

BITESIZE BELIEFS

The background of the entire page is a detailed architectural blueprint. It features various lines, shapes, and text typical of a technical drawing, including dimensions like '10M', '2500', '1500', '3450', '1800', '24M²', and '1400'. There are also some circular and rectangular outlines representing building structures and site plans.

DOUBLE JOINTED

KNOWING WHY CHURCH IS VITAL

STEPHEN G. DERGES

www.bitesizebeliefs.com

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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 – it's my prayer it will lead to a greater understanding of God's ways and a deeper relationship with Him.

WHY THE BOOK?

This is one of a series of 'pamphlet type' books I've written over the years to help people grow spiritually and, as you can see, it's not very long. It's not because I haven't much to say, but in this age of 'soundbites' and 'instant makeovers', I thought short, easy-to-read books would be more accessible. There are 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 more recently, Chair of the Trustees and Leadership Team of an Independent Evangelical church, I've learnt a multitude of lessons – some painful – as well as known God's gracious favour.

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 for reflection on the personal implications. And please don't skip over the Bible passages – God's word has power – take time to genuinely meditate on them.

So, find a comfortable chair, sit back, get a cup of tea (or a 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

DOUBLE JOINTED

It hurt, really hurt, and yet as injuries go it was relatively minor.

Whilst playing rugby, during a lineout I'd mistimed the catch, resulting in the ball hitting the end of my thumb. I can hear brains whirring, *"What's he on about? The ball's hit his thumb – what a shame!"*

Okay, it wasn't life-threatening, but remember, I'm a man! I'd dislocated my thumb and it was painful, but worse was to come. The trainer/medic arrived with his *'magic sponge'* – basically a bucket of ice-cold water. With a few muttered tut-tuts came words I didn't want to hear, *"This is going to hurt a bit – look away now."* He was right.

A quick twist, a popping sound and oh boy, it sure hurt, but thankfully the thumb joint was returned to its socket. There was no pain-killing spray in those days, so it was off the pitch to apply a strengthening bandage and then back on to finish the match.



What's the point? Ever since, I've had a weakness in the thumb on my right hand. It doesn't cause any real problems. I just know it's weak and occasionally, too much pressure causes it to complain a bit.

There's a similarity – an analogy – we can make between my thumb dislocating incident and what happens in the Church when Christians get together.

But before we get there, let's have a look at what's happening in many countries today.

DECLINING CHURCH IMPACT

In Britain and other Western countries, there's been a continuing decline in the influence of the Church. Overall attendance has fallen, especially in traditional denominations, and an overall reduction in numbers professing allegiance to the Christian faith. The growth of *'house churches'*, was primarily due to existing – often disillusioned and disaffected – Christians transferring between churches, rather than people becoming new Jesus-believers.

As many of these new expressions became established and their founding leaders possibly lost their visionary edge, or handed on their baby to successors, we've seen a shake-up in this radical expression of the Body of Christ.

I recall hearing Ian Smale (better known to many as Ishmael) speaking to parents in the early 1990's with a challenge that has stuck with me – if our generation's children needed to initiate new models of church by the time they reached our age, we would have failed them.

Many folks find working out God's intentions for their lives, and consequently the impact they and the Church have on society, problematic. Hopefully, by the end of this short book, we'll have a better understanding of God's purposes and realise why it's called 'DOUBLE JOINTED'.

INVOLVED OR UNATTACHED?

We're so used to worldly wisdom telling us we can never trust anyone else, that we should make it on our own because no-one else will look out for us, or that as it's our life, we should always look out for 'number one'. It reminds me of the egotistical attitude of the Queen of Hearts in 'Alice in Wonderland' when she says, "*Your way? Your way? Everything here is my way*". It's also intrigues me that Frank Sinatra's "*I did it my way*", is the most popular song at funeral celebrations.

Regretfully, this attitude is increasingly found in the Church. We become inward looking and distrustful of other people's motives. But God has designed us to be inter-dependent, rather than independent. We need to get to grips with the concept that God values relationship above everything else.

At Creation, we see the Trinity – the most perfect example of relational unity – working together. "***Let us make man in our image, in our likeness***", says Genesis 1:26, and in Genesis 2:18-23 we read because Adam had no other human relationships, God created Eve. Adam had the wonderful privilege of not only meeting with God¹, but also the company of his mate – think of the

fun it must have been to develop that relationship!

Rosalyn & I are both Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® certified practitioners and we know from experience how different everyone is in many areas of life. But extraverts aren't always stand-up comedians and introverts don't lock themselves away in solitary confinement or on a desert island. It has more to do with how individuals process information



and renew their energy. Extraverts prefer to interact with others whilst introverts prefer less external input – sometime none at all.

But whatever the personality type, as the old saying goes, "*No-one is an island*". Somewhere along the line we need to develop relationships with other people. It's impossible to just emigrate off the planet (at least it is right now) so wouldn't it be better if we all accepted the premise that being with people offers mutually rewarding benefits?

Some of us enjoy solitude and many are comfortable with their own company – so please don't think I'm saying that it's wrong to get away by oneself. Taking time out to commune with nature is great, but time alone with God will be

¹ Genesis 3:8



even more beneficial.

