

BITESIZE BELIEFS

BEAUTIFUL BODY

RELATIONSHIPS REALLY MATTER

STEPHEN G. DERGES

www.bitesizebeliefs.com

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® Anglicized, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from HOLY BIBLE. NEW LIVING TRANSLATION copyright© 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (AMP) are taken from THE AMPLIFIED® BIBLE. Copyright 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission (www.lockman.org)

Copyright © 2004, 2015 and 2023 Stephen G. Derges. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, shared in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written consent of the publisher.

The right of Stephen G. Derges to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This edition published in the UK in 2023 in conjunction with Neighbourhood Prayer Network and Petersbrook following previous editions in 2004 and 2015

Publishing by Petersbrook

Design & artwork direction by Phil Davies

phil@sportingmarvels.com

BITESIZE BELIEFS

BEAUTIFUL BODY

RELATIONSHIPS REALLY MATTER



Dedication

The whole 'BITESIZE BELIEFS' series is dedicated to my wonderful wife Rosalyn – thank you for believing in me, trusting in me and loving me. I know that I'm a better man with you than I would have been without you.

Acknowledgements

Many people have had a profound influence on my life and it's not possible to list everyone here. So, apologies if you are not specifically singled out – your reward will be in heaven!

Countless leaders, speakers, authors – many of whom I've not met personally – have inspired me and helped me develop and I'm profoundly grateful for the books, video and audio recordings and other materials they have shared.

I'm especially indebted to Carl Brettle, CEO of Neighbourhood Prayer Network (NPN), and his wife Rebekah who had the vision for NPN and launched the ministry in 2013 at Wembley Stadium.

Carl was the catalyst for me to re-edit the original editions of 'BITESIZE BELIEFS' and make this publication a reality – I appreciate your advice and faith in me. Do check out NPN's vision and ministry at:

www.neighbourhoodprayer.net

Introduction

Thanks for picking up this book – my prayer is that it will help you to a greater understanding of God's ways and into a deeper relationship with Him.

WHY THE BOOK? ...This is one of a '*pamphlet type*' books that I've written over the years to help people grow spiritually and, as you can see, it's not very long. That's not because I've not got much to say, but in this age of '*sound-bites*' and '*instant makeovers*', I felt short, easy-to-read books would be more accessible. I've too many books on my shelves that I've started but not finished, so I've kept '**BITESIZE BELIEFS**' condensed because I want them to be read.

Although I didn't attend Bible College or study for a theological degree, over many years I've been involved in various leadership roles in church, charitable, community and business settings. As Pastor of a Baptist Church and recently Chair of Trustees and Leadership Team of an independent evangelical church, I've learned a multitude of lessons – some painful ones – but I've also known God's gracious favour.

'SELAH MOMENTS' ...In every '**BITESIZE BELIEFS**' book there are references to '**SELAH MOMENTS**' – let me explain.

'Selah' is often used in the Psalms where the writer wants us to meditate on what's been written. The Amplified Bible translates 'Selah' as: "pause and calmly realise what that means!"

Often what we hear and read impacts us just in that moment, so throughout this book there are opportunities to reflect on the personal implications. And please don't skip over the Bible passages – God's word has power – take the time to genuinely meditate on them.

So, find a comfortable chair, sit back, get a cup of tea (or your favourite beverage) and you'll be through this book before you know it. But hopefully the thoughts and challenges will last a lifetime.

Stephen G. Berges

BEAUTIFUL BODY

I admit it – I'm overweight. I've ignored it for years convincing myself I'm too short for my weight – I don't need to exercise more and eat less. I'm not fat – my skin's too well developed!

It's my wife Rosalyn's fault. If she wasn't such a good cook, I wouldn't have to eat the fantastic meals she provides – again avoiding responsibility for my actions.

Following a couple of clinical procedures – keyhole surgery on my knee, a hip replacement with potentially a matching pair on the other hip soon – I'm even more conscious I should lose those extra pounds.

Before the operations, the medics checked my weight. The actual damage remains strictly confidential (I'm not open and honest enough to divulge



those secrets) but the outcome was a shock. I'm convinced hospital scales add on at least several kilograms to emphasise the need for weight control.

Years ago, I was extremely fit, playing rugby, cricket and other sports, but as life has gone on, the waistline (and everything above it) has slipped south.

It's called 'furniture disease' when your chest slips into your drawers!

Once, in a rugby match, an opponent knocked himself out when he ran into my then reasonably well developed 'six pack'. Nowadays if anyone head-butted me in the stomach, they'd probably suffocate to death!

So, I'm challenged to start the inevitable regime of healthier eating and exercise to trim down, tone up and find the slim, honed version of me that's inside waiting to see the light of day. Whether it ever happens remains to be seen!

IMAGE COUNTS

Our world is obsessed by image and brand. Marketing positive qualities, values and reputation is a critical success factor. 'Influencers' endorse products and services and multiple millions of pounds are spent on image consultants, to make a favourable impression. I'm not saying it's inherently wrong – it's the way business works.

'Beautiful people' adorn magazine front covers enticing us to mirror the latest looks and clothes styles. It doesn't seem to register that talented photographers have taken the shots at just the right angles, with soft focus lighting, enhancing the results with 'Photoshop' to airbrush offending blemishes.

