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MALCOLM'S MARVELLOUS MONTHLY MAGASINE



Awesome August - Super September

Top August highlight? Our 31st wedding anniversary, of course! Time to try something different - don't want to get stuck in a rut.

So, Penny booked us into a couple of hotels and made a plan for us to do part of the Thames Walk - the section from the Thames Barrier to Battersea Park. The twist? We took only what we could carry. Walking with nothing more than a light backpack was a slightly scary, but truly liberating experience. Not done anything like this since student days.

We thoroughly recommend the walk. Even though London can be a bit crazy (!) the history and sights are stimulating, sobering and inspiring. Mad inventors, desperate poverty, extraordinary explorers, shameful exploitation and spiritual inspiration are all there along the banks of "Old Father Thames". We're already planning the next section.

I hope August was awesome for you and that September will be super. Read on for more updates on what I've been up to these last 31 days.

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.” Matthew 4:23 NIV11

I've been posting teaching tips more regularly on Tuesdays (mostly). I've got 39 up there, with 15 for 2016 so far, and have set myself a goal of producing 33 by the end of the year.

This month's topics: "How to trim a lesson"; "How to use Statistics"; "Preaching to Jewish People"; "Anecdotes vs Stories" and "Tips for the Tipster". Have a look if you would like to improve your preparation and communication of Bible lessons. You can also hear the audio versions here, or on my website.

Douglas Jacoby was kind enough to feature my tips in one of his recent newsletters. I can heartily recommend his materials in turn.

What We're Reading

My other regular video & audio postings are reflections on books I'm reading. This month we've finished "The Search for God and the path to persuasion" by Peter May, begun to dig into "Zeal without burnout" by Christopher Ash; and we'll soon be moving on to "Misreading scripture with Western eyes" by E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien.

The "Search for God" book gave me pause to think about how we communicate our testimony. I experimented with this at a church service in the Thames Valley churches of Christ, and have written a short article - "Tasty Testimonies". Let me know what your take is on this topic.

Tasty Testimonies

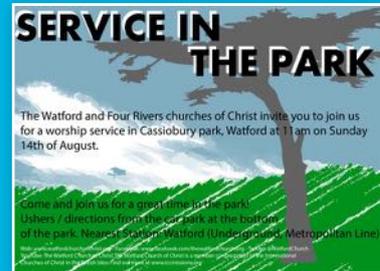
Ten Commandments for Terrific Testimonies (Based on the book, "The Search for God" by Peter May)

Introduction

What is a testimony? For the purpose of this article we'll approach it thus: A testimony is an opportunity for one person to tell another about the work of God in their life.

In other words, it is personal. It is not an exposition of scripture, or a lesson. It might be told to one person or many. It could be communicated via music, speech or the written

Watford Outdoor Service



We had a great time meeting with the North West region of the London church - and Stefan spoke. You can see the whole lesson here.

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

word.

Do you feel confident telling your testimony? If someone asks you, if the door opens, can you give a succinct, compelling, persuasive summary of how you became a Christian and/or an example of the work of God in our life? We'll take a look here at some ideas that might help us to be more confident and effective.

Testimonies are as old as Abraham. He told Abimelek that it was God who made him “wander from my father’s household” (Gen 20.13). Throughout the Old Testament people shared that it was God who spoke, acted, healed and guided them. Sometimes it was God’s people to whom they spoke, sometimes it was non-believers, and sometimes their enemies. The testimony-tellers were priests, prophets, kings and ‘ordinary’ people.

Testimonies also appear in the New Testament - most significantly in the Gospels and Acts. Take the man possessed by Legion: “Jesus sent him away, saying, “Return home and tell how much God has done for you.” So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.” (Luke 8:38–39 NIV11). Or the Samaritan woman who, after having a transformative conversation with Jesus, went back to her village and invited the inhabitants to, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” (John 4:29 NIV11). You can probably think of many more examples.

Acts is interesting. Paul is the prime example of a testimony teller. He tells his to a lynch mob, Felix and King Agrippa (Acts 22:6, 24.24; 26.14-15). These testimonies had a profound effect. So can ours. In his book, Peter May offers eight thoughts to help us prepare a compelling testimony. Here are mine.

1. Who are you talking to?

Are your audience mostly non-believers? Are they people like you, or different from you? Older, younger? If you are talking to an individual, what do you already know about them and their belief system? The more you know, the more you can and should tailor what to say. There’s no point in repeating what they already know. Adjust your language to your listener. Someone with English as a second language probably needs you to use fewer complex words.

2. Know your limitations

If you are a scientist, by all means talk about physics, genes and the theory of relativity. However, if you are no expert in these matters, you are better off sticking to what you do know. You will be more credible and sound like yourself instead of someone you think you ought to be.

