

I don't need to produce a barrage of statistics to demonstrate that the church in New Zealand is decreasing in numbers heralding cries of how irrelevant the church is to society. There are witch hunts happening in many churches as they try find the root of the problem and route it out to burn it at the stake. And usually the issues boil down to style—we are full of boring conservative prudes! We aren't dynamic and vibrant enough. So we set about equipping ourselves for battle by proving just how cutting edge we can be by emulating the latest fads under a Christian banner. Cynical. You bet.

But look at how the churches that are cutting edge are so big and they use technology and are so relevant with their music!

In all the megachurches in the States where they have congregations of 1000 or more (and the slick programmes to boot) it has been shown that 85% of their growth has come from people coming from other smaller churches—like moths to the light. Does that mean they are doing something right? Us pastors like to read books by the ministers of these churches to find out what their secrets are. I got taught some of these secrets a college and I'm not going to tell you what they are because I would be giving away my strategy. Well, actually no I wouldn't because there is only one strategy that I believe is time tested and proven for people to grow, but not that great for building big churches. Honesty.

People of my generation can often accuse the church of being irrelevant. And they have been leaving the church in droves to become what is known as the “Churchless faith.” Leaving those of us left behind to feel like we are part of a massive ugly behemoth of old-school irrelevant cheesy tradition. By leaving us and saying that we are irrelevant they (in my opinion) are in danger of undermining what Jesus meant for the church to be as a community.

**We are a community of faith in Jesus
that is the light of the world
and the salt of the earth.
We are the ones who are a royal
priesthood,
full of new creations,
living in a relationship with our Creator
who transforms our minds**

**so that in deed
we summarise the entire Bible
by the one phrase :
Love God, love people.**

What a magnificent idea! What a magnificent picture of community! So why are we on the back foot here? Why are we defending ourselves against society and those who accuse us of being irrelevant? How on earth can the Gospel of Jesus Christ who restores us, who reconciles us to God, who shows undeniable the awe inspiring love of God that will let us live life to the full, how can this message be irrelevant?

I think it's because while **that's our aim, it's not our actuality.** But the thing about it is this. We don't let our failure to live the ideal be a fundamental part of how we relate with each other at church.

When we come to church we see not fragility in others but instead we hope for strength in other people. We don't see secrets. We see facades. Some things that we are hiding we are aware of, other things we are not. But I'm not sure that we see fragility. It's a bit rude to call someone a sinner. I want to suggest tonight that **it is in our fragility that we are relevant.** It is after all in our weakness that God is most powerful. But if we are hiding our weaknesses then where is the power of the Gospel?

If we are irrelevant, then it is because we are not honest.

I will be blunt. I don't really think that people who look for a church that suits them will find anything useful. Because when they find something they don't like they will leave and go to the next place. Leaving is an easy option. Because by leaving or "voting with your feet" if you like, these people are walking away from the problem. They are not solving anything, for often they will silently slip out the door without talking to anyone about it. Only a few people know exactly why they left and the grapevine begins it's work and the rumours begin to spread.

It feels like a trademark of our society that if we go somewhere and get bad service then we don't go back there. We don't write letters very often, we don't do anything really about anything, and quite rightly so

because we feel with corporations that they aren't really that interested in talking to us about our issues.

But church is different. We should feel as though we can lay a complaint and it be heard, because there is no profit at stake here. In fact Jesus even gives instructions about how to lay complaints in Matthew 18. We are meant to be able to resolve our differences, why? Because Jesus says he will be involved in the decision making process. A process designed to demonstrate love. This is called reconciliation. This is the practical outcome of the gospel. It involves grit. It involves a difficult choice to talk about our hurt. It involves commitment. Commitment to working through uncomfortable issues. Love is a choice and often it's a difficult one at that—**Love involves committing to the issues.**

One of the most staggering things about the love that is shown in marriage is that Julia did not think for a moment that when she was marrying me I was all sorted out. In fact, she knew me quite well and when we made our commitment in our vows she committed to my issues. Julia committed herself to loving me warts and all. She committed to not just loving the nice stuff like a good consumer, but she took the whole package knowing that I am a work in progress. Julia committed to my issues.

Why don't we treat Church like that? Why do we feel like there is something static about us? Why can't we be a part of the solution and not the problem? Why can't we engage with the issues of church instead of leaving? Why don't we treat our church like a work in progress, and accept that it's not perfect : actually I'm preaching to the converted here. Most of us already accept that, those who don't have probably left already.

I am not comfortable with the supermarket mentality that we are breeding in churches especially in Auckland. People are hopping from church to church trying to find something that appeals to their tastes. Where is the commitment there? Where is taking up one's cross with that? It's a hollow form of faith because at the centre of it is self, not others. **In an ideal world church is not a place where we belong, it is a place where we contribute.** And through that contribution we belong.