We're tempted with the latest 'must have' product adverts that will make our lives more efficient, effective and easier and to impress our friends, neighbours and colleagues. Again, there's nothing intrinsically inappropriate in enjoying designer label clothes and accessories, having a dream home with the latest

gizmos and gadgets or the hottest model car on our driveways. It's all a matter of perspective, but is there a danger of being conned that having material possessions and looking good is what life is all about?

CHRISTIAN BRAND VALUE

What's our USP (unique selling point) and what kind of image should Christians portray?

The Apostle Paul's famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13 – the one always read at weddings – explains at the heart of the Christian faith is love, not the rules and regulations of religion. Love is our brand value and should be our motivation and inspiration for living.

Most Christians are honest and realistic enough to admit that we consistently get it wrong – our attitudes and intentions don't always match up to our actions. It's difficult to always be patient and kind; we can be envious of others or guilty of pride. It's challenging to forgive those who have wronged us and often we give up on them too easily. With choice (and *'free will'*) comes consequences.

But if we really want to live as our designer intended us to, the standard is love because as the Bible tells us, ***"God IS love."***¹

Has the Church lost the plot when it comes to getting the message of love across? Do we concentrate too much on programmes and events or have people become more cynical or discerning when it comes to faith issues? Are we failing to *'walk the talk'* with actions that don't match up to what we purport we believe?

Let's get real. When asked about their faith allegiance in the 2021 Census, under 50% of UK residents identified as Christian – down from over 70% in 2011. Locally, I reckon less than 5% attend church regularly (interestingly, 'regularly' is defined as once or twice a month) indicating many have gone AWOL – absent without leave.

Whilst I agree with the contention, *"You don't need to go to Church to be a Christian"*, we don't *'need'* to, but (there's always a *'but'*), I'm convinced a healthy, vibrant, effective Church includes fellowship with others in worship and prayer, sharing our faith together.



The Bible says, ***"God loved the world so much..."***² When the Church lives out God's love, we will see individual lives changed and whole communities transformed and renewed.

Remember, we are the Church, not the buildings we meet in, so it's down to us to make the difference in our communities. Local Church congregations should be the spiritual guardians of their localities.

Jesus is the hope of the world but we, the Church, can make a huge impression when we work and live together in unity and love, especially as Jesus said, ***"Your***

¹ John 4:8, 16

² John 3:16



love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.”³

Our love for each other – especially across the denominational and doctrinal divide – is a far more effective means of communicating the Gospel than any clever sermon or even Biblical exegesis. This isn't so much about ecumenicalism, beneficial as that is, but rather the establishment of constructive relationships across the Christian community. My contention is, as the Body of Christ takes its rightful position, working together co-operatively, we'll see societal transformation.

The Apostle Peter encourages us not to be *“ineffective nor unproductive”⁴* by adding to our faith several personal attributes and qualities – goodness; knowledge; self-control; perseverance; godliness; brotherly kindness; love.

Exhibiting these qualities and truly living as the Holy Spirit directs us, a **‘BEAUTIFUL BODY’** of believers will be formed. It's both a personal and collective responsibility to resolve any issues which may adversely affect us as members of the Body of Christ, or which hinder the Gospel message.

TAKING A FRESH LOOK

I previously had the privilege of writing a monthly column for a local weekly newspaper under the banner of *‘Focus on Faith’*. The editor took a chance in allowing me to write a series of articles on the theme, *‘Taking a fresh look at...’* The inspiration for this book was conceived when I wrote a piece regarding judging

others and our attitudes towards people who are different to us.

I thought, *“That seems like a good subject for another Bitesize Beliefs book”*, but then realised it could be the world's shortest book.



Jesus said, *“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”⁵* End of story. Period. Finished.

However, **‘BEAUTIFUL BODY’** was born from a desire to look deeper into how relationships are formed and actively maintained.

SETTING THE SCENE

Let's try and get to grips with the reasons behind why the Church is less effective than it should be.

As Head of Customer Relationship – a great job which I enjoyed tremendously even with the usual pressures of huge business targets, financial budgets and interminable meetings – my primary objective was to develop additional business from both existing and new customers, and I introduced the ARM strategy – **Attract | Retain | Maximise**.

In theory, whilst customer relationships should be mutually rewarding, the over-

³ John 13:35 (NLT)

⁴ 2 Peter 1:8

⁵ Luke 6:37

riding goal was to retain customers long term, encouraging the purchase of additional, or more profitable, products. In the Church we have an opportunity to Attract | Retain | Maximise. Sadly, in too many congregations, people become Christians through 'attraction' activities but over time slip out through the backdoor. There's a host of reasons why, but part of the problem is that we don't have suitable 'retention' policies. Often people don't feel valued enough, their gifts aren't recognised or appreciated, or we don't invest in their ongoing spiritual maturity by helping them 'maximise' their potential and purpose.

RELATIONSHIPS: CHOICE

At an international financial services conference, I cited the old saying, *"You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your relations"*.

It's true – we don't have much choice about who our relations are, but we can choose who we *build* relationships with. The conference focus was customer profitability – making value judgments determining which customers were worth having, and which weren't. In other words, relationships were based on choices driven by specific criteria.

