

DANIEL HOLLAND

SECOND
EDITION

A practical handbook

GROWING

as a new Christian



A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

*Growing
as a new
Christian*

**HELPING YOU
AS A NEW CHRISTIAN
TO KNOW
'WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?'**

DANIEL HOLLAND

DEDICATION

*Rejoice
with me;
I have found
my lost sheep*

(LUKE 15 v6a)

With eternal thanks
to the great Shepherd,
Jesus,
who leaves the ninety-nine sheep
to find the one
who is lost.

To those who have now found
their healing and salvation in Jesus.
And to those who are still searching,
and need Jesus
to carry them to safety.

Many people checking out this book will be doing so because they have made the most profound and radical decision that it is possible to make. They have had a life-saving encounter with the God who loves them far more than they could ever possibly imagine or conceive, and have embarked on the most extraordinary adventure that will last for the whole of eternity.

If this is you, then truly your life will never be the same again! You are just at the beginning of a journey of transformation that will lead you in ways that you never thought were possible.

After making such a life-changing decision, however, it is easy to imagine that the Christian walk will be unalloyed sweetness and light. You may be feeling a sense of elation that all your cares and worries have apparently disappeared in a flash. You may be treading the sunlit uplands of hope, and have visions of spending your life with perfect people and telling the whole world about Jesus.

But be aware! Alongside many glorious peaks lie potential pitfalls to trip you on your way. You have many experiences to go through, many choices to make, and the challenge of making sense of the oddities of church life and Christian culture in general, where not everything may be exactly as it first appears.

Given these potential challenges, I can't think of a better aid than Dan Holland's wonderful book, which will help you greatly to mature as a believer and become strong and rooted in your faith. Dan writes passionately and with real-life experience and will encourage you to keep going and run the whole course without giving up prematurely. He is someone who not merely talks the talk but has walked the walk. He will give you much to dwell upon and reflect over.

This is a resource that you will treasure and give you much to draw upon for a long time to come. It is something that you may want to read and reread many times over. I warmly commend this little volume to you and hope you will be richly blessed by it.

DAVID LAMBOURN (EVANGELIST)

Author, 'But is He God?' (Paternoster, 2014)

Introduction and explanation

FOR YOU... A NEW CHRISTIAN

You have made a wonderful decision. You now belong to Jesus and many exciting changes are happening in your life. You are literally a new person. We want to encourage you as you seek to mature in your relationship with Jesus. You are now a citizen of His Kingdom! We highly recommend you become a member of a church or fellowship, this is Biblical. There's a great new family for you to meet! But your first allegiance is to Jesus.

When a baby is born, we do not give it size 9 boots and tell it to go and make its way in the world. Instead, we nurture, teach, feed, and equip so eventually the baby reaches 'young adulthood' achieving maturity and a level of independence, best expressed in family terms as 'interdependence'.

Right now is your opportunity to grow and mature with Jesus. It is a wonderful journey you have embarked upon, so determine then to go on. God always has blessings and new things to show you and give to you, but life is not always simple or a bed of roses. Spiritually, there is an 'enemy' who is out to trip us up if he can. We need therefore to be aware we are engaged in a spiritual struggle – a battle indeed! Fear not, you ARE on the winning side, but please recognize the need for maturity and your own determination to reach that goal. You need strong and wise Christians around you. By listening to

them, learning from their mistakes, and allowing them to guide you, you will avoid many pitfalls.

This short handbook sets out what you might reasonably expect from your fellowship or church, by way of support, encouragement, and practical discipling. It represents 'best practice', to borrow a term from commerce and we are unashamedly setting the standard high. As important as your church is, you too have a role to play. Forgive me using the old adage 'you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink'. Not that you are a horse, but if you get the opportunity, drink! Jesus said 'whoever drinks the water I give, will never thirst' (John 4 v14).

Jesus assures us, 'my yoke is easy and my burden is light'. So it is! But there is a serious invitation for you to become a disciple. Living for Jesus is a joyful task, even in trying circumstances. He died on a cross full of love for you; part of your response is to live for Him and to seek to grow more like Him. He will provide all the Godly power you need. Your task is to use that power as given.

We have used a particular word several times in this material. It may be old-fashioned and counter-cultural. But we do need to be disciplined. The word 'discipline' and 'disciple' come from the same root. Part of discipline is to seek proactively to be more like Jesus, and to work at it. Don't forget you can talk to God all the time (this is called prayer). He really wants to hear what's on your mind, especially your struggles, There's no need for fancy or 'religious' language. You'll discover He answers prayer in all kinds of ways.

