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MALCOLM'S MARVELLOUS MONTHLY MAGASINE



Sweltering September

September gave us varied weather. What lucky people we were to plan a break down at my parents' place in the week when the hottest temperatures for years broke records.

Both my parents turned 80 this year. 1936 and all that. We threw a special family party for them both in early September. The main present was a 'love seat' we put into one of the borders. Took all day to clear the flower bed, lay flags and put up the seat - but it was worth it for two very special people!

Penny & I continued our walking theme by doing part of the the North Downs way between Canterbury and Shepherds Well - around 15 miles or more. We had an appetite that night! More on something memorable that happened that day later.

I hope September was special and that October is proving to be Oxeptional for you. Read on for more updates on what I've been up to these last 30 days. Apologies for the late production on this month's mag. Been a bit busy!

God bless,

Teaching Tips

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” Matt 4:23 NIV11

A couple more teaching tips went up this month: This month’s topics: “A Note About Quotes”, and “How to choose a commentary”. You can also hear the audio versions here, or on my website. If you have topics you’d like me to cover, please let me know. “Vital Visuals” will be coming up in October as well as other thoughts.

What We’re Reading

I’ve stepped up my reading speed this month and finished “Zeal without burnout” by Christopher Ash. I’ve posted several vlogs on the book and written Amazon & librarything.org reviews which I’ve also put on my blog. It’s in this edition of the magazine below too. More reviews are on their way: “Misreading scripture with Western eyes”; “Putting on the Wakeful One”; “Brother Roger of Taize”; “Thoughts in Solitude”; “Like Shaking Hands with God”; “God First Loved Us”; “A Philosopher’s Notes” and “BrainChains”.

How to Beat Burnout

A review of “Zeal without Burnout” (seven keys to a lifelong ministry of sustainable sacrifice) by Christopher Ash.¹

Preamble

Burnout is prevalent in church leadership.² How do we avoid it? Not by becoming lazy, but keeping ourselves, “fuelled and aflame.” (Rom 12:11 MESSAGE) Christopher provides us with seven simple but profound practical truths to maintain spiritual fervour instead of experiencing spiritual failure. These apply to those serving in Christian ministry, whether on staff of a church or not. Anyone practicing the seven keys with diligence will undoubtable find refreshment and renewed faith.

Summary

The most important aspect of maintaining spiritual health while under strain is soberness, “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” (1 Cor 10:12 NRSV) A buyer of the book is, presumably, aware enough of their challenges to recognise the symptoms of burnout either in full view or coming over the horizon. However, we are not the best

Watford ‘forest’ Service



The entire Watford church took to the road and headed into the woods. It was our first ever ‘forest’ church service. Ashridge provided the location. Joe ‘horticulture’ Cronje shared interesting insights about trees, their roots and oxygen along with spiritual connections. Scuba equipment featured along with activity sheets and building a mini-shelter. Want to know more? Come to our next one!

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[thewatfordchurch](https://www.facebook.com/thewatfordchurch). If you’d like to keep up with future events & meetings of the Watford Church then follow us on [@WatfordChurch](https://www.facebook.com/WatfordChurch). Otherwise drop me a line: mccx@mac.com

judges of our fitness and need books like this to conduct a periodic review. I recommend this as a readable and succinct book that could be best used by pulling it off the shelf at least once a year for a checkup.

Body of the Book

Christopher reminds us that sacrifice (good) is not the same as burnout (bad). Statements such as, "I would rather wear out than rust out" (George Whitfield) may be well intended, but smack too much of machismo. The problem with burnout is not simply the effect it has on us, but also on colleagues, friends and especially family. In essence, burnout is avoidable and thus is akin to selfishness. We are called to present our "bodies as a living sacrifice," (Rom 12:1 CENT) - not a dead one! It helps to remember that we are creatures of dust (Gen 2:7; Psalm 90:3; 103:14).

Having reminded us of our limitations Christopher gives us his "Seven Keys" to sustainable sacrifice:

1. We need sleep
2. We need sabbath rests
3. We need friends
4. We need inward renewal
5. A warning: beware celebrity!
6. An encouragement: it's worth it!
7. A delight: rejoice in grace, not gifts

Rather than go into detail, I'll simply add a couple of points not covered in my vlogs.