RELATIONSHIPS: QUALITY

One dictionary definition of relationship is, *"The existence or effect of a connection, association or feeling prevailing between persons or things"*. It's a sound definition but it doesn't mention anything about the quality of the relationship. Is it good, bad or indifferent?

For example – if I was daft enough to put my finger into an electrical socket and turn on the power, all three dictionary definitions would exist:

- **An association:** my finger and the socket
- **A connection:** an electrical current earthing through my body
- **A feeling:** but not one I'd want to experience again as I'm not a masochist or Frankenstein's monster!

Here's a Health & Safety Warning – please do not try this experiment. If anyone puts their finger into an electrical socket and turns on the power, it's at their own peril and risk! I do not recommend it and don't have personal injury insurance should anyone wish to sue me for any consequences that may arise.

Marketing textbooks say relationship quality is determined by the strength of the attributes or behaviours associated with it. In the above business example, it was about ensuring our customers saw us as their primary financial services provider. If they chose a competitor for a product we also offered, overall the relationship became less valuable to us.

Marketing experts define four 'relationship stages' – formation; development; decline; termination – and three characteristics designated as the *'hierarchy of relationships'*.

- **Acquaintance...** The phrase, *"You never have a second chance to make a first impression"* is often used. Whenever we meet someone for the first time, initial judgments we make usually colour our thinking and often affect future rapport. We're attracted to some people virtually immediately, whilst others we keep at arm's length.
- **Association...** In spending time with someone, we begin to share freely, get to know and understand them.



We discover motivations, attitudes, aspirations and passions. Finding out these attributes – and sharing ours with them – builds mutual trust and confidence.

- **Allegiance...** Being in relationship with someone over long periods, especially when overcoming adversity together, engenders mutual dependency. I'm grateful I have a few people in my life who, over the years, have committed themselves to helping me grow and I hope I've reciprocated. I may not be in contact with them regularly, yet we start up where we left off last time because of the bond between us.

RELATIONSHIPS: OUR WAY

Unfortunately, I believe we've missed the point of being in relationship with someone. Our choices of relationships and how much effort we're willing to invest in them, tend to be framed by who does what to whom and when. Frequency of contact and the availability of the parties involved are often key factors in how these relationships develop.

There's also the *'feel-good factor'* – the intangible benefit of enhanced personal status when you're a friend of someone famous. Consciously or unconsciously, relationships often exist because of

the benefits we receive from those associations, even if it's just the 'warm, fuzzy feeling' of being appreciated or noticed.

RELATIONSHIPS: GOD'S WAY

Thankfully God doesn't see relationships in the same way.

To Him, nobody is valued more or less than someone else, no-one is better or worse and each person is of equal value. Unlike us, His love isn't conditional and doesn't fluctuate depending on the circumstances, the day of the week, or whether we're having a good or bad time.

God doesn't accept us for what we have **DONE** or **DO FOR** Him – we're accepted because of what we've **DONE AGAINST** Him.

The Bible tells us we've all fallen short in trying to attain God's standards of holiness⁶; our best efforts equate to "*grease-stained rags*"⁷. The only way we can know Him is through accepting His free offer of pardon and grace.⁸

This may sound uncompromising yet isn't rocket science – it's incredibly simple. The whole basis of our relationship with God is that **we become His relations**.

God loves us so much and wants us to become His friends, adopting us into His family. Through Jesus' death on the Cross, we literally become **His blood relatives** by accepting His offer of salvation. Isn't that absolutely incredible and amazing?

RELATIONSHIPS: FELLOWSHIP & COMMUNION

Rather than the word 'relationship', the Bible uses 'fellowship' – sharing in common – or 'communion'.

1 John 1:3-7 says,

"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin."

This passage establishes both the **basis** and the **quality of fellowship**. Instead of building connections based on personal choice or value judgments, wholesome fellowship with other people arises and develops because of our dependence on the Father and Jesus.

Consequently, effective fellowship must be **"in the light"** – open, honest, authentic, rather than secretive or subversive. There's no room for hidden agendas or selfish motives.

Nothing gets in the way of relationships more than deception, dishonesty, disparagement or any other letter 'D' word we may think up. But the great news is that, just as the rising sun dissipates (another 'D') the early morning mist, when our fractured and flawed relationships are structured as the Apostle John advocates, they become mutually beneficial.

⁶ Romans 3:23-24

⁷ Isaiah 64:6 (MSG)

⁸ Ephesians 2:8

⁹ 1 Corinthians 14:40

¹⁰ Psalm 145:3

¹¹ John's Gospel Chapter 9



DEFINING STRUCTURED RELATIONSHIPS

God is a God of order – the Apostle Paul writes **“everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way”**.⁹ Whether we like it or not, He has assigned structures for our relationship with Him and other people.

Rather than being haphazard or inconsistent, our relationships should be organised, planned, intentional and well-thought out.

Jesus summed up the Ten Commandments into two pithy statements in Matthew 22:37-39, when He said –

- **“Love God with all your heart, soul, mind”** – everything you have and are – and
- **“Love other people in the same way as you love yourself”**.