We sincerely pray that you are blessed and equipped. as you read this short handbook.

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NB. In this book we tend to use the generic term 'he' and 'him'. This is not gender specific but a question of style.

*Finding
and
staying
in the right
church*

Find a church

You have just made the best and most lifechanging decision you will ever make. It's exciting. Now is the time to 'strike while the iron is hot'. As a new Christian the only way you can continue growing and blossoming is with the help of an assembly or fellowship – the all-encompassing word commonly used for this is 'church'. This is the way God has designed it. Without the spiritual life and support of a church family most people's faith withers rapidly. Remember, you have not 'joined a church', in the decision you have just made. It's much more exciting than that! You have become a citizen of the Kingdom of God. And you have been *reborn*, so you now have a *new life* to lead.

It may be you were on holiday, or the other side of your town when you first gave your life to Jesus. Choose a church that is accessible to you, asking God to guide you. It's unrealistic to be travelling over an hour a week, however much you might want to. Besides, it's virtually impossible to join in the regular life of a church from that distance; you would be a commuter. The Christian world is quite small. Ask Christians where they think might be right for you.

It may seem strange, and a big commitment to begin with, but regular church attendance is the way people will get to know you and vice versa. Over time you will hear a spectrum of Bible teaching. Some parts might make sense to you

immediately, and other bits may seem peculiar. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions or be intimidated because you will find lifelong Christians don't understand everything either!

Do they talk about Jesus?

Listen out in a Church for whether they regularly talk about Jesus and His Holy Spirit. There are churches that seldom mention Jesus; this would be a bad sign. Ultimately you will know; God will confirm in your heart if you are indeed in the right place and this church is home. Don't give up if the first place you try definitely isn't. Keep going and you will certainly find the right one.

I knew a Christian with a remarkable testimony (story of faith) of finding a church. He and his family started reading the Bible. No one told them to do this, but God was at work in them. Eventually they knew they should find a church. They visited four or five and each time they all knew it wasn't for them. Finally they went to a fellowship, and immediately they looked at each other to confirm what they all knew to be true; this is the one, Jesus is here. They knew because the church was like the apostolic community in the book of Acts they'd read about. This family went on to become strong Christians and the son is now in Christian ministry.

God is very invested in getting you to the right place; He will lead you if you don't give up!

Stay in church – stick at it

The more you commit, the stronger your relationships at church will grow, and you'll hit your stride with people. Your friends and family may not like this new commitment you have made and resent the time you are spending elsewhere. However, you must take responsibility for your own spiritual health. In the end they will respect the wonderful changes they see in you. Jesus will reward you in exciting ways for putting Him first. This might take time, so don't be impatient. You will want all your family and friends to come to Jesus too. The best way to do that is to put Jesus first. Your love for them will only grow as you do; they will notice this.

Enjoy the Bible

Find a version of the Bible that really works for you; there are so many now. You can also listen to the Bible online, in your car; find a way to engage with it every day. You'll find your appetite increases and it's the chief way you're going to grow. There are some fantastic books of Christian testimony out there. Enjoy them, but always prioritise reading the Bible first.

Baptism

*Whoever believes
and is baptised
will be saved* (Mark 16 v16)

Jesus' simple command to you in response to the saving work He has done in your life is to be baptised. This is an outward act of being submerged (momentarily) in water to mark the inward transformation taking place.

Your new pastor/vicar/priest will want to spend some time with you sharing some scriptures that explain baptism, and answering any questions you may have. Here we give a brief description of the wonderful transformation that takes place. The old you with all your wrong-doing, greed and selfishness is (symbolically) buried in the water with Jesus. The new you, is raised with Jesus in His resurrection (rising from the dead). Coming out of the water you are now 'washed' and 'clothed' in Jesus. Wow, what a new beginning. This is a spiritual reality, not a fanciful idea.

This can be done simply in your own church. There are normally other possibilities if your church doesn't have a baptistry (normally a large tank in the ground full of water). In warmer weather there may be a lake or river nearby, or even a swimming pool. You should invite your family and friends to share in this wonderful occasion. You will probably feel different afterwards as something very important has happened.