Each short chapter reviews differences between us and God. We have needs that He does not, and thus we do well to take advantage of the resources He has provided to continue to do the work He has in mind for us. Christopher carefully treads the line between self-care and selfishness.

Christian work does make you tired! Paul and others had "sleepless nights and hunger" (2 Cor 6:5 NIV11). Our writer is not advocating a comfortable cross, but a sustainable life of discipleship.

The example of a firefighter is a helpful thread throughout the book. It is not selfish to guard our devotional times any more than it is selfish for a firefighter to take a break before heading back into the fire. Remaining in the burning building beyond his or her capacity for strength or air would be folly, not faith. "To neglect sleep, sabbaths, friendships and inward renewal is not heroism but hubris."

In essence the book is concerned with self-awareness. Once we are aware, we then must be humble enough to surrender any fears or selfish ambition to God. Hard to do unless we also share our predicament with at least one trusted friend. Perhaps, if I have a criticism of this book, it would be that it lacks detail on what to do when you find yourself in a place without 'safe' people around. It's a situation I have faced in the past as do many in Christian service. I'd like to have heard Christopher's thoughts on this topic.

Conclusion

The book's brevity does not indicate a superficial treatment of this vital topic. There is enough between the pages to bless your burnout - or even prevent it in the first place. A more detailed

exploration of many of the themes can be found in the works of [Gordon MacDonald](#) (“Ordering your private world”, “Restoring your spiritual passion”, “A resilient life” and others).

Let's hope and pray that we can live out the instruction that Paul gave the Romans, and that he himself lived, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11 NIV11).

His concluding poem/prayer is a helpful meditation:

“I am – and will never, this side of the resurrection, be more than – a creature of dust. I will rest content in my creaturely weakness; I will use the means God has given me to keep going in this life while I can; I will allow myself time to sleep; I will trust him enough to take a day off each week; I will invest in friendships and not be a proud loner; I will take with gladness the inward refreshment he offers me. I will serve the Lord Jesus with a glad and restful zeal with all the energy that he works within me; but not with anxious toil, selfish ambition, the desire for the praise of people, and all the other ugly motivations that will destroy my soul. So help me God.”

Malcolm Cox

¹ thegoodbook company, hardback, 123 pages, 2016

² In the USA it is estimated that some 1500 people leave pastoral ministry each month due to burnout, conflict or moral failure. A third of pastors say they feel burned out within just five years of starting ministry, and almost a half of pastors and their wives say they have experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.

Devotional Life

Prayer has been a theme this month both because I've been reading Tim Keller's [book](#) on the subject, and because we're doing something called the “R.E.A.C.H.” focus in the Watford church. But more on both of those items next time. Do you have a favourite book on prayer? Please share it with me. I might read and review it.

Music and Worship

Last year I wrote a series of articles on music and leading corporate worship. In case you missed them, here is the second one.

Corporate Worship Matters: 2. Worship and the Mission

Introduction

Corporate worship fulfils many needs we worshippers have. These needs are often summarised as being ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’. We might return to those descriptions on another occasion, but what about a third aspect, the evangelistic impact of collective worship?

Does our congregational worship advance the mission, or hinder it? The early church saw non-believers attending their services. Paul's admonitions to the Corinthians indicate that their corporate worship had the potential for missional impact, even if it did need reform:

“So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”” (1 Corinthians 14:23–25 NIV11)

I’m sure that final phrase, “God is really among you!” is one we long to hear more often at our gatherings. Corporate worship has a unique place in strengthening our evangelistic effectiveness as a church. Our task (making disciples of all nations) is so far beyond us it’s laughable. Who are we? Who do we think we are to take this on?

We are too weak. But, praise God, we have the strength of Christ. Paul hopes the Ephesians will understand and experience “his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,” (Ephesians 1:19–20 NIV11) How can we make sure our meetings have a missionary impact? How do we access this “incomparably great power”? One channel is that of corporate worship - as we see in Acts 4.

Strengthening, Acts 4

The church was in danger of attack (“after further threats”, v21) and afraid (why else would they pray for “boldness”, v29?). The movement was in danger of being snuffed out before it had really got going. Perhaps Peter & John could feel the fate of Jesus approaching them.