Firstly, love Him – not because He’s vain and can’t live without our admiration, but because He deserves it. The Psalmist declares, **“Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; His greatness no one can fathom”**.¹⁰

Secondly, love other other people in the same way we’d like to be loved and treated. Personally I don’t know anyone who wants to be hated, criticised or insulted. Yet many of us have an innate, in-built ability to do just that to people we know and love and those that we’ve never even met, e.g. politicians or bankers. As a result, *‘hate crime’*, especially on social media, is increasing exponentially.

We make snap decisions about people based on their appearance, their language or their behaviour, especially if they’re behind the wheel of a car! If people don’t look like, act like or have the same opinions as us, we often dismiss them as either *‘cranks’* or *‘crackpots’* – sometimes even worse.

NOT BLIND BUT STILL UNABLE TO SEE

One day the Disciples met a man blind from birth and they asked Jesus, **“Whose sin caused this man to be blind – his own or his parents?”**¹¹

What a question to ask in front of him. He was blind not deaf – whilst he couldn’t see who was speaking, he could certainly hear what they said. It wasn’t even an intelligent question (that’s me judging already!) How could his sin have caused the problem if he’d been blind from birth?

Sadly, these fully-sighted Disciples were unable to see the real issue. Less concerned that he needed help, or was living with total blindness, they wanted to debate an unanswerable question and to label the man instead of showing him compassion. We label jam jars and other containers to identify what’s inside. The Disciples saw what was on the outside and made assumptions about what was happening inside.

Could we be just as guilty of looking but not seeing? For example:

- Young people walking down the street wearing 'hoodies' aren't necessarily urban terrorists who may mug someone without a second thought.
- The chances of teenagers skateboarding recklessly across the road and damaging our car aren't that high.
- 'Big Issue' street-vendors aren't automatically scroungers.
- Accountants aren't necessarily boring.
- Connecting with well-dressed people, who live in the best postcodes and who appear to have made it, doesn't guarantee our future success.

I'm so grateful God doesn't treat us on the basis of our appearances, where we grew up, the colour of our skin, or by the mistakes we've made. We say,

"Don't judge a book by its cover," but the Bible says, ***"The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart".¹²***

It's salutary to think our Heavenly Father is more interested in our motives and attitudes than our actions and activities, especially when we know what we're really like and our attempts trying to put on a good act to impress others. Despite our shortcomings and problems, He still cares for us and wants to have a personal relationship with us – flaws, warts and all.

Back to the story...

The Disciples saw the blind man as an unlucky victim of fate, but Jesus saw with different eyes – this was a ready-made opportunity to demonstrate love and compassion. Jesus told the Disciples,



"You're looking for someone to blame... look instead for what God can do".¹³

Then He healed the man which got Jesus and the man into even more trouble (read the story and find out why).

It's time for our first '**SELAH MOMENT**' – please turn back to the Introduction to find out what I'm talking about.

Let's look at how we evaluate other people and honestly scrutinise our attitudes:

➤ With whom do I relate and why?

Is it for the benefits or status of the relationship or am I contributing equally? Remember: acquaintance | association | allegiance

➤ What mix of relationships do I have?

Is there variety in my friendship circles that includes people of different cultures, ideas and interests or are they all similar to me and my lifestyle?

When was the last time I cultivated a new connection, or do I expect others to make the first move?

➤ How about those I don't normally 'gel' with?

How do I relate to people I work or go to school with – those with whom I have no choice but to get alongside?

Who do I consciously avoid – why?

Am I serious about building friendships or do I have an attitude of '*detached involvement*' only doing the minimum to get by?

BEING PRACTICAL

I want to challenge our thinking but also suggest potential practical solutions should everyday relationship problems and breakdowns occur in a church context.



RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CHURCH

Various analogies are used to describe the Church – *"The Bride of Christ"*, an *"army"* and a *"building"* (more accurately, *"temple"*) but in three passages of Scripture – 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Romans 12:1-7 and Ephesians 4:11-14 – the Church is described as the *"Body of Christ"*.

I believe it's vital we understand the importance God places on the Church in declaring His plan of salvation – there's no Plan B. To achieve His ultimate purposes, the Church is pivotal, yet in our increasingly secular culture, is ignored, intimidated and considered unimportant.

Let's look at three areas – Church leadership relationships, Intra-Church relationships and Inter-Church relationships.

¹² 1 Samuel 16:7

¹³ John 9:3 (MSG)

"...if we are
living in the
light as GOD
is in the light,
then we have
fellowship
with EACH
OTHER, and the
blood of
JESUS, HIS SON
cleanses
us from all sin"

1 JOHN 1:7
[NLT]

...he had given thanks, he distrib-
uted to the disciples, and the disci-
ples to them that were set down; and
likewise of the fishes as much as they
would.

12 When they were filled, he said
unto his disciples, Gather up the
fragments that remain, that nothing
be lost.

13 Therefore they gathered them
together, and filled twelve baskets
with the fragments of the five barley
loaves, which remained over and
above unto them that had eaten.

14 Then those men, when they
had seen the miracle that Jesus did,
said, This is of a truth that prophet
that should come into the world.

15 When Jesus therefore perceived
that they would come and take
him by force, to make him a king, he
departed again into a mountain him-
self alone.