A consumer church mentality undermines this entire chapter in Corinthians and the one following which talks

about love. In our consumer oriented world we find it easy to 'take'. And if we don't like what we get we go somewhere else. But this is not good enough. This is self-serving not other-serving. This is not loving other people, because it places self first. And here we are absorbing culture into our own church experience. When we change our style to be relevant, we are in fact eating away at the heart of what it means to be church which is style-less. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free . . . no status symbols. Unity of diversity. And in this unity we sort out our differences.

I think that in Church, of all places in society, if we don't like something, we should be able to talk about it openly and freely. We should be able to bring our ideas and contributions to each other in love. All of our contributions if brought in love must surely be a good thing for the community as a whole. That is the heart of a church that is based on the priesthood of all believers.

But the key is love! Straight after Paul talks about the many parts of the body he goes into the love chapter that is often read at weddings. But I'm going to read it here . . .

Love is the key to the whole thing once again. God and others first. Love God and love people. If we contribute but have not love, then we are clanging gongs. Love for other people will make them equal.

We are all equal in God's eyes, why are we not in each others?

Outward homogenising. It means lumping a group of people together as being all the same. Like the phrases "Asian drivers" or criminals Jehovah's witnesses. It's putting people in boxes and assuming they are all the same. They are stripped of their identity as individuals and made into one particular type. On one hand we need to label people because it is helpful, but on another hand it is quite destructive. Our stereotypes are our own worst enemies at times. **How much do we write each other off as being youth, adults and elderly?**

Think of the great battle of the music styles! It's often as simple as the young people don't like hymns, and the old people don't like the new stuff. Poppy cock!

Some of the young people don't like hymns, and *some* of the old people don't like the new music. Our generalisations are not helpful at all. We need to learn to embrace each other's integrity and pull each other up when we sense it's going pearshaped.

In church there needs to be discussion about things like worship, but not to get your own point across, but to understand the other person's point! How often does dialogue break down because of people not listening to each other.

One of the stereo types of church is that it is irrelevant. This is held by both those who are in church and outside of church. Why is that? I think it's because we can't demonstrate community that resolves and commits to each other. **Gospel relevancy doesn't come from music styles, preaching styles or clothing styles, it comes from integrity, honesty and vulnerability.**

Ouch. And here is the rub. Do you really want to know me? Or do you want me to do my job? Do we really want to know Michael? Or do want him to just lead us in a good time of worship? Do we really want to know Peter, Carolyn, Daniel or Nigel? Or do we just want them to do their jobs well? Do we really want to know each other like Jesus knows us? Or would that be too much of a test of our practical faith, the part where we are meant to love one another as Jesus has loved us. You know, the kind of love that has dinner with prostitutes, thieves and lepers.

Boy if we knew even a few of the secrets about each other, I wonder if we would be able cope? Let's look around us. Do we see a group of sinners or is that just too presumptuous? When you look at the pastors, what do you see? How far do you think you could cope with knowing my weaknesses?

I've had a terrible week. I've let down many people because of many things and you probably didn't know that until this moment. At the end of this week, I am so painfully aware of how sinful I am, I am so aware of the burdens I carry, I am so aware of the hell that we live through every day as we all fight against what society thinks we should be, what society thinks we should like, how insecure and under-formed we are as people. I am so aware

of my own failings. So much so that I stand here not because I want to, but because I have to.

I stand here because the grace of God compels me not to give in. Not to feel unworthy of being able to speak God's word, because I stand as a sinner who immersed in grace and ironically that gives me the right to do this. Grace which is the love and mercy of God given to me even though I am a sinner. Grace is God's empowering forgiveness that I don't deserve and throw in his face all the time. But we are all ministers in the church, whether we sin or not, because it is grace and mercy that allows us to operate in the Spirit. And it's undeniable how hard that is to comprehend but there is the truth.

And I can't cope with that at times, because it feels hypocritical, but this is where the truth, the absolute core of the message of Jesus lies. I am not the man you might think I am, but that should be obvious. Who turns out to be the person you think they are when you get to know them? Superficiality is one of the greatest struggles of our time and culture. How much have we brought it into our church community life? Our assumptions about people are often what stop us from reconciling with them. Our superficiality cripples the mission of the church.

As a pastor, I will have the privilege of hearing and sharing in some of your struggles. And I will not judge you! How could I knowing who I am? But I can't help but feel that it is not just the pastor's role to share in other's sufferings and struggles, because it would be a tragedy if the only safe person in the church was the pastor.

To finish the sermon, I want us to think about the implications of the 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 here. Think about the implications both philosophical, theological and practical. I've given some thoughts, add to them yours and then lets have a dialogue about it all, in the years to come.

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B E N E D I C T I O N

You are God's servants, gifted with dreams and visions.
Upon you rests the grace of God like flames of fire.
Love and serve the Lord in the strength of the Spirit.
May the deep peace of Christ be with you,
The strong arms of God sustain you,
And the power of the Holy Spirit strengthen you in
every way.