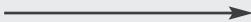
For some historical reasons not all churches offer believer's baptism and some may offer you

‘confirmation’ and/or a renewal of baptismal vows if you were once ‘christened’ as a child. While these fall short of full baptism (as described in scripture) they do provide an opportunity to mark your new life in Christ in front of family and friends, and may offer you the chance of giving a personal testimony (story) of how you come to faith and what Christ has done in your life.

Similarly, some churches may prefer a different mode of baptism to full immersion and you may need to discuss this with your minister. Different churches may have their own way of facilitating this public confession of faith. It is also important to remember, whatever format is used, that baptism is intended to picture dying to your old self and rising to new life in Christ, and you need to make this real in your own experience. You can find out more about this by reading chapter 6 of Paul’s letter to the Romans.

The table below demonstrates what may be your situation. Jesus commanded baptism, so we do it! Your new church will want to publicly affirm your new faith. Avoid unnecessary delay but this approach may be beneficial:

You are sure of your new faith and sense God’s leading. You should ask your new church about baptism.



You should be welcomed into fellowship and baptized with minimum delay. Your new leader will spend some time with you before this event to prepare you and show you the relevant Bible verses.

You are unsure and/or confused



You should be welcomed into fellowship and encouraged to join e.g. an Alpha-type course and/or one on one Baptism-preparation.

*Grace
and
Truth*

Honesty

You should expect honesty; Christians who will tell you if they don't know the answer to your question. If they promise to come back to you in a few days, they will. Honesty is the bedrock for any healthy relationship. Don't trust people who can't be honest about everyday things.

Of course, if your older Christian brother or sister forgets something, especially a commitment, then gently remind them! They may be too busy....

The grace/truth spectrum

You will quickly discover some Christians lean more towards truth, and will happily shoot you between the eyes with it any day of the week. Others are gracious to a fault, but you're never quite sure if they were trying to tell you something in code, or how long you should stay at their house after the Bible study on a weeknight.

Not every Christian will be the same; some care more about your feelings and others focus intently on what is right and wrong. Every Christian has their own journey and they haven't completed it yet. We are all 'works in progress' and need balancing out with others who have different dispositions and strengths. You need people who exemplify grace (God's undeserved kindness) and

truth (rights and wrongs), even if the ‘truth-tellers’ are a bit more uncomfortable to be around. Hopefully, you’ll be with a group of believers who balance grace and truth.

Integrity is essential

However gifted, exciting and dynamic the Christians around you may be, you should value integrity above everything else. Gravitate towards people who can admit mistakes, accept suggestions, and apologise for getting it wrong every now and again. You should be able to enjoy the pastor’s preaching on Sunday safe in the knowledge that he is the same person joking with the assistant in the hardware shop on Thursday morning. Nothing he says in the pulpit means anything if it is not backed up by his everyday life. Leaders reproduce who they are, not what they say.

If this is not the case, you should feel free to question him, and he should welcome the challenge. Refuse to play ‘religious’ games where Christians have two standards and two lives lived out in hypocritical parallels. If you do not experience integrity in your church you may need to look for another. Keep searching until you find people who help you grow as a Christian. Please do not give up on your faith if you discover the inconsistencies and failings of human beings!

*A glorious
medley
of people*

A glorious medley of people

The kingdom of God, when properly expressed, is a glorious and harmonious medley of young and old, black and white, rich and poor, male and female, reflecting the differences and backgrounds of all Christians, living in loving diversity. This is a truth that some churches reflect better than others. You may be in a local church that expresses this beautifully; or perhaps they lean towards being white middle class, or predominantly black or old aged for example. If this is so you may experience the full diversity of the Kingdom of God more clearly at conferences and celebrations.

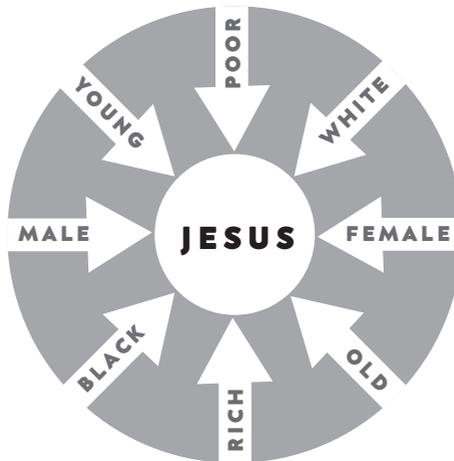
Look for people who are their authentic selves, not pretending to be anything they are not but eager to learn about you and your story. They should do this with gentleness and respect, not expecting you to take on all their cultural mores to be accepted or valued. It's important you are accepted for precisely who you are, while simultaneously encouraged to progress in your discipleship. Racism, misogyny, snobbery etc. do not belong. You should expect a level of sensitivity to your needs, but currently some may seem to be taking exception and offence at something (or other!). Beware it is not you who is misinterpreting other Christians!