We're hardwired for relationship. God planned we should enjoy other people's company and, most importantly, His. The whole plan of salvation is designed to bring us back to the place where, following Adam and Eve's rebellion, humanity could once again enjoy an unfettered and unbroken relationship with our Heavenly Father.

THE TYPES OF JOINTS

I mentioned earlier we could learn some lessons from my dislocated thumb experience and we're going to get to them shortly. But to do that, I'd like us to consider the way we're physically built.

I'm not a student of anatomy, but I do know there are three types of joints in our bodies.

- **The immovable** – the joints between the individual bones of the skull are fixed and hopefully don't move around.
- **The partially movable** – like those between the vertebrae in our back.
- **The freely movable** – those permitting movement in the limbs.

Sadly, some of us are **totally immovable**. How many times have we met people who say, *"This is my way of doing things; I'm alright and I'm not going to change"*?

But physical change is inevitable. Everything, apart from our eyes, changes in size – either bigger or smaller in dimension! But, so I'm reliably informed, our eyes remain constant in size.

And what are eyes for? Vision.

Doesn't that speak volumes? God has provided an anatomical spiritual principle – we have the capability of *'fully seeing'* from day one.

Yet others of us are **partially movable**.

These people recognise change happens but usually prefer not to instigate it and so tend to keep within their comfort zones. They may react to *'some'* change, occasionally positively but at other times, not so enthusiastically. Overall, they prefer to do without it, especially if change means major adjustments to their lifestyles.

Finally, others are **freely movable**. Not only do they embrace change wholeheartedly, but they also look for opportunities to initiate change through introducing creative ideas or innovative methods to adapt processes. Sometimes labelled as revolutionaries, these *'change-agents'* encourage us



not to accept the status quo but to seek out and pioneer new ideas and activities. Sometimes their initiatives may not always work out and they have to backtrack, but as someone once said, *"If you never make a mistake, you'll never make anything."*

Yet even the freely movable can be **fixed in attitude**. Ball and socket joints, such as shoulder and hip, allow movement in virtually any direction, whereas hinged joints, like the knee and elbow, only allow vertical rather than lateral movement.

Sometimes, even those who are freely movable, need to review and reassess their attitudes and motives!

It's time to take our first **'SELAH MOMENT'**. Have a look at the Introduction to find out what these are as more will follow later.

Let consider how we match up with the following questions:

What type of person am I?

● Am I immovable, partially movable or freely movable? What boundaries are there which I'm not prepared to cross? How do I decide if, and when, I'm going to change?

What's my attitude to change?

● Do I embrace it, fear it, or merely let it happen around me? What would it take for me to become less fearful of change? If I embrace change, have there

been times when I've been too quick off the mark and not fully considered the implications?

● **What have I learned from some of the decisions I've made in my life?**

These decisions may have resulted in success or not achieved the anticipated outcomes. How have I changed through both my achievements and mistakes?

The whole concept of **'BITESIZE BELIEFS'** is to get us to face up to personal issues. If nothing different happens as a result of reading this book, we'll have wasted our time. My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will enable us to put into practice what we're learning together. By the way, the **'SELAH MOMENTS'** get tougher as we go on!

Talking of getting on, it's time to look at what the Bible says about joining or rather joining.



THE TINA PRINCIPLE

TINA is a mnemonic standing for ***“There Is No Alternative”***.

On becoming a Christian, we are automatically joined in relationship with other Christians – there is no other alternative, it happens! We’re members of the Universal Church – the Body of Christ. The *‘joining fee’* involves:

- Recognising our need for forgiveness
- Accepting Jesus’ sacrificial death on the Cross
- Believing in Jesus as our personal Saviour
- Repentance for our disobedience
- A willingness to invite the Holy Spirit to fill us so we become more like Jesus.

In addition, there may be a need to apologise and seek forgiveness from anyone we may have harmed, including, if appropriate, restitution.

Physical joints occur where two or more objects join together. It includes both the confluence (the place where they meet) and the connection made. And that’s what relationships are all about.

² 1 Corinthians 12:27

³ Colossians 1:18



Apart from his experience on the road to Damascus, there is no account in the Bible the Apostle Paul ever met Jesus, but I believe he quickly realised the key to understanding God’s purposes was to grasp His heart for relationships.

Writing to the Ephesian church, Paul explains our position and what Jesus has done – have a look at the table below.

Elsewhere Paul tells us, **“You are the body of Christ and each of you is a part of it”²**, and **“He (Jesus) is the head of the body, the Church”³**.

As Paul says four times in Ephesians 3, this is a *‘mystery’* but it’s all down to the Holy Spirit working in us. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we read that we’re baptised into one Body by the Holy Spirit. He initiates and perpetuates our life because the Holy Spirit is the lifeblood of the Body.

The moment we become a Christian, we become fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household	Ephesians 2:19
We become joined together with other Christians in a ‘building’ – a holy temple in the Lord; a dwelling in which the Spirit lives	Ephesians 2:21-22
We are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone	Ephesians 2:20
We are heirs together with Israel, members of one body, sharers together of God's promise	Ephesians 3:6

GLOBAL AND LOCAL

Although we don't have an option about belonging to the Universal Church with every other Christian, we do have a choice whether we want to join a local expression of church, or not.