3. Avoid alienation

Starting with general ideas is better than specifics. What’s wrong with this opening phrase, “I was a prolific consumer of porn”? The shock factor will make everyone sit up, but it will (whether it should or not) cause some people to feel revolted, and others to access their own shame. It divides the audience into those who will connect with you, and those who will decide you are a wicked person! Similarly, phrases like “I was brought up in a Christian home” are alienating - unless you are talking to people who were all raised in the same environment. Better to begin with questions like, “Have you ever wondered if what we see is all there is?”, or statements like, “I grew up confused about what life was really all about.”

4. What’s it all about?

Does your audience know why you are talking to them? Do you? In other words, are we clear that we are speaking to draw people to Jesus? We're not there to make them laugh or cry. We're not part of the entertainment, and we're not trying to make people like us. Can you tell your story such that people think more highly of God? Think though what you are going to say and filter it through this lens.

5. Cut out jargon

A non-believer may well have no idea what justification, discipleship, repentance, salvation or sin are about. Remember, at least in the culture where I live, the majority have almost no Christian background and very little exposure to the Bible. We need to de-jargon our testimony. What words could you use instead of "discipleship"? How about "following" or "apprenticeship"? Alternatives to repentance could be, "turn-around" or "mind-change". We can worry about bible terms later when our friends get into studying it. But for now, we need words and concepts that connect.

6. Who's the hero?

Is it Jesus, or is it you? Write out your testimony and look at how many times you are mentioned and how many times Jesus/God are mentioned. Of course, we need to talk about ourselves enough to make a connection, but from there on the focus should be Jesus. Our goal is to make people curious about Jesus, not curious about us.

7. Honesty's the best policy

An exaggerated story is soon found out. If you were a billionaire, say so. If you were an addict or criminal, please tell all. But, if you were average, with standard problems and achievements in life, let that be your story. The depths of loneliness, emptiness and hunger for meaning apply to all people anyway. You don't have to have a "spectacular" story to have a spectacular impact.

8. Unhelpful Questions

The question we want to leave in people's minds is something like, "How can I get to know more about this Jesus?" Anything that distracts from this is unhelpful. Therefore, let's restrict ourselves to subjects that point people to Jesus, rather than those that take them away from him. A testimony is not the place to discuss politics or the ethical use of GM crops. "Before I was a Christian I voted Conservative, but now I'm a Christian I vote Labour." is going to be unhelpful. We have no idea how Jesus would have voted.

9. Where are we going?

Audiences are helped with their attention if they have some idea of where we are going in our testimony. Something like, "There were three key moments in my becoming a Christian, and I'd like to tell you about them" lets the listeners know where they are in your story. We don't need to structure the thing to death, but bear in mind that, although you know where you're going, no one else does, and people don't like following someone who's is not telling them where they are going.

10. End well

Introductions and conclusions are the hardest to write. But they may be the most important parts. In general, the advice is to keep it simple. Say what you've got to say, end with a simple statement, say, "thank you" and sit down. A question works well. Something like, "Now you've heard my story, what's will you do next?", or, "You've heard my take on Jesus, what's yours?"

Concluding thoughts

Testimonies are under-used in our services. Perhaps because they've not often been done well. What from the above helps you? Do you have suggestions of your own? Email me, mccx@mac.com, or tweet me, @mccx.

Let's tell our story well - the world is waiting to hear that there's better way, and there is - with Jesus.

Malcolm

PS: See the accompanying [video](#) & [audio](#) version

Devotional Life

My own devotional times with God have been enriched this month by a book, "Thoughts in Solitude" by Thomas Merton. Each chapter is short (sometimes no more than 1 page) and gives me something to meditate on as I go to God in prayer. I'll blog on the book once it's finished, but for now, here are three of my favourite quotes:

"[We need] to have enough mastery of ourselves to renounce our own will into the hands of Christ – so that he may conquer what we cannot reach by our own efforts."

"Discretion warns us against wasted effort: but for the coward all effort is wasted effort. Discretion shows us where effort is wasted and when it is obligatory. Laziness flies from all risk. Discretion flies from useless risk: but urges us on to take the risks that faith and the grace of God demands of us."

"..tepidity... Is a state in which one rejects God and rejects the will of God while maintaining an exterior pretence of loving him in order to keep out of trouble and to save one's supposed self-respect."

Deep, huh? That fella could write. Do you have any reading recommendations?

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 first one.