If you are a vegan you shouldn't be invited to 'the church hog roast' unless special provision is made. Likewise if you are a recovering alcoholic

you shouldn't be press-ganged into to the men's *pie and pint night* at the pub, unless you are completely comfortable with this. The men's group could easily meet in an unlicensed restaurant or café instead. Sensitivity and some give and take on both sides is needed.

The Kingdom of God is a place where you have freedom and encouragement to grow closer to Jesus, and to others who love Him. You will find you are now meeting with people you would never otherwise have had anything to do with. The beauty of the Kingdom is that as we get closer to Jesus we draw nearer to other Christians who love Jesus. We need to be Jesus-focused; this is our best hope for good relationships.

Socio-economic background, political views and culture recede. All the usual divisions and prejudices start to fall away. This is wonderful evidence of God's work. The diagram below illustrates this reality.



Jesus delights in putting us with opposites and Holy Spirit is the glue that holds us together, whatever our starting position and however we differ in background, education, lifestyle and culture. The church is the local expression of the global Kingdom of God and the place where you can establish your faith in loving, supportive relationships.

Good days and bad days

As in any community you will see some things you admire, and others that you definitely don't. I was an idealistic teenager visiting Spring Harvest (a Christian festival) for the first time. I anticipated a utopia of Christians living together in an advanced state of harmony and bliss. There would be unbroken worship and praise; no harsh words or ugliness. Boy – was I in for a shock!

It was much more of a mix; good and bad. There were lovely Christians and generally the behaviour was better than you would find in Butlins normally, but my expectations were unrealistic.

Some people were there just for the 'jolly', sponsored by Christian families and friends.

My cousin took me to visit some of his friends, all of them were pastors' children who had set up a den of iniquity in their chalet. They smoked pot and drank themselves stupid all week. It was quite an eye-opener. They were not there for spiritual development!

One evening I went to a Christian concert, slightly late. There was a steward at the door who politely told me the venue was full. He explained the fire regulations as a courtesy. Disappointed, I thanked him and walked away. A couple had followed me to the door, and they tried to enter the venue. The steward repeated himself. They were unmoved; 'but we want to come in'. He testily reiterated the fire restrictions and safety measures.

'If you were a Christian you would let us in' they bleated. 'We are at capacity and if you were Christians you wouldn't ask me to break the law' he countered. It escalated, he was called a jobsworth, and finally I was out of earshot. What an ugly, ungracious, exchange this was. Sometimes Christians don't treat each other any better than people would 'in the world'. This is sad and it shouldn't be the case. But be forewarned! These imperfections do not nullify everything else that is happening, often wonderful things!

On other occasions, when church is firing on all five cylinders you will see beautiful harmony, care and sacrifice. Like every family the church has good days and bad days. Sometimes it reflects the glory of Jesus and at other times it doesn't. Realistic expectations, expecting the best but being pragmatic about shortcomings, is a mature and sustainable outlook. Every Christian is on a journey, they may be further up the road than you, but even as a new Christian you may be more mature and gifted in some areas already.

You may spot hypocrisy quicker than older Christians; you haven't been 'churchified' yet. You won't pretend or spiritualise it; your insights are helpful to Christians who have grown too accustomed to certain things. You bring a fresh pair of eyes, and you don't have so much history and baggage in the Christian community.

Times in the presence of God

If you are with faithful Christians who are open and committed to God, there will be times when God's glory falls. There will be a beautiful sense of God's presence filling your heart and the space you are in. In these moments the presence of God washes away all our unimportant differences and glues us together in love again. We cannot predict when this might happen, except to say that God is a good Father Who delights to presence Himself with us. Treasure these times and live from the good of them. There is no substitute for times of deep worship.

As you walk with God you will carry His glory in increasing measure, and others will notice it. You will bring the presence of God into your workplace, family and friendships. As people notice the difference in you, gently share your faith and explain what God is doing in your life. You may feel led to invite friends to a service at your new church; or some other event aimed at

non-Christians. You may not realise it but you are a great evangelist (someone who tells others about Jesus) as a new convert. You are like a new-born baby in the sense that everyone is excited to see you and the changes you are going through. As you share God's work in your life (Christians call this sharing your testimony) it consolidates what He has done. Your life/words and deeds are powerful; people may react to what you say and do. Some will be thrilled; others will be angry because it challenges their view of you and of themselves. Don't be shocked if this happens; it's probably not personal.