In the days of the Early Church, the issue of which local church to join wasn't relevant – there was only one expression of church in Jerusalem. They met daily in the Temple and in homes⁴ but the key was the way in which they built relationships, and Luke records in Acts 2:47, ***"The Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved."***

On the Day of Pentecost⁵, we see a new dynamic. The Apostle Peter spoke to a crowd of people from 16 different countries and regions, who were visiting Jerusalem for the Festival. Over 3,000 people became believers and were baptised that day, returning to their home countries, presumably setting up different local fellowships.

Hebrews 10:24-25 encourages us to, ***"spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing"***.

The writer's use of the word *'habit'* reinforces there's an option – it's a choice we make to be involved or not. Habits start as choices, but we can also choose to modify our behaviour.

Over the centuries though, Christians have had an unfortunate tendency to fall out with each other. Various doctrinal issues and liturgical preferences have caused division, often due to pride, personality clashes, misunderstanding, selfishness or just plain *'immovable joints'*, culminating in many different forms and formats of local church.

Although I'm certain none of us has got it entirely right, our Heavenly Father has been gracious enough to redeem divisive situations and allow His blessing to flow through imperfect vehicles.

I'd like us to look at three potential areas which cause some Christians to either not join a local church or leave one.

- We haven't really grasped the implications of becoming a Christian.
- We haven't understood the concept of genuine discipleship.
- We don't have a robust enough strategy in place to keep people involved.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

In Romans 12:4–8 the Apostle Paul radically states we, ***"form one body"*** and ***"each member of the body belongs to each other"***. Most Christians probably just about cope with the concept of belonging to God, but belonging to *'each other'*? – well that's a different matter, especially if we haven't dealt with the independent spirit issue we discussed earlier.

We're heading for another **'SELAH MOMENT'** but before we do, have a look at the familiar passage in 1 Corinthians 12, especially verses 4 to 27, maybe in a couple of different versions. Ask the Holy Spirit for His insight and for a new understanding of this passage.

The key to what Paul is saying here is that nobody is exempt from being a part of God's purposes. He frequently

⁴ Acts 2:46

⁵ See Acts chapter 2

⁶ For a longer review of this principle have a look at my book **'IDENTITY CRISIS'**

⁷ Luke 10:25-37



uses the phrase *“each one”*, often referring to us in a communal sense. Paul is eager to make us realise we can’t do without each other. It was never God’s intention for only a few members to function in the body.

Here’s that next **‘SELAH MOMENT’** I promised. It’s about to get tougher as we think about the following:

● **God has arranged the parts in the body** – verse 18

What’s my part? Do I know where I can best function and am I doing what God has told me to do?

● **Every part is indispensable** – verse 22

Have I been guilty of downgrading my part? To do so, is to question the divine calling on my life. Or have I ever downgraded someone else’s part? That’s equally harmful. The Amplified Version of the Bible translates verse

27, *“Each one has his own place and function”*.

● **Each member of the body is to have equal concern for one another** – verse 25

Am I concerned for others? Do I help practically, financially, prayerfully and stand together in adversity with others? These are just four of many ways to show concern.

● **If one part suffers, all the other parts suffer with it** – verse 26

Loving care is more than avoiding discord. It includes empathising with each other’s circumstances and, where appropriate, suffering together – feeling the pain. When I see someone in difficulty what’s my response? Do I look away or pass by on the other side or act like the Good Samaritan?

After that **‘SELAH MOMENT’**, let’s move on.

GENUINE DISCIPLESHIP

The problem facing particularly the Western church today, isn't that there's a lack of spirituality in those who aren't yet Christians – there are plenty of non-Christian alternatives around. And it's not because they are unaware of the claims of Jesus and what Christianity offers either. I believe it's more about people being put off because our faith isn't authentic enough. We don't always do what it says we should do on the tin!

I once saw the thought-provoking, and somewhat ironic, bumper sticker: *"I've got nothing against God. It's his Fan Club I can't stand!"*

Jesus instructed the Disciples in His famous last speech to them before He left earth after the resurrection, to:

"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."⁸

Most of us will be aware we're not called to make 'converts' or 'believers'; but to ***"make disciples"***. The initial step of believing, and accepting, Jesus is just that – an initial step – but it has eternal consequences.

Making disciples was at the very heart of Jesus' mission statement for His followers – and that includes us today. He wasn't

saying, *"Go and make 'clones' of others who'll believe what you tell them."* He's encouraging us to recognise our lives are to be based on His life. In effect, we are to have the same kind of genetic make-up – or spiritual DNA – He had.

The essence of becoming a disciple is to be someone who thinks, acts, speaks and represents the one they follow and who sends them out to proclaim a message. It's not about mentally assenting to a philosophy or doctrine – rather active engagement and the willingness to be so totally associated with Jesus, we actually become like Him.

Jesus said, ***"No servant is greater than his master nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him."***⁹ But often we think that we can take shortcuts when it comes to our faith.