16 And when even was now come,
his disciples went down unto the
sea,

17 And entered into a ship, and
went over the sea toward Ca-per'-
na-um. And it was now dark, and Je-
sus was not come to them.

people which
of the sea sa
other boat
whereinto h
and that Jesu
ples into the
ples were gon

23 (How
boats from T
place where
that the Lord

24 When
that Jesus w
disciples, th
and I come to
for Jesus.

25 And w
on the other
unto him, Re
hither?

26 Jesus
Verily, verily
me, not beca
but because
and were fill

27 Labor
perisheth, b
endureth un
the Son of m
for him hath

28 Then



43 ^{truly, truly} I say unto you, ^{truly, truly} ye can not eat that bread from heaven, ^{truly, truly} which my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven.

44 For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.

45 Then said they unto him, Lord, give us this bread.

46 And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never thirst. ^{truly, truly} And he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

47 But I say unto you, That ye which have believed on me shall never thirst.

48 I am that bread of life.

49 For the fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead.

50 This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die.

51 I am the living bread ^{which} came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and ^{the} bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

52 The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us ^{his} flesh to eat?

53 Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

43 ^{truly, truly} I say unto you, ^{truly, truly} ye can not eat that bread from heaven, ^{truly, truly} which my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven.

44 For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.

45 Then said they unto him, Lord, give us this bread.

46 And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never thirst. ^{truly, truly} And he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

47 But I say unto you, That ye which have believed on me shall never thirst.

48 I am that bread of life.

49 For the fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead.

50 This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die.

51 I am the living bread ^{which} came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and ^{the} bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

52 The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us ^{his} flesh to eat?

53 Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

Matt. 26:26



CHURCH LEADERSHIP RELATIONSHIPS

How church leaders and congregations interact is a massive area where relationship breakdowns almost inevitably occur.

The pastor of a church my wife and I attended used to tell the congregation when things were somewhat tetchy, *"God will give you the leadership you deserve."* I admit my ungracious response was, *"And God gives leaders the congregations they deserve too!"*

Hebrews 13:17 (NLT) emphasises this is a two-way street.

"Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit."

Congregations are to obey their leaders and submit to their authority – I would say that being a church leader! The benefit is it will be advantageous for the congregation and enable leaders relish their ministry.

Leaders under pressure will not lead effectively when criticised, disrespected, wisdom ignored or talked about behind their backs. The cynic says, *"We only need leaders so there's someone to blame when it goes wrong"* but God has ordained the role and function of Church leadership for our benefit.

However, leaders don't have it all their own way. They are accountable for their leadership – both to the congregation and certainly to God. In the same chapter, there's another instruction for

leaders and congregations, *"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."*¹⁴

Church leaders' lives must be worthy of being imitated and will be scrutinised as a worthy example to follow and they should speak God's word. No pressure then!

Dominating, over-bearing leadership is an anathema to God. We're called to be servants – even though the term *'servant leadership'* has become commonplace. But if we refuse to acknowledge and honour the church leadership God has place over us, we could be guilty of the offences the Israelites committed against Moses in the wilderness – and look what happened to them! Scan the Book of Exodus – there are numerous examples.

This is a virtuous circle with leaders and congregations working co-operatively. Where it starts is immaterial, but it has to start somewhere.

If we're serious about representing God in our world, we have to return to God's original blueprint where the Body of Christ truly understands the concepts of both leadership and follower-ship, and demonstrates them in practice.

Time for **'SELAH MOMENT #2'** – here are some additional questions.

- **What is my relationship with my church leader like?**

Is there respect and honour for what he/she is doing? If not, why not and what am I doing about it?

- **How often do I pray for my church leader?**

Church Leaders need prayerful support. When was the last time I

¹⁴ Hebrews 13:7

prayed specifically for him/her rather than moaning about a decision or the direction in which the church was going?

● What about power and position?

As a church leader am I more concerned about my status and control or the way in which I servant-heartedly *'shepherd the flock'*? How can I demonstrate greater servanthood in the way I lead and minister?

INTRA-CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

Breakdowns also occur between people in church congregations – we're all human with a tendency to be misunderstood, miscommunicate and make mistakes.

In many church splits people 'pick up

their ball and take it home' rather than work through problems. These divisions are often justified by misquoting Romans 8:28 saying, "All things work together for good", conveniently omitting the relevant words about loving God and being called according to His purpose.

Thankfully God can, and often does, redeem our mistakes by bringing good out of bad situations, but I have a problem believing He engineers disagreements in order to create church break-ups. Remember, if love is our Christian brand value, demonstrating love is the key to overcoming breakdowns in relationships.

The following table should challenge us how we relate to other Christians. It's worth looking at in more detail, perhaps as the basis for a small group study.

Remain in God's love and obey His commands	John 15:9-10
Love one another, be prepared to lay down our lives for our friends	John 15:12-13
Be patient, kind, not envious, boastful or proud. Don't be rude, self-seeking, easily angered or resentful. Do what is right; tell the truth. Protect, trust, hope and persevere on behalf of others	1 Corinthians 13:4-7
Don't continue or prolong anger	Ephesians 4:26
Build one another up	Ephesians 4:29
Get rid of bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, malice; be kind, compassionate and forgiving	Ephesians 4:31-32
Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ	Ephesians 5:21
Carry each other's burdens	Galatians 6:2
Serve one another in love	Galatians 5:13
Spur one another on towards love and good deeds	Hebrews 10:24
Live in the light so others don't stumble	1 John 2:10
Do not criticise or grumble against each other	James 5:9



It's no wonder we have difficulty in convincing people about our Christian credentials if we don't live out our faith in these ways!