What was the church’s response to the Apostles’ report? A time of corporate worship. And what did they ask for? I know what I’d request - take the threats away, keep us safe, allow us to be quiet for a while until this all blows over. But that was not the spirit of the early disciples. Instead they begged God for boldness. And guess what? That’s exactly what He gave them.

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” (Acts 4:31 NIV11)

Worship drives evangelism. Christians share their faith freely when they “have a genuine, infectious love relationship with God, when they worship God wholeheartedly.” I believe that corporate worship has the potential to connect people with the power of God so that they begin to believe in the “impossible”. That they can be bold at work, with family and neighbours. That they can hold on to their faith when life has piled up troubles around them. That they can love their enemies and pray for their persecutors. How can our corporate worship help? When it is focussed in the same way as the worship of our brothers and sisters in Acts 4 all those years ago.

Their time of collective worship begins with addressing the “Sovereign Lord” and asserting His authority over all nations, peoples and kings. Then they move on to the way God guided the hands of those who thought they were directing the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. Having declared God’s sovereignty over all matters material and human, and reminded themselves of the

centrality of the cross, they are ready to make requests. After asking for boldness and the power of God, they exit the meeting speaking “the word of God boldly”.

Some lessons for our times of worship might be that we will do well to focus on songs, Bible readings and prayers that emphasise the sovereignty of God and the centrality of the cross, before we get to that part of the service which deals with our behaviour.

Acts 4 shows us how the Spirit strengthens disciples in the mission. Are there any other examples of corporate worship advancing the mission? Let’s have a look in Acts 13.

Sending, Acts 13

It’s not clear what prompted the group in their “worshiping the Lord and fasting” (Acts 13:2 NIV11). It must have been something significant - why else would they not eat? It seems they needed to hear God’s voice (don’t we all from time to time!).

The Spirit speaks - “the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”” (Acts 13:2 NIV11), and the missionaries are sent - “they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” (Acts 13:3 NIV11). A momentous decision with far-reaching consequences. Up to this point the people “sent” had been individuals, and the sending agent had been persecution (Act 8). All this changed once the church gathered to worship.

The lessons for us? Corporate worship provided the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to send out missionaries. We do not know how the Spirit “spoke”, but we do know that the church heard the will of God. We all want to see the mission advance, go to new neighbourhoods, towns, cities and countries. Would we gain greater clarity about who, where and when if we spent more time worshipping and fasting as a church?

Gerrit Gustafson puts it well: “[worship is] the fusion of the power of God’s presence with the power of the gospel.” No wonder Barnabas and Saul were so effective! We are able to worship God today because people in the first century had a conviction that the solution to any problem was to worship - together. Thus the mission was advanced and the whole world came to hear the gospel.

Summary

These two examples could be summarised thus: crises and confusion caused worship. When things happen - we come together to worship. When we come together to worship - things happen. Part of the purpose of corporate worship is to be strengthened and to be sent. Evangelism is a product of worship, and as such we will do well to consider the desire of the Spirit to strengthen and send us as we plan the content of our times of corporate worship.

Malcolm Cox

Thames Valley and Atonement

I was lucky to have a chance to teach three classes on the atonement and implications for how we explain the cross and enjoy the communion. Recordings can be found on www.tvcoc.org. A large slice of my attention is now focussed on preparations for the carol service in December.

Speaking Soon

October sees me leading a class on replacing ourselves as leaders, as well as preaching in Bracknell and Lower Earley. I'll speak in Watford twice this month. The most unusual engagement is to preach at a Tamil church in Reading on 23 October in the evening. Through an odd set of circumstances I have a connection there, so pray for me as I go to preach the Gospel.

How to Find and Follow

Well, I'm on most social media outlets, but here is the list:

Twitter: @mccx. Facebook: Malcolm Cox. LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/mccox

YouTube: www.youtube.com/mccxmac. Web site: www.malcolmcox.org

Oh yes, and there are those slightly more traditional means of communication:

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Until Next Time

Thanks for reading this far. That's it for now. Let me know what you'd find interesting to hear about. The next edition will be out in November.

Take care, and God bless, Malcolm