normally take between 12 to 18 months. I would follow a very simple process, which would include examining the following:

- family life
- financial giving
- performance at work and work ethic
- relationship with people outside the church community
- service in the community
- spiritual gifts
- ministry passions
- attitude toward authority
- leadership gifts
- humility, and anything and everything else related to their salvation journey
- calling, character, courage, and competency

At the conclusion of this process I would lay hands on them along with the others in the parenting team (elders) endorsing what the Lord is already doing. (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 4:14, 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:6).

The Importance of Eldership

The issue of which fathers and mothers should lead the church as eldership couples is of extreme importance. The reputation of the gospel in the community and the health of the church are dependent upon Godly, qualified fathers and mothers who keep in step with Jesus and who can model this to the rest of the church.

If we fail as eldership couples to train and raise the next generation, then there won't be a next generation. Leadership is rare. Spiritual, Godly leadership is necessary to develop, train and release sons and daughters into their God-ordained call and destiny.

Implementing Godly Leadership

Every culture needs to interpret their unique community needs when implementing Godly leadership. This process is not to be rushed. **It is time for the modern church to realise that the time of church as a business is now over and in my opinion, should have never existed.**

Those who persist in operating churches as hierarchical businesses will be grieving Holy Spirit, who is indeed dismantling such behaviour for such a time as this. That the church would be families of believers who parent the young into their destiny is the heart of God and the only thing that will call back the many people who are leaving the church, in search of this very relational paradigm.

Some questions to consider as we journey forward:

- What should we do about unskilled partners (husband and wife), or partners who are not committed to the church community?
- It could be considered condescending in a community that is adopting the parental model, for those who are being led, who might see themselves as 'the child' in the parenting relationship. What then is the kind of language that we need to adopt that is most helpful in describing family/this loving relationship?
- How do we dismantle church boards and management structures that only manage the seen world, when what we really need are leaders that see, agree and decree the unseen world - leaders that know how to live by faith?
- How do we dismantle current leadership structures, where leaders are not spiritual parents but are more like good administrators, who frustrate Holy Spirit's plans because of their lack of calling to be parents?
- How do we locate and train parents who will train and release people?

- How do we recognise and train spiritual parents more effectively?
- How can we create Godly family structures that are releasing flat structures instead of hierarchical ones?
- How do we create spaces of trust between parents, where they can be themselves and find their own unique expression, thereby celebrating the diversity God has created in them?
- How do we release single individuals who are called to father or mother into their call?
- How do we build a currency of trust within our community, where leaders can model this trust?
- How do we create transparency or a culture of vulnerability within our parenting teams?
- How do we present the Gospel message in this new covenantal way, inviting people to RSVP to a beautiful invitation rather than reciting a 'sinners prayer'?
- How does the money work to keep bills paid and people employed?

Acknowledgements

I am always grateful to the men and women God has put in my life. I see them as 'gifts from God', all of them, yes even the ones that have, or continue to 'irritate' me. I am different today because of them. I am also grateful to the folk that have loved me even when it was difficult to do so, these are my closest. They never gave up, rather they pursued a deeper connection, a deeper friendship and understanding of my heart. These folk I've allowed 'in', into my inner world, they see me and I feel loved in that place of exposure. I've built trust with them and allowed them to question the deeper parts of me. Why? Mmm, because without them true transformation is but a mere myth. And therefore, I love to thank people at the back end of every book I write. I think it is extremely important to do so, honouring them as 'gifts from God', in my salvation journey as I have already mentioned. So here we go:

Firstly, I would like to thank my wife Debbie. You have always believed in me even when the chips were down, always loved me, upheld me and honoured me. We have argued, debated and studied the ways of God for years - this book would not exist without your input.

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In particular, thank you Jesudian Silvester for starting me on a journey that has truly changed how I see my heavenly Father. Both you and Lovina are so dear to our hearts.

I would also like to thank David Tensen for writing such a great foreword. It has been wonderful partnering with both yourself and Natalie, I look forward to what unfolds for us all in the future. Paul Young, Mark Jurisic, Bruce Ollington and James Thompson for their endorsements, thanks so much guys. Let's follow Holy Spirit with all our hearts in this new season. Ann Donker you certainly are an amazing gift, thank you so much for your countless hours of editing. Asher Johnson thank you for teaching me how to communicate my thoughts in engaging people to turn the page, you are a legend. Andee Sellman thank you for your input and thoughts around family. My team, all of you at Friends First you are the best: Wayne, Rose, James, Sarah, Chris, Mariah, Tony, Teresa, Bill, Georgie, Dave, Cathy, Pete, Teresa, Glenn, Meredith, Monique and others - thank you. My motorbike riding buddies, Billy and Frank, thanks guys for all the convos.

I could go on as I think of countless other amazingly wonderful people, whom I like to call Jesus with skin on. I love people, I love the church and I am eternally grateful to the guidance of Holy Spirit as He nurtures and builds the Bride of Jesus Christ. Exciting times ahead.

God bless you.

Thankfully, Gary does not give us another organizational 'model' for the Church, but rather explores the roots and life of what it means to be in authentic relationships with one another. This little book is a powerful antidote to the poisons of performance and transactional theology in which many of us were raised. Wrestle with the ideas; you are worth the work.

- Paul Young, Author of *The Shack*, *Crossroads*, *Eve* and *Lies We Believe About God*

You hold in your hand a book that will either affirm or frustrate your theology, thoughts and intuitions on where we find ourselves today. It ends with Gary asking a myriad of exceptional questions, inviting relational discussion. And this, in my opinion, is the kind of psychologically safe, critical thinking the church needs today.

- David Tensen, Author of *The Wrestle*



Gary Grant

Born in Harare, Zimbabwe and educated in South Africa it was at age of seventeen in the midst of a revival movement in the 1980's that Gary encountered God. As a result the miraculous power of God has been a constant throughout his adult life shaping Gary into who is today. In 1994 Gary along with his family immigrated to Australia with a passion to establish strong communities of faith. Gary alongside his wife Debbie are currently the senior leaders of the Friends First community in Melbourne. They have travelled extensively preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom message in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Korea and India. They have two grown children; Joel married to Lana and David married to Dahna, and now a beautiful grand-daughter Emily.

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