Tall order? Sure, but nobody said it was going to be easy, especially if we try and do it in our own strength, but thankfully we're not alone. God graciously and with foresight provided the Holy Spirit – the same Spirit that enabled Jesus to live a perfect life. When we submit to, and ask for the Holy Spirit's help and guidance in our relationships, we'll be empowered to maintain the *"unity that the Spirit gives in the bond of peace."*¹⁵

The Apostle Paul says *"the Spirit helps us in our weakness"*¹⁶ and intercedes on our behalf when we don't even know how to pray. I'd venture to suggest many of us have experienced occasions when we've not known how to pray about a relationship problem we've encountered.

Having the Holy Spirit as our counsellor, guide and mentor when relational difficulties occur is a wonderful resource.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN IT ALL GOES PEAR-SHAPED?

It's obvious when relationship problems occur – disagreements and disputes invariably rise to the surface – but the onus is always on us to try and bring resolution.

In two specific passages Jesus talks about inter-personal problem resolution...

Matthew 5:23-24 -

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

Matthew 18:15 -

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you."

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:3

¹⁶ Romans 8:26

No *'ifs and buts'*, should someone cause me a problem – it's my job to sort it! If I cause a problem to someone else – it's my job to sort it!

Difficulties often arise when the issue isn't acknowledged or there's no desire for repentance and restoration due to an unwillingness to tackle issues or the potential fallout that will ensue if something is confronted.

Regretfully there's a tendency to *'let sleeping dogs lie'*. In some churches so many unresolved issues have been swept under the carpet that classes in mountaineering are required to enable people to walk up the aisles!

Some words of caution though:

- **Get involved only when appropriate.**

Don't become embroiled in situations unless invited to contribute and don't talk about disagreements either – *'a matter for prayer'* is merely a pseudonym for gossip!

- **Disputes involving church leaders require a different process.**

These are always painful with inevitable casualties.

- **Remember the objective.**

Reconciliation and restoration of broken relationships is the goal – not point-scoring or exercising revenge. Gracious confrontation always involves *"speaking the truth in love"*¹⁷

James 1:19 provides three principles to follow: *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry"*. Unlike a foxtrot it's not *'quick,*

quick, slow' but *'quick, slow, slow'*.

Thankfully the Bible provides clear guidelines for dispute resolution and hopefully the diagram below will help us understand God's restoration process.

The various meetings are provided to ensure fair play, not take sides so always start *'one-on-one'*, escalating only if appropriate. Remember, for church employees *'going public'* is extremely serious – they could face a loss of livelihood and income and their families impacted. If the local press gets wind of what's been happening in private, or worse still the national tabloids and other media outlets pick up the story, as Tom Hanks unforgettably said in Apollo 13, *"Houston, we have a problem!"* We've all seen how the Christian faith is quickly denounced and individuals pilloried.

If ever there is a time and process for reflection and re-evaluation leading ultimately to repentance and reconciliation, this is it. The church shouldn't *'hush things up'* but get on our knees and pray together. If we, God's people, can't get to a place of understanding, repentance, forgiveness and acceptance, there's little hope of us proclaiming a Gospel of grace and mercy. Those who aren't Christians have enough trouble to handle without getting involved in a church that can't solve its own problems.

Christianity is about accepting others, even with their differences, rather than judging and criticising; of caring instead of condemning and of serving rather than waiting to be served. It's the way God treats us.

¹⁷ Ephesians 4:15

DISPUTE RESOLUTION - GOD'S WAY

Dispute / relationship issue occurs

You caused the issue
Matthew 5:23-24

Someone else caused it
Matthew 18:15



Arrange a private meeting between the two of you

Does resolution and any repentance occur?

NO

Further intervention required

Is the person a Church Leader?

YES

Meet with witnesses
1 Timothy 5:19

Public disciplinary action
1 Timothy 5:20

Remove from leadership
1 Timothy 5:22

NO

Meet with witnesses
Matthew 18:16

Church Meeting review
Matthew 18:17

Remove from fellowship
Matthew 18:17

Does resolution and any repentance occur?

NO

**Love, care and support
to win them over**
Matthew 18:17

RESTORE RELATIONSHIP
Humility - Galatians 6:1
Forgiveness - Luke 17:3
Comfort - 2 Cor 2:7
LOVE EACH OTHER

YES

"SELAH MOMENT #3"

- Do I tend to not *'rock the boat'* rather than openly address issues up-front – why?
- From which relationships have I backed off when they became a little rocky? What can I do to re-establish those relationships?
- How can I curb any critical spirit I may have? Is it because I've failed to understand their backstory and not bothered to get to know them?

Let's move on, I could get depressed talking about disputes and difficulties!

Let's look at:

INTER-CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

Many outside the Church find the array of Christian expression bewildering and confusing. In their minds, we invariably meet at similar times, believe the same things, yet to all intents and purposes, it appears we're in competition with each other.