I'm certainly not from the hair shirt, sackcloth and ashes brigade. I'd rather accept Jesus' promise of having ***"abundant life"***¹⁰ as the older Bible versions translate it. But authentic Christianity involves sacrifice. After all, what is it about ***"Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple"***?¹¹ that we don't understand?

Time for our next 'SELAH MOMENT'.

What were some of the elements of becoming disciples, which involves the same kind of sacrifice Jesus demonstrated to the Disciples? Meditate on the following.

● Total submission and obedience to God's purposes.

Consider Luke 22:42, John 5:19-23 and John 6:38. Jesus was not only ***"obedient unto death"***¹², He was also obedient in life.

⁸ Matthew 8:19 (The Great Commission)

⁹ John 13:16

¹⁰ John 10:10

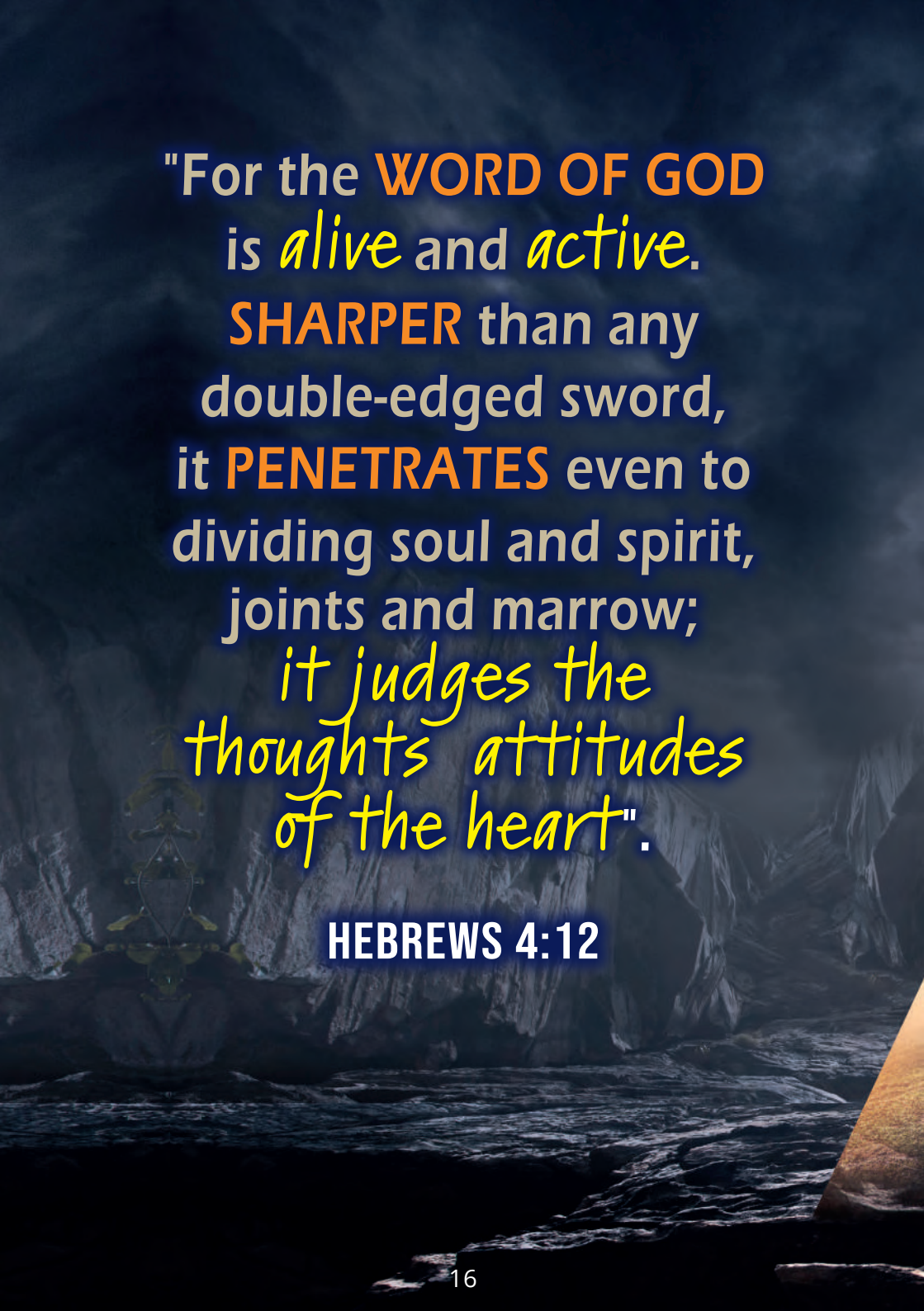
¹¹ Luke 14:27

¹² Philippians 2:8

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MATTHEW 8:19



"For the **WORD OF GOD**
is *alive* and *active*.
SHARPER than any
double-edged sword,
it **PENETRATES** even to
dividing soul and spirit,
joints and marrow;
*it judges the
thoughts attitudes
of the heart*".

HEBREWS 4:12





● A humble yet assured attitude...

Jesus knew who He was, yet He demonstrated sacrificial servanthood. Take a longer look at the Apostle Paul's wonderful poem of praise in Philippians 2:5-11 and review his encouragement to imitate Jesus' attitude of humility. For a second example, look at the story of Jesus washing the Disciples' feet in John chapter 13 and note verse 3 where Jesus says He knew who He was and where He'd come from.