*People
who will
be there
for me*

Choosing to trust

Trust is earned but it is also given. Christian maturity includes forgiving and overcoming past hurts while choosing to place trust in the people God has put around you, and believing the best about them. You recognise at some point that you might feel let down and rejected, but you choose to embrace the risks and gain the rewards of discipleship. Everyone who is an effective leader today will have spent some time learning from someone more mature. This is normally called discipleship. You should walk this same path.

Navigating disappointments

There is a delicate and challenging balance. With our own daughter my wife and I are careful to protect her from evils in the world and we pray for her to avoid the pains and sorrows we have faced and overcome. When she is older, however, there will be a fine line between engagement in her life and over-protective smothering. There will be a point when she must face the world, no matter how well we have protected her. And then it will be obvious to all if we have successfully prepared her for it.

Let's consider a scenario; you pray for a sick relative who is not expected to live and they are instantly healed, astonishing doctors and family alike. You are not ashamed to tell them why!

You pray for someone else to be healed; full of faith, and you see that person show improvements, only to die much earlier than predicted of cancer or heart disease. If we don't go to God with our pains and disappointments, we'll end up thinking wrong things about Him. You especially need to keep talking to God and to other Christians at this point. All of life is grist for the mill if you keep coming back to God and His living Word. Your *discipler* is there to help you process all these experiences well, facing disappointments head on, while still pointing to Jesus and the ultimate victory of resurrection (eternal life with Jesus).

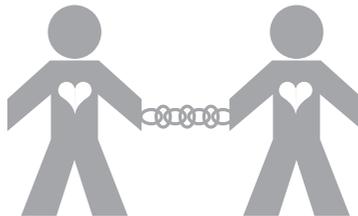
Some of the powerful lessons you will learn, and indeed encounters with Jesus you have, may be in this crucible of suffering, and alongside disappointment. These are not the only ways God can teach you, and yet wise leaders should not deny you the opportunity to go deeper with God by 'wrapping you in cotton wool'. God knows you better than they do. Jesus is the master Shepherd; they are under-shepherds, following Him at the same time as they are leading you! Your genuine faith is never wasted. Expectations in the arena of faith are challenging to manage, you need your discipler's help. He or she can encourage and help develop your faith, rather than allowing it to be reduced to something small and unbiblical.

Discipled to God, not Man

If your discipler and church friends are doing a good job, you will be progressively freed up into your relationship with Jesus. He is your glorious focus, and this aim is at the forefront of everything you do with your discipler. There will be natural stages of growth when you need less from other Christians. And perhaps need them in different ways.

Avoid leaders who usher you into more and more dependence on them. This can become a co-dependent relationship, where you are not allowed to think for yourself, and every decision must be okayed by them. Your relationship with Jesus should become freer, as you need your discipler less, (or more accurately in different ways than before).

This schematic illustrates what we should seek to *avoid*; you being dependent on your discipler and he needing you to need him. This is classic co-dependency. Both you and he should have your identity in Jesus, this is the goal:



CO-DEPENDENCY

Unhelpful, unhealthy bonding with reduced freedom rather than more.

There are three main stages of development in natural life and in discipleship. There is no pre-set time scale for how long you will be at each main stage.

DEPENDENCE

Like a newborn baby it is only natural in the early stages of your faith for you to need lots of love, nurture and teaching. There is no shame in this and you should feel free to ask as many questions as often as you need. If your discipler is a good one he will give you lots of time to talk and work through any questions you may have. Don't be concerned if you need him a lot at this stage; this is perfectly normal. He will expect this, and be thrilled to help.

INDEPENDENCE

As you grow and develop over years and even decades there is a level of independence that you will begin to experience. You have the freedom to read, study, question and broaden your Christian horizons. Discipleship is less like asking permission and more like a teenager saying 'pray for me, I'm going to do xyz'. There might be helpful feedback afterwards, but you are beginning to assert your own identity and purpose in the Kingdom of God. It might be that different Christians than the ones who supported you most at first can help you better with exploring your specific giftings and callings. You might do training, shadowing or an internship to facilitate this. God may even call you into Christian work or equip you to live out your faith in your secular workplace.