Personally, I find having diverse expressions of worship in the various denominations and networks inspiring. Different folks need different strokes and a *'one size fits all'* approach doesn't work because we're all unique. Our relationship with God and the way we worship Him in communal gatherings invariably includes our personal preferences, backgrounds and experiences.

During our married life, Rosalyn and I have worshipped in Anglican, Methodist, Open Brethren and Charismatic House Churches and closely worked alongside Christians in Pentecostal, Catholic and

other church groups along the way. We've always sought to be involved with the church in our locality that best fitted us as a family and got *'stuck in'*.

God has chosen to have a personal, individual, unique relationship with His people and we don't all have to worship Him in the same way.

VW, Audi, Bentley, Bugatti, Cupra, Ducati motorbikes, Lamborghini, Porsche, Seat and Skoda are all part of The Volkswagen Group. Although seemingly each brand is in competition with each other, the Group consciously tailors its brands to appeal to specific customer preferences, thereby maximising overall profitability and market share.

Similarly, Christian churches have different methods of expressing their faith – worship styles, liturgy, activities, even some aspects of doctrinal understanding. We proclaim the message of salvation differently because we appeal to diverse *'consumer groups'*, hopefully avoiding competing against each other.

Sadly, many local churches have a blinkered view of working alongside others outside of their denomination or *'stream'* due to previous disagreements and splits or feeling others are *'doctrinally not quite sound'*. Let's get past the *'I'm right, you're wrong'* attitude and find ways to complement and co-operate rather than compete within the Body of Christ.

Yes, we have differences but focusing on what we agree about, rather than disagree with, we can:

- Effectively collaborate to enable people accept Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.



- Assist those who have slipped away to regain their faith.
- Lovingly care for the poor and marginalised through jointly sponsored activities, e.g. CAP Centres or Foodbanks.
- Partner together and facilitate united community activities – for example instead of three local churches running a summer children's Holiday Club, why not work together to provide three different holiday events during the year and save on resources which could be redirected in other activities?

Is this idealistic? Maybe, but let's take God at His word. Psalm 133 promises a blessing when we ***"live together in unity"***.¹⁸

It's true 'unity' isn't 'uniformity', but God envisages us having the same heart – attitude, motives and intentions – to mutually proclaim His greatness and love.

Israel's twelve tribes had diverse abilities, gifts, functions and characteristics but were welded into a Kingdom totally united under God's authority when adversity struck or needed to achieve an objective together.

A GLORIOUS BRIDE

We're getting to the conclusion – honestly!

Candidly, I'm exasperated the media habitually portrays the Church as ineffectual and spineless. But is that due to the way we come across?

We should be proclaiming God's great love and kindness, authentically living out our faith, rather than apologising or compromising our beliefs to circumvent potential offence. I know – I'm guilty as charged.

The Book of Revelation is a mystery to me. When our children were young, Rosalyn and I used to read them The Lion's Children's Bible where Revelation only warrants two pages, which even I could understand!

John's vision of heaven is described with such superlative and descriptive imagery that it's hard to be unimpressed by what's awaiting us. He likens believers to a glorious bride on her wedding day beautifully dressed for her husband.¹⁹ Paul, in Ephesians describes Jesus





presenting the Church as being ***“a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”***²⁰

It's a far cry from where we are today but thankfully the Bible says on the last day we will be eternally changed – transformed in a flash.²¹

But why wait when we can do something about it today?

Although Philippians 3:20 tells us our ***“citizenship is in heaven”***, we live here and now on earth where we are called to be God's ambassadors.

Jesus focused much of His teaching on explaining how the kingdom of heaven's values and standards differ from human philosophies and belief systems.

In a bid to distinguish the way we live from those who don't yet know the extent of Jesus' love, mercy and grace, 1 Peter 2:14 describes us as ***“foreigners and exiles”*** (other translations use ***“aliens and strangers”***).

Being a citizen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, my passport affirms I have a 'right of abode' in the UK and I'm permitted to exit and re-enter the country. Governments across the world are required to allow me to 'pass freely' and to 'afford... such assistance and protection as may be necessary'. Provided I act legally, I'm protected by the full weight and authority of the UK Government.

I'm a citizen of heaven yet I'm living in a foreign environment where God's rule doesn't always exist. My life, words and actions, should positively influence what happens around me – with rights come responsibilities.

¹⁸ Psalm 133:1

¹⁹ Revelation 21:2

²⁰ Ephesians 5:27

²¹ 1 Cor 15:51-52

ANOTHER "SELAH" MOMENT

The following three Scriptures reveal ways we can demonstrate our heavenly citizenship in a foreign land – do they describe us?

- I'm holy and righteous just as God is holy²²
- Reflecting the Lord's glory, I'm being transformed to become increasingly like Jesus²³
- I'm divesting my old nature and being renewed in knowledge in the image of my Creator²⁴



It's a scriptural principle, not wishful thinking, that we can progressively emulate Jesus, so representing Him on earth.

No-one who's not a Christian is remotely impressed by our talk about Christianity. What counts is seeing the miraculous, and one of the greatest miracles they will see is a Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, committed to each other in love and unity.