● A relevant and real relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit...

There are many Bible passages we could look at here.

- The times Jesus went off alone to pray at night, in the evening or early in the morning.
- How He knew the Old Testament scriptures and prophecies and could amaze the religious leaders with His understanding.
- His awareness of the anointing of the ***"Spirit of the Sovereign Lord being upon Him"***¹³ enabling Him to bring sight and hearing; preach good news; release captives, etc.

Here's the **'SELAH MOMENT'** punch-line – how do I match up to Jesus' requirements?

If, as Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:23-24, it's God's will for me to be recreated ***"to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"***, how well am I doing? Let's ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten us of any areas where re-adjustment is necessary.

Time to move on to the third reason I've identified as being a cause of people not joining a local church.

THE LACK OF A STRATEGY OF INVOLVEMENT

I'm not a total physical wreck really, but I once had the misfortune of rupturing (snapping) my Achilles tendon, which was also very painful – more so than the dislocated thumb. I've had keyhole surgery to remove offending pieces of cartilage from my knee (the result



of course of too much praying!) and more recently had a replacement hip operation as well as repairs to a broken wrist – the second time I've fractured wrist bones. Perhaps I'm a physical wreck after all – the accidents aren't waiting to happen, they're already happening.

We looked earlier at 1 Corinthians 12, but the problem with superficially thinking about this passage, is that we only concentrate on those body parts Paul mentions – hand, foot, eye, ear.

It's vital to have hands and feet, ears and eyes together with other more visible parts like noses and mouths, but Paul recognises there are ***"unseen"***, seemingly

¹³ see Isaiah 61:1-3 & Luke 4:18-19

weaker, parts that are indispensable too. He expands this thought in Ephesians 4:16, saying: **"From Him (Jesus) the whole body, joined together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."**

A ligament is a short band of tough, flexible, fibrous tissue that binds bones together ensuring limbs function as they're intended to. Ligaments, tendons, cartilages, arteries, veins and a whole host of other seemingly unimportant *'bits'n'bobs'* (a technical, medical term for internal organs) are vital components for our well-being and mobility.

Some parts may be more visible than others, but nevertheless, they're all important. My mobility was seriously impaired when my Achilles tendon wasn't functioning as it should, and my knee was painful when bits of cartilage

were floating around in it. The same was true with my hip. I had pain in various parts of my leg and back because I was compensating for a problem I couldn't actually see, but which I could feel wasn't right.

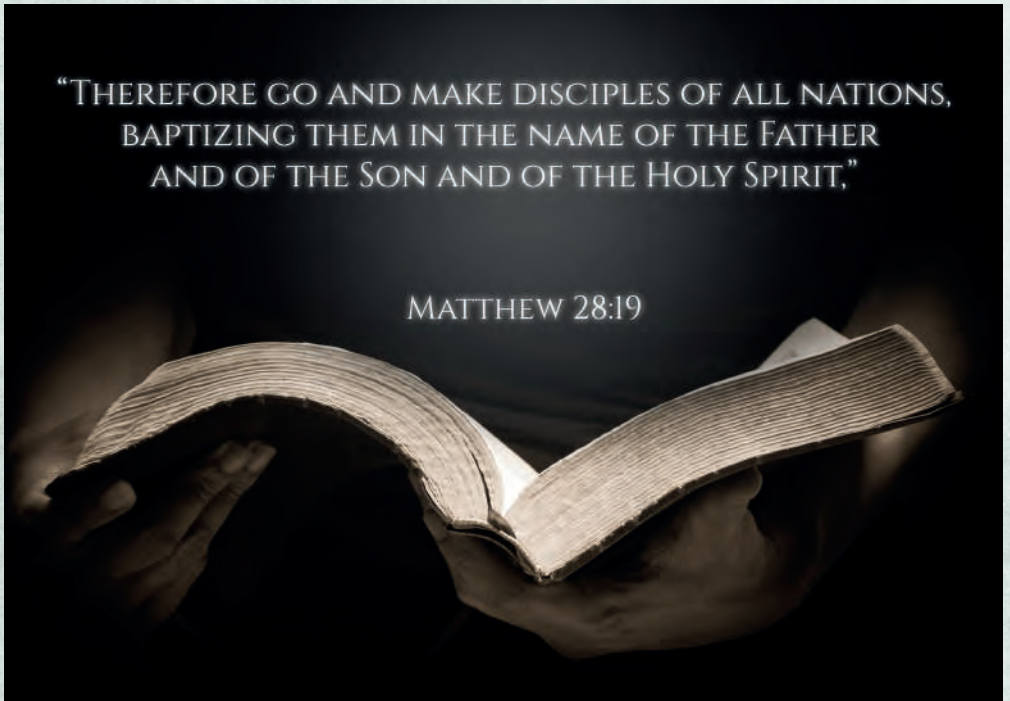
In the local church, some *'unseen'* people play invaluable parts – without them we don't function effectively.

We need a strategy to ensure people are connected, bought in, involved, engaged, to enable the local church to share God's good news in an appropriate and relevant way to our generation.