INTERDEPENDENCE

The third stage is analogous to being an adult son or daughter. There are times you might want to pool skills and have the backup of a parent ('I'm laying a patio, could you lend a hand and give helpful tips.'). Or your parent (figure) might call on you; ('Please help me set up my new TV system; I'm drowning in leads and remote controls!').

You move into healthy 'interdependence'; healthy mature adults seek help and take advice when they need it. There is humble recognition that in some areas you are stronger than others and vice versa. You know how to ask for help, and offer it to others when appropriate.s



DEPENDENCE

A necessary and healthy stage of development. The child expresses spiritual, not natural age.



INDEPENDENCE

The discipler cheers the new Christian on as he begins to express his own unique and God-given calling and identity.



INTERDEPENDENCE

Co-working with the new Christian now in fruitful Kingdom activity.

From convert to disciple

As you gain in Christian maturity you will ‘develop’ in three overall areas; in knowledge and understanding of God, of His enemy, and of yourself. The schematic below illustrates these as pillars on which we build our life in Christ. Your goal is transition from the point of receiving Jesus as Saviour to crowning Him King and Lord of every area of your life. So many converts don’t get this help or aren’t willing to receive it when it is offered. The goal of your re-birth is ever-closer discipleship to Christ. If you are offered help, then do receive it gratefully. Tragically some Christians never move past the first step. We hope for much better things in your case; that you will become mature and strong, and your relationship with Jesus will blossom while bad habits and destructive patterns fall away.

MATURITY IN THE FAITH

UNDERSTANDING
OF GOD

UNDERSTANDING
OF SATAN

UNDERSTANDING
OF SELF

We pray you find a good church, receive excellent help and rapidly become a disciple, cultivating your own dynamic, vibrant spiritual life with Jesus. Where this is the case, and as you mature (there is no fixed time for this to happen) others around you will begin to look to you for leadership. You will have the opportunity to make converts yourself, preaching through your words, works, and character:

follow me as I follow Christ!

Glossary

**defining some terms
which you will be hearing
around churches...**

CHURCH – the Greek word usually translated ‘church’ is ecclesia. It means an assembly of people who come together for a purpose. Our English word ‘church’ encompasses this idea. People often say that a church is the local ‘body of Christ’, assembling together as a family. In terms of ‘church’ we should not think of an institution with all its trappings, but rather of a family, gathered. At a day to day level it is a group of Christians who seek to serve God and grow together in love and trust. Church is a place where His presence can be powerfully experienced. This resource may be helpful to explore this:
<https://christian-publications-int.com/images/PDF/BibleStudent/26%2020101210%20TRUE%20CHURCH.pdf>

CONVERSION – possibly an old-fashioned term now, but it describes a radical life change. You ‘convert’ from one type of life to another. Biblically as we consider being born again, the expression means to find spiritual life in exchange for spiritual deadness. At a practical level it can mean conversion from one religion to another (e.g. from Buddhism to Christianity). In that sense, conversion is easy to understand. As a ‘convert’ you have received Jesus as Lord and as Saviour and are now living in Him as a new disciple – a follower of Jesus. This resource may be helpful to understand this:
https://christian-publications-int.com/images/PDF/BibleStudent/10_THENEWBIRTH.pdf

BAPTISM – the marking of the new life through immersion in water. This resource may be helpful to understand this: https://christian-publications-int.com/images/PDF/BibleStudent/31_BAPTISM.pdf

DISCIPLER – Someone who helps you become more mature as a Christian. A helpful secular parallel to this is a mentor. This person should encourage, equip, love and challenge you in equal parts.

DISCIPLINE – the idea that we live by God’s externally imposed standards. In turn, this requires that we discipline ourselves and accept a measure of gentle discipline via those who are recognized as leaders or elders in the faith. However, this is a million miles away from ‘heavy shepherding’ where what the leader says, goes without question! Jesus said ‘my sheep know my voice’. A leader who is obviously not Christ-like is one best avoided.

GLORY – This is the presence and power of God that changes us. In His glory (presence) we become more like Jesus and so increasingly reflect His glory. We (you) are His ambassadors!

WORSHIP – Declaring God’s limitless worth as we draw close to Him; experiencing His goodness and kindness. Worship is a time of “singing” to Jesus but equally it is a lifestyle of obeying Jesus.

FELLOWSHIP – Building relationships (friendships) with other Christians, sharing time and reciprocal hospitality.

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