Corporate Worship Matters: Trends and How to Evaluate Them

When the church gathers to worship great things happen. I know. It happened to me. Almost exactly 30 years ago I walked into a Sunday service of the Central London church of Christ (as it was then). I'll be honest, the quality of the song leading was woeful (wrong starting notes, singing off-key, vague direction etc.). And, although I knew some of the hymns, they were all sung to the "wrong" tunes. Added to that was the absurd absence of instruments! Here I was, a classically trained musician, a conductor of choirs with a degree in music, a singer, pianist and french horn player, sitting in a less-than-impressive musical environment. My reaction?

I was awe-struck.

Why? Because everyone sang with all their heart. The style, the sound and the setting did not suit me, but the Spirit was present - and I noticed. There was no doubt in my mind that I was in the midst of true believers. I experienced effective worship. Robert Webber wrote, "Worship is never to be arts-driven, but arts-enhanced". In my case it was effective even though it was arts-deficient!

It is our responsibility, as worship leaders, to examine the effectiveness of our corporate worship. In the first of a series I offer here some thoughts on the specifics of assessing trends in worship.

1. Find the Trends

Trends in worship shift from time to time. Perhaps they change and morph more quickly than ever. Are we aware of the trends?

For example, David Murrow says, "if you're serious about reaching men, move it outside." Some church groups use liturgy, newly written creeds, scents, dance and art in their meetings. One Seattle congregation I heard of has no preacher, but someone coordinating events and offering a "lesson" through their blog. Some services are all singing, some contain no music at all. Are we aware of worship variations in our area and culture?

Three suggestions for surfacing trends which affect ourselves and our congregations:

- a. Survey the congregation for Christian media exposure. Which Christian books, radio, TV and web sites are they absorbing? Which Christian music artists are on their iTunes playlists? Where is the emphasis and where are the gaps?
- b. Visit local worship experiences outside our fellowship of congregations. I took our worship team to a Hillsong service and did a de-brief afterwards on what we thought was useful or not. Have you ever been to a Pentecostal service, a Catholic Mass, or a Methodist meeting? In what way are different worship experiences refreshing your own?
- c. Look up the Christian worship charts. What styles are at the top? Who are the best sellers?

Trends influence us whether we know it or not. Find out which ones are predominant in your area.

2. Test the Trends

Many worship practices are neutral. They are neither good nor bad in themselves, only more or less helpful. If we know our local trends, how do we assess if they are good or bad? Whether they should be opposed or embraced? Are they already influencing your congregation? As we examine any trend we will apply three filters and ask three questions:

- i. Doctrine filter. "Does it offend any Biblical principle or command?"

ii. Distraction filter. “Does it distract people from God?”

iii. Direction filter. “Does it direct people to God?”

In my own part of the world I have observed a number of trends in churches around me, some of which have been introduced to our congregations in whole or part. A few would include: having no “main” song leader, simply a group of singers and a band; “shushing” a congregation before starting singing; emphasising one style over against others - i.e. all hymns / all gospel songs / all chorus songs. Are these practices good or bad? It’s going to depend. It will depend on whether they pass the three filters above, and whether they will help people connect with God’s presence.

What do we do when “it depends”? I’d suggest we pray and talk to the worship team and the church leadership team and come to a consensus. It’s unlikely that any particular trend is going to lead people astray spiritually, but it might be appropriate not to adopt something just because it is ‘trendy’ if it might distract worshippers from their focus on God. I’m not offering a definitive position on any particular trend, but proposing that worship trends must be assessed in our local context.

3. Teach on the Trends

The final step is to teach the congregation. Why should we speak to the congregation about which ‘trends’ we consider to be acceptable? Because otherwise members may be inclined to practice whatever worship trend suits them without considering the filters above. They may also cast negative spiritual judgment on others who act differently. Not only that, but they could become resentful if their preferences are not included in worship. It may be that they are not included for good reason, but a lack of explanation can be harmful.

Confusion is not conducive to God-honouring worship (1 Cor 14.26-33 - more on that in a forthcoming article). Uncertainty is a form of confusion. A member who sits in a service wondering why we have instruments (or no instruments), or why we have someone centre-stage leading worship (or not) is a member who is finding it hard to set their heart and mind on Christ.

Let’s be worship leaders who are aware of trends, but not with the goal of being trendy! Instead, our aim is to know the trends, apply appropriate filters and teach clearly so that members and visitors alike have their best chance to hear the Spirit’s voice.

Malcolm Cox

Thames Valley and the Youngsters



One of my responsibilities is the development of the younger people as speakers. It’s been a joy to see them grow - especially this month as we’ve held a series called, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young.” (1 Tim 4.12) Younger people have spoken with great conviction and honesty. You can hear most of them [here](#): Rachel, Gene, Mark, Alex, Alice and Fabian.



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 tradition 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 October.

Take care, and God bless, Malcolm