1 Thessalonians 3:12 (NLT) reads, ***"... may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow"***.

"Grow and overflow" conjures up an image of a force that's uncontainable; inextinguishable and impossible to conceal.

If we're permitted to have favourite Bible verses, I'm greedy and have two!

- ***"Only let us live up to what we have attained"*** – Philippians 3:16
- ***"...the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love"*** – Galatians 5:6b

Take a final 'SELAH MOMENT' to reflect on the implications of these verses. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to show us how best we can work out these principles practically in our relationships.

Don't take too long reflecting though – there's a world out there that needs us to get on with the job, sort out our relationships and be the **'BEAUTIFUL BODY'** that God intended us to be. We can do it and when we do, we'll see transformation, in our personal relationships and across the Church to beneficially impact the whole of society. It happened with the early Church and the outcome was ***"The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."***²⁵


The **'BEAUTIFUL BODY'** of Christ growing – that would be worth seeing!

²² 1 Peter 1:15-16

²³ 2 Corinthians 3:18

²⁴ Colossians 39:10

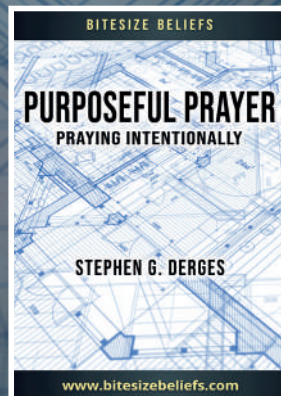
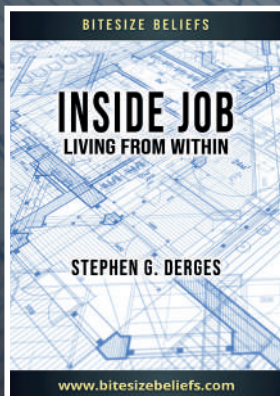
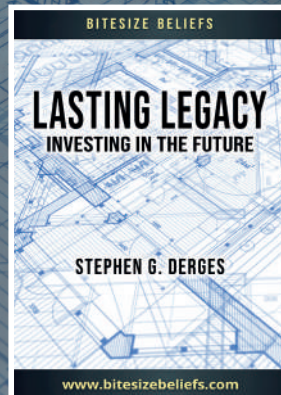
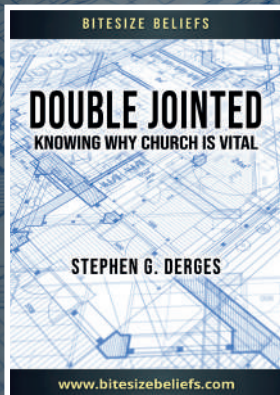
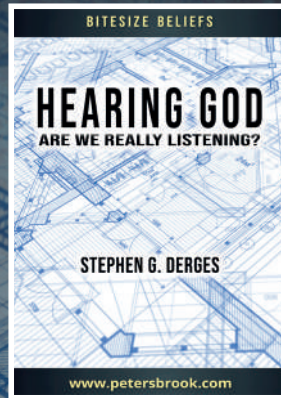
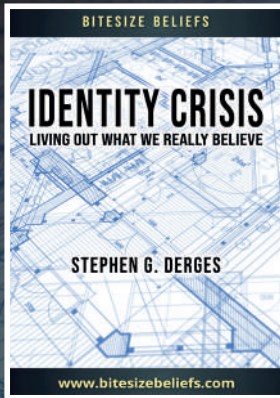
²⁵ Acts 2:44

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding an open Bible. The person is wearing a blue t-shirt and dark jeans. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting. The Bible has a dark cover and its pages are visible.

**“...MAY THE
LORD MAKE
YOUR LOVE FOR
ONE ANOTHER
AND FOR ALL
PEOPLE GROW
AND OVERFLOW” .
“GROW AND
OVERFLOW”**

1 Thessalonians 3:12

OTHER **BITESIZE BELIEFS** TITLES



FOR FURTHER INFO...

www.bitesizebeliefs.com

Discover Faith Lift

A daily devotional to lift your faith.

To be encouraged each and every day
Subscribe for free via www.faithlift.org

DISCOVER



@NPNCOMMUNITY
WWW.NEIGHBOURHOODPRAYER.NET

BELIEVINGTOGETHER

Jesus said people would know we were His followers by the way we love each other, so how come Church attendance is declining? Has Christianity lost its attraction because people see division and discontentment in the Church? How can we solve age-old disagreements and misunderstandings “making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”?

“BEAUTIFUL BODY” looks at these and other questions to clearly outline what the Bible says about relationships in a simple, practical manner. It’s not good enough to sweep problems under the carpet otherwise we’ll trip over every time we walk into church.

If we’re truly serious about seeking transformation in our communities, we have to get to grips with painful issues that both tear churches apart and hamper the effectiveness of the Gospel.

Find out how you can be part of the solution and not part of the problem.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Stephen Derges was previously Pastor of a Baptist Church and now a Trustee focused on leading an independent evangelical church in Devon.

He writes for various publications and websites, speaks at churches and conferences and has broadcast on local radio and television on faith and business leadership. Both he and his wife are certified Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® practitioners.

More information at: www.bitesizebeliefs.com



Published by PetersBrook

www.petersbrook.com