In **'BITESIZE BELIEFS – BEAUTIFUL BODY'**, I've written about a customer relationship strategy I developed for a company I previously worked for, called **A.R.M. – ATTRACT | RETAIN | MAXIMISE**. And I believe we need to employ similar principles in relation to local church involvement.

**"THEREFORE GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS,
BAPTIZING THEM IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER
AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT,"**

MATTHEW 28:19





How do we attract new people?

Becoming Pastor of a Baptist Church in Shropshire, I introduced three 'R' words which became our Core Values:

Real | Relevant | Relational.

These attributes became the basis of our teaching and the way in which we encouraged people to live their lives. I believe one of the reasons the church grew both numerically and spiritually over the years was due to the congregation living out the '3 R's' teaching.

Consider how Jesus lived. He wasn't superficially involved with people. He made friends with them, associated with them, meeting them *'where they*

were'. I'm convinced the reason He said, **"Go and make disciples"**,¹⁴ was because we need to be where the people are rather than hoping or expecting them to come to us.

- When they were hungry, He fed them.
- When they were afraid, He gave them inner strength and peace.
- When they had physical difficulties, He healed them.
- When they were overcome with grief, He empathised with them.
- When they didn't understand God's ways, He used stories – everyday real-life incidences – to teach them.

I once drove past a church with a *'wayside pulpit'* displaying a photograph of a bunch of grapes and the text **"I am the true vine"**. Now I know it's scriptural

¹⁴ Matthew 28:19

(John 15:1 to be precise) but what does that mean in our generation and culture? In someone's imagination, the building could have been an off-license – somewhat ironic as this particular church denomination didn't believe in drinking alcohol! Naturally, I'm not denying the power of God's word to be effective, but how relevant is talking about vineyards in a suburb in the middle of the Birmingham/Wolverhampton conurbation?

I sometimes wonder if Jesus had been born in our generation, whether He would have been a carpenter. I'm not disparaging carpenters (one of

why the concept of '*body ministry*' is so essential. If we're serious about **"every supporting ligament"** contributing, we must consciously find ways to involve people so that their gifts and talents have an outlet. Involvement also counteracts the independence issue because it helps us appreciate that we can't do it all by ourselves – we need other people's input and output.

As a church leader, it's not my job to tell people what to do (or how and when to do it) but to help them identify (another 'I' word) their passion and find ways to resource, facilitate and support their vision practically. It's about engaging with people to help release what's within them.

Finding out what spurs someone into action takes time – the interaction part – as we don't usually get to hear what excites someone on the first visit. Sadly, time is often the commodity most church leaders find difficult to free up because we're so busy doing other so-called important things and going to meetings!

And maximising people?

Here are three P's:

Partnership | Prayer | Persistence

I'm a fan of alliteration as hopefully it helps us remember concepts!

Creating an atmosphere where people partner and peer mentor one another, leads to increased spiritual maturity. Paul complimented the Philippian church in their partnership with him.¹⁵ No doubt it was a two-way process – mutual support, resourcing and encouragement flowing both ways.

And praying together is essential – in large groups, small groups, two's or three's or any combination. Prayer is



my brothers is a '*chippie*' and my Dad trained as one) but if Jesus had been born in our technological age, would He have had a profession more reflective of our culture? Let's find ways to be appropriately aligned and relevant to our communities.

What about retaining people?

Here are four 'I' words:

Interact | Involve | Influence | Inspire.

People need to feel they belong, and their contribution is valued – that's



the powerhouse to enable us to live for God. I'm trying not to be directive, but one aspect I believe we should be increasing is prayer.

- Praying for individuals.
- Praying for communities.
- Praying for the expansion of the Kingdom.
- Praying for resources to be released.
- Praying for opportunities to witness.

The list is endless but disappointingly, often our willingness to pray isn't.

This brings me to the last 'P' – persistence.

The Apostle Peter lists persistence as a quality we need to add to our faith – along with several others. Actually, he

uses another 'P-word' – perseverance – but it amounts to the same thing. Stickability – the determination to keep on keeping on.

The reason it's so important is Peter says if we add these qualities we won't be *"unproductive or ineffective"*. This isn't blind doggedness or an inability, or even reluctance, to change our minds and actions. It's about tenacity, commitment and dependability, as well as being faithful and resolute in our involvement in the Kingdom.

Regretfully, we probably all know people who have fallen at the first hurdle when difficulty or opposition hits. We need strategies in place to help keep people actively involved, enabling them to not just survive, but to thrive.

Before we start to conclude, it's time for **'SELAH MOMENT #4'**. This time please think through the following:

¹⁵ Philippians 1:5

¹⁶ 2 Peter 1:3-8

● **How real, relevant and relational am I in sharing my faith with others?**

Do I shy away from opportunities? To my shame, I have on occasions. And what about my family, work or social relationships – how effective is my Christian faith in those scenarios?

As the old saying goes, *“If I was on trial for my faith would there be enough evidence to convict me?”*



● **What inspires me and how involved am I with the people with whom I fellowship?**

How much do I value the input I receive from my church leaders or when sharing in corporate times of worship? It's been a wonderful benefit throughout my life, that people have supported, encouraged and challenged me.

