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Topic : How to Build a Church That Matters  
Passage : Matthew (various passages)  
Date : 28 August 2006

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Communism, the Concorde passenger aircraft, floppy discs and pagers – these four objects have one thing in common – they have been overtaken or replaced by more advanced ideas or technologies.

- Communism has largely been replaced by democracy as a system of government.
- The Concorde has been replaced by conventional, long haul aircraft with larger passenger capacities and which are cheaper to operate.
- Floppy discs have been replaced by thumb drives and other flash storage devices, which are cheap, reliable and have larger capacities.
- The pager has been replaced by the mobile phone.

The Christian faith is now 2000 years old, or 4000 if you count from the time that God revealed Himself to Abraham. Given its age, today I want to ask the question – is church also headed the way of irrelevance ? Are Christians in danger of becoming extinct ?

The church faces very tough competition nowadays.

Why go to church, when you can watch TV, surf internet, play computer games, go shopping, go spa, soon we will even have the integrated resorts !

Then, there is the New Age movement which teaches that people can find inner peace through meditation and other self-help or occult methods. Why depend on the church ?

Finally, if you want to serve the community, there are so many volunteer welfare organisations that you can join. Again, you don't need to be part of the church to do good works !

A few weeks ago, during youth fellowship, we shared in my group about a non-Christian who said that because all religions teach good things, there was really nothing special about Christianity.

Is the Christian faith also in danger of being replaced by other, more interesting ideas ? Is the church also in danger of becoming outdated ? How can we build a church that matters to our modern world ?

The “church” during Jesus’ time also struggled with this question of relevance. The Jews were losing interest in their faith. And those who were not Jews were not interested in Jehovah God. People were looking for something that was missing. But when John the Baptist started his ministry :

“people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of Jordon”.  
(Matt 3 : 5)

And after John the Baptist was imprisoned, Jesus started His ministry and built it into the church that has lasted till today.

What was the church doing wrong ? What was Jesus doing right ? Were people going to Jesus because Jesus had a Hillsongs worship team ? Or because Jesus told good jokes during His sermons ? Is it because Jesus had a very big and nice church building, with a state-of-the-art sound system ?

Live bands, Powerpoint presentations, telling jokes – there are some of the tools used by the present day church to keep up with changes in how people communicate, to enhance the worship experience, and to help believers understand God’s word better. These are just ways of doing things and I think many of them are good. But these alone do not build a church that matters. Today, we are going to look at the gospel of Matthew to discover three timeless truths – applicable for all time whether in the 1st or 10th or 21st, or even 30th century if the world lasts that long – regarding what the church needs to do to remain relevant, and faithful to the purpose that God had called it to.

[ Prayer ]

During Jesus’ time, the New Testament had not been written yet. So the church was not like what we know it to be today. Nonetheless, there were many similarities. The Jews read the Old Testament, like we do. They all worshipped at a temple in Jerusalem, like we worship in church. There were religious leaders known as the Pharisees, just like we have pastors, and there was a “church authority” known as the Sanhedrin, just like we have church councils or committees.

### **THREE SIGNS THAT THE CHURCH IS ILL**

The church during Jesus time, like ours, was very well established. It had a 2000 year history. But the problem with this established church was that it was no longer attracting believers. It did not have a significant impact on the people around it. It was a church that was ILL. In reading the gospel of Matthew, I can see at least three reasons why this was the case :

- It was Insincere;
- It was always Looking inwards;
- It was Legalistic.



### **Insincere**

An insincere church is one that looks righteous on the outside, but is rotten on the inside. While it can attract believers, it cannot keep them, because people soon discover that it does not practice what it preaches.

The Pharisees during Jesus' time were guilty of this. John the Baptist said that

“everything they do is for men to see.” (Matt 3 : 5 - 7)

The Pharisees were more interested in looking good in front of people, than seriously following God. Jesus also said :

“... [ they ] honour Me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from Me.” (Matt 15 : 8)

Is the church today like that ? One of the churches I attended in the past had a fantastic worship team, a well organised cell group structure and a very dynamic childrens' ministry. It had regular prayer meetings that often lasted till past midnight, and where everyone spoke in tongues.

