

## The Green Eyed Monster

By Norman Walford 29<sup>th</sup> November 2013

In my last post I discussed how I was planning to experiment with moving from having one 'church' to having two 'churches'. This experiment is now moving along, and I have to say that I'm pretty happy with it so far.

IN MIDWEEK I go to St Gregory's, our rather staid old Anglican-evangelical congregation with its pronounced Pharisee leanings, its 'try harder' theology and the Holy Spirit relegated to the role of a bit-part player. That's OK. Our Men's Group meet over bread, cheese, and wine to read the bible, discuss, enjoy, and generally to put a human face on our Christian existence.

ON SUNDAYS I've been attending the New Creation megachurch pastored by Joseph Prince in a massive auditorium with great worship, professional sound, and above all a great gospel message of grace, grace, and more grace. It's impersonal, of course—with up to 20,000 attending every Sunday it can hardly be otherwise, but that's OK also—that's the flip side of that kind of organization. I can be inspired there, and I feel I can take non-Christian men and women there and guarantee that it will have an impact on them, which is important.

Like all the Christian life, it's an experiment, and so far it's going well.

Actually, as I've been going through this transition, it has seemed that something like scales have been falling from my eyes, as I've suddenly realized something which should have been self-evident to me a long time ago. That is, that we talk about this church and that church, there **really is only one church in Singapore (or anywhere else for that matter)** and that is the Church of Jesus Christ. There are many *congregations*, but there is only one *Church*.

That's why I've put 'church' in quotes in the first paragraph of this article