● **Who are my partners and the people who input into my life?**

Would I miss them if they were no longer there? In fact, do I have people who I trust enough to share my innermost feelings and concerns? If not, why not?

● **What improvements could I make to my prayer life both with other people and as an individual?**

Do I pray only when I'm in trouble or is it a regular prioritised activity? How often do I get together with others to pray, and if I don't, what prevents me?

BEING COMMITTED TO A LOCAL CHURCH

I sincerely believe in the local church gathering together even though in our communication-led world there are more sermons available on TV, radio or the Internet than we could ever watch or listen to. There's a huge range of daily devotionals and Christian books than we could ever read in our lifetimes; talented songwriters compose excellent worship songs we can download to take with us; real-time digital church services are available virtually anytime, anywhere, so why become involved with local church?

The answer is simple – we're supposed to be contributors not just consumers.

Genuinely, I'm not knocking the availability of these great resources – they're especially beneficial for anyone physically incapable of meeting with a local congregation and vital for Christians living under repressive regimes where outside input is the only means to receive teaching.

During the pandemic, there was an exponential increase in the use of live-streaming, webcasts and webinars enabling people in different world-wide locations to join events simultaneously. Unfortunately, some folks who gravitated to online services during the lockdowns, haven't returned to in-person gatherings – yet! This has resulted in many churches moving to a 'hybrid' model and church leaders now have to work out how to



disciple two different '*congregations*' – those who meet in-person and those who are online.

Personally, whilst I feel online has its place – especially for those people who are '*shopping around for church*' – it's not a substitute for having personal, intimate fellowship with other believers in an environment where "*iron sharpens iron*".¹⁷ The local church is where we learn how to interact with Christians and serve alongside each other. After all, we're going to spend eternity together – in person.

As we've seen, local church is a place where we "*spur one another to love and good deeds*", and it's where wise spiritual leaders care, protect, inform, teach and inspire us. And they must give an account for the way they undertake this role.¹⁸

Local church provides opportunities for the public reading of Scripture, as Paul encouraged his apprentice Timothy¹⁹,

for us to engage in communal prayer as well as share communion.

In most towns and cities, there will be a choice of places to attend, but it's vital we find the most suitable one for us. If, as I hope I've established, the local church is a vital component in God's Kingdom strategy, it would be remiss of me not to give some pointers how to choose where, and with whom, to have fellowship.

It's been our normal practice as a family to worship as close to our home as possible. The starting point has always been to investigate and research the available options, asking appropriate questions, as well as going along to check the situation out.

The decision may include choosing between different expressions of local church, including doctrinal views, mission and vision, leadership personnel and style, and congregational demographics – it's vital to be able to '*fit in*'.



Here are a few questions for starters, it may be appropriate to ask.

- Is the teaching and life of the church based on Biblical principles?
- Is Jesus given the highest place – not just lip service?
- How does the Holy Spirit inspire, motivate and empower, and are both the fruit and the gifts of the Spirit in evidence?
- In what ways does the church reach out to communicate God's love to those who haven't yet become Christians? This may be through social action programs to care for practical needs plus direct evangelistic activities.
- Is there an inappropriate sense of pride or competition in relation to other churches in the area or does this church aim to work cooperatively with others in sharing the Gospel and providing for people's needs?
- Can it be said of the church – ***"By this everyone will know you are my disciples because you love one another?"***²⁰

The Church is described as a ***"Bride"***²¹, so if this isn't inappropriate terminology, this process of *"spiritual dating"* should either lead to a growing inner peace, or disquiet – an indicator further investigation may be required.

Once the decision to be associated with a local church is made, I believe it's essential to be fully committed to that congregation. This isn't so much about

a formal membership programme, although having a suitable programme for welcoming new people would indicate the church is serious about commitment. It's more about being physically involved in the church's activities, and a willingness to serve and to be accountable to the leadership and the other members of the congregation.

Sadly though, there are times when, having been a part of a local church for a while, some people begin to feel they don't belong, or that they should move on.

Being joined together is a two-way process and, going back to the marriage analogy, we need to remember the solemn warning given at a wedding ceremony, *"What God has joined together, let no man separate"*.

If there is a potential parting of the ways in the offing, usually there are 3 options:

1. Escape... Regretfully, leaving often perpetuates the problem because people take it with them. I've come to realise that the spirit with which someone leaves a church, is the one they bring with them. If they leave because of dissatisfaction with the leaders, almost invariably they'll have problems with their new ones.

2. Stay and maintain a front... But that doesn't work either because Ephesians 4:25 says, ***"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body."*** We must face up to difficulties and problems if we are to overcome them – we're supposed to be ***"more than conquerors"***.²²

3. Be open and honest and seek the Lord... Talk to, and pray with, the leaders about the reasons behind any discontent. If they're wise, they'll be prepared to

¹⁷ Proverbs 27:17

¹⁸ Hebrews 13:17

¹⁹ 1 Timothy 4:13

²⁰ John 13:35

²¹ Revelation 19:7

²² Romans 8:37

listen. They may not agree with the concern and remember, they have the responsibility and accountability before God, to lead with Spirit-led discernment and ensure this isn't a spiritual attack that could potentially sidetrack them by not focusing on the church's mission and vision.