So many things were right about this church, but it never grew in size. It always had only about 100 odd members. It's not that there were no visitors. The problem was that visitors did not stay for very long – at most one year. Even its old members eventually left. Why ?

Because while many things looked good on the outside, some of the church leaders were actually only using the church to glorify themselves. People saw through this, and they left.

## **Looking Inwards**

A church that looks inwards is one that spends all of its time enjoying the fellowship of its own members, but does nothing about the needs of the community.

In Matthew 9, Jesus' latest disciple, Matthew, threw a party to celebrate his conversion from a tax collector to disciple of God. He invited both his fellow disciples, as well as the people who he formerly worked with – the tax collectors and sinners.

“... many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with Him and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, ‘Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners ?’ (Matt 9 : 10 - 13)

So other than being hypocritical, the Pharisees during Jesus' time were only interested in fellowshiping with themselves – respectable people who from the same background and class in society. Prostitutes ? Tax collectors ? Not interested.

Again drawing from my previous experience, I know of a church with a choir whose members would faithfully meet week after week to practice. Although this choir was the pride and joy of the church, its members couldn't really give a good reason for its existence, like why it was so important for the church to have a choir that could sing Handel's Hallelujah chorus in this day and age. The members only knew that they had to meet, and that in many ways they enjoyed each others company. But otherwise it was an exclusive setup, because the members didn't think of, or bother, trying to bring in people who were not like them into the fellowship.

Another previous church that I attended was really big on what I call the “food ministry”. As far as possible, every meeting was made into an excuse for eating, because they enjoyed food so much. So they were always planning for the next pot luck or dinner party. I know because my parents are good cooks and everyone kept asking my family to cook chicken curry. But they didn't make the effort to include people who were not like them, into the fellowship. They were only interested in enjoying themselves.

A church that always looks inward will never be relevant, because it can never attract anyone other than a person who shares exactly the same values and background. But how many such people are there ? How likely is such a church to grow, unless it takes the effort to welcome people who are not like it ?

## **Legalistic**

A legalistic church is one that values its tradition and man-made rules above people. Matthew 12 records an incident where Jesus' disciples were picking up some grain from the fields on the Sabbath. Now the Sabbath was the day of worship for the Jews, just like Sunday is for us. In the Old Testament, God had told the Israelites that they were not to do any work on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees expanded this rule to ridiculous proportions, by specifying to the last detail what was right and wrong to do on Sabbath. There were rules concerning how far a person could walk on a Sabbath day before it was considered “work”. Even today, the lifts stop on every floor on Sabbath day, because to press a lift button is considered work. One of the Sabbath day rules set by the Pharisees was that no one was to pick up grain, and so they were unhappy with Jesus’ disciples.

“Look ! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath !” (Matt 12 : 2)

Not only were some of these strict rules silly, they got in the way of helping people. Because the Pharisees believed that Jesus should not heal a person on a Sabbath day. Healing was a form of work !

Can you imagine a church which tells you that you cannot send anyone to the hospital on Sunday, because the Bible says that no one should work on a Sabbath day ?

Actually, some church rules are not that far off. A previous church that I attended had a silly rule against wearing bermudas to church. So if you wore bermudas on a Sunday, everyone would stare at you as if you had walked in wearing a bikini. I did it once and got several comments like, “wah, today so casual ah, going to the beach is it ?”. If you were a new visitor who didn’t know this rule, can you imagine how you would feel ? Would you ever want to go back ?

Another church that I know treats its hall and all the furniture in the hall like the holiest place in the world. In order to remove even a few chairs for, lets say, a function at another part of the church, you had to ask the Deacons Board for permission, and even after that, the senior pastor had the power to veto the decision (which the pastor often did).

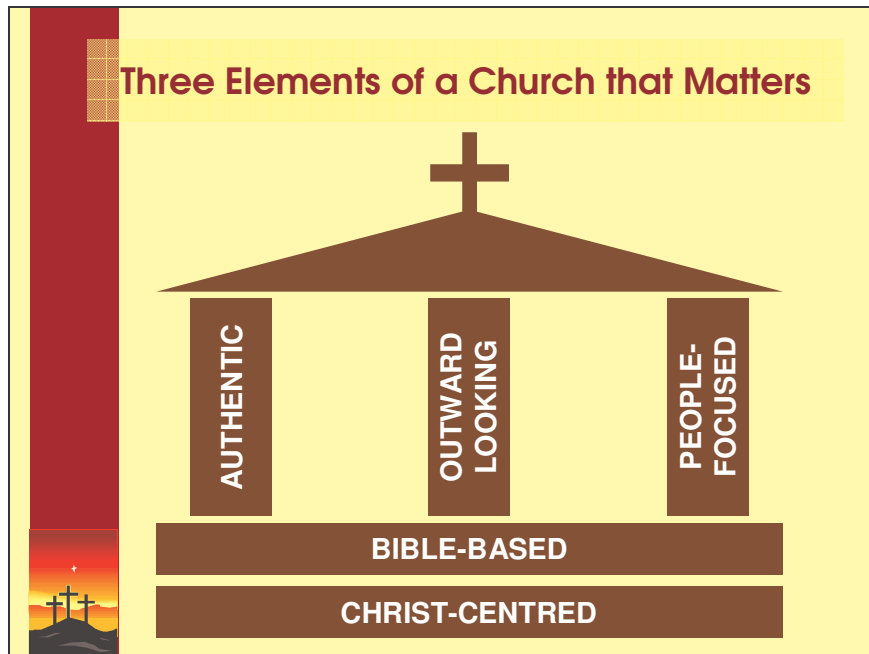
That church also had a rule requiring Chinese to be used in service. The pastor insisted on this because the church had started off as a Chinese church and, at most, he would allow a bilingual service where Chinese was translated into English.

In a church like that, how do you make visitors feel comfortable ? How do you organise functions to invite unbelievers ? Do this cannot, do that also cannot.

### **THREE ELEMENTS OF A CHURCH THAT MATTERS**

Now that we’ve looked at three reasons why the church was losing its relevance, let’s look at three elements needed to build a church that matters.

Before we go into that, however, let’s first be clear that you cannot build a proper church without a foundation in Jesus Christ and on the God’s word. So a church must first be Christ-centred and Bible-based.



Then, we go into the elements, which are actually the opposite of what I said were the reasons a church can lose its relevance.

- First, the church must be authentic instead of insincere.
- Secondly, it must be outward instead of inward looking.
- Finally, it must be people-focused and not legalistic.

### **Authentic**

On the night that Jesus was arrested and crucified, He prayed

“... may this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will.” (Matt 26 : 38)

I think this prayer captured the authenticity of Jesus’ faith. First, by His obedience to God’s will, and secondly in the admission of His struggles to do the right thing.

An authentic church not only lives up to what it preaches, but is open about its struggles and weaknesses. This attracts people because they are assured that they are not going to be the only sinners in a group of holy people. Instead, they know that they are going on a journey with everyone else in the church to live as perfect a life as possible, so that they can please God.

Which is more believable – when your parent or teacher tells you that -

“when I was your age, I everyday study, 7 hours, 3 pm to 11 pm. No TV. No shopping. No talking on the phone. That is how I become so successful !”

or

“when I was your age, I was like you. I had problems settling down to study, so there were sometimes when I secretly play soccer with my friends before I go home. But I realised that doing well was very important, and so I started studying harder. I have no regrets.” ?

Personally, I think the first person is self-righteous. I wouldn't listen to him. But the second one gets my attention, because he is authentic.

### **Outward Looking**

The second quality of a church that matters is that it also looks beyond its comfort zone, to meet the needs of and to bless its community. This is the purpose of the church – to reach out to people who are not like it. That is why, in Matthew 9, Jesus told the Pharisees

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick ... I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners”.

And when Jesus first started out in His ministry, He read from Isaiah, saying that his purpose was

“to preach good news to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”  
(Luke 4 : 18 - 19)

Jesus intended His church to look out for the poor, the prisoners, the sick, and the oppressed. This is because no one else would care for them.

This is why, in the Youth Fellowship, I have always encouraged everyone to be involved in the outreach in Sengkang. Many of the children in Sengkang are not like us – they are rude, noisy, irritating and troublesome. But it is precisely because they are not like us, that we must make the extra effort to reach out to them. Because if the church does not look out for these people, no one else will care for them.

### **People-Focused**

In response to the Pharisees' complaint that Jesus' disciples were picking grain on a Sabbath day, Jesus told them that the Sabbath rules were made to help man, and not the other way around. Therefore

“If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not [ break the Sabbath rule and ] take hold of it and lift it out ? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep ! Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” (Matt 12 : 11 - 12)

In saying this, Jesus was telling them that the church must not lose sight of its purpose – to love others and make disciples – by obsessing over man-made rules and traditions.

And Jesus demonstrated this later, by going around accepted protocol and telling His disciples not to prevent little children from coming to Him.

Can you imagine, if the US President visited Singapore, would you bring your children to go and see him ? No, it would be a waste of his time. You would get your ministers and your businessmen to see the US President instead.

But Jesus said, “let the little children come and do not hinder them”. (Matt 19 : 14)

## Conclusion

What I've shared today is something very close to mine and Joyce's heart. Both of us often joke about how we want to go to a mega-church where we don't have to get involved in ministry – just turn up on Sunday and the worship, sermon, children's ministry are all ready for you, and then go home early. Or to go to a church where everyone is from the same background as us – for networking, isn't it better to be fellowshiping with businessmen, lawyers, maybe even politicians ? Just before we got married, we had the opportunity to change churches because we wanted to both attend the same church together. But we didn't end up in just another mega-church because we realised that, if we wanted to be part of a church that matters, a church that is relevant to our society, then the church that we attend must be authentic, outward looking and people-focused.



**Are we ILL ? Or a church that matters ?**

- Are we **authentic**, or **insincere** ?
- Do we look **outwards**, or only **inwards** ?
- Are we **people-focused**, or **legalistic** ?
- What else do we need to do, to become a church that matters ?

Many Christians go to church with the question – what can I get out of church today ? A great worship ? A good sermon ? Friends ? I think these are important. But today I urge you to also consider, are we a church that matters ?

- Are we authentic, or insincere ?
- Do we look outwards, or only inwards ?
- Are we people-focused, or legalistic ?

One evening ten years ago, when I was still in NS, I had booked out of camp to go to church for a prayer meeting. I alighted at a bus stop and was walking to church when a stranger stopped me and asked me for the time. Quite strangely, after I had told him the time, he started walking together with me. Out of politeness, I chatted with him. Eventually he got round to what he wanted to tell me – he was a pimp and invited me to visit his prostitutes. Now, being the pious Christian virgin that I was, I got a little freaked out, started walking faster and told him I was going to church. He also quickened his pace to keep with with me. What happened was quite unexpected. That the man followed me all the way to church ! By then I was completely freaked out. I introduced him to my pastors and went to one of the rooms to hide. I regretted my actions immediately after that – I was worried that the pimp might stumble my pastors, and I started praying that God might preserve their integrity.

What would you have done in a similar situation ? Have you also had a strange encounter with “fringe” or non-mainstream people before ? How would we react if, one day, a woman wearing just a bikini walked through our church doors (and we hope that she is a woman !) – would we welcome her, or try and hide her out of embarrassment, or tell her to go away because she wasn’t properly dressed ?

Looking back on this incident, I think I behaved like a total suaku. Instead of praying for his salvation, I only prayed that God would keep my pastors safe ! Instead of rejoicing that someone new had stepped into church, I was worried about how immoral this new person was. Instead of helping to make this visitor feel welcome, I avoided him.

Was my reaction appropriate ? I don’t think so. It doesn’t satisfy what I had just said about being authentic, outward-looking and people-focused. As we close in prayer, let’s ask God to give the church the wisdom and love to always carry itself in a way that is sensitive and relevant to the needs of our times.

[ Closing Prayer ]