And always confide in the appropriate people instead of talking behind their backs.

DECLINING CHURCH IMPACT

I started this book by recalling my dislocated thumb incident, which is where I'd like to finish, because there are two types of *'double jointed-ness'*.

There are many benefits when our joints are working properly, but in many cases, after suffering a physical dislocation, there's the potential for a joint to move in different directions, almost at will.

Dislocation easily occurs, but there's always pain. Along with the separation, there's a sense of not knowing what to do, together with a feeling of being under pressure, and even panic. If left out of joint for just a short period, numbness sets in. Yes, there's pain when the joint is replaced, but there's also overwhelming relief.

Naturally, there will be concern and wariness about the potential for future injury, but as the joint is exercised, supported and strengthened, over time it will begin to heal and become effective again.

Isn't that a great illustration? We're supposed to be *'double jointed'* – linked into both the Universal Church and a local

church. But when we become dislocated from a local church, it's possible to become *inappropriately 'double jointed'*.

This in turn leads to three problems:

- Being out of place.
- Being out of relationship.
- Being out of control.

The outcome of these three breakdowns leads to discontent, disillusionment and eventually displacement, when someone leaves their church or, at the very least, stops attending on a regular basis.

It's never been God's intention for us to be dislocated – from Him or from relationships with other people. In devising His plan of salvation, His intention was that we should be in communion with other Christians where we would be supported, strengthened, encouraged and loved and where our gifts and talents could be expressed for the common good.

It wasn't just a good idea that there should be a local church with which we could be involved – it was the Divine Plan.

Can I be a loner in the Kingdom of God? Yes, but we're called to be salt and light in our world²³ and the Church needs to regain its rightful place in terms of influence and impact. We have a much better chance of effecting change when we work in unity. The implications have eternal significance as the light we'll shine will be so much brighter when we're shining together.

The key question for each of us is whether we're **'DOUBLE JOINTED'** or somehow dislocated?

The choice is up to us both individually and collectively – let's choose wisely!

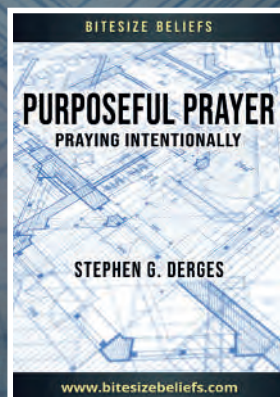
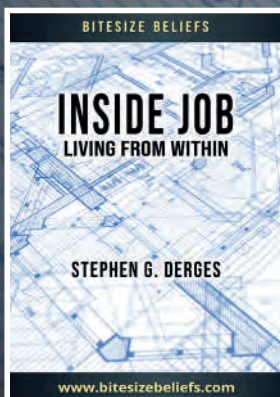
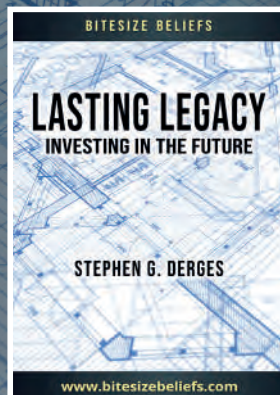
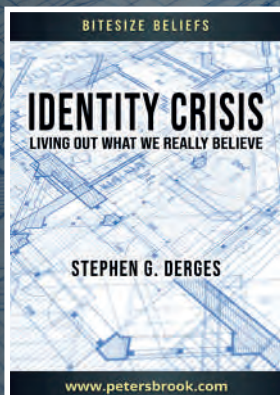
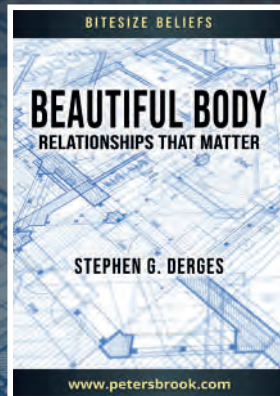
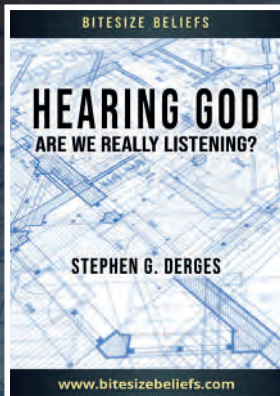
²³ Matthew 5:13-16

John 13:35

**“BY THIS EVERYONE WILL KNOW
YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES BECAUSE
YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER?”**



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BELIEVINGTOGETHER

Ever felt that it would be great to be a Christian on a desert island? That too many pressures are exerted on us by being part of 'church' – whatever form that might take? And what about the fear of getting too involved with other people? Will we end up doing things we don't want to do?

'DOUBLE JOINTED' looks at the whole issue of involvement in the Body of Christ. Why is it some Christians don't want to be part of a local expression of God's family. Why do others having become involved start to back off? What about the 'Lone-Ranger Christians' or someone who flits between different churches?

As we begin to understand God's original purpose when He established the Church, maybe we'll recognise He really does know best, and it's our ways and attitudes that require change if we're going to enjoy an abundant life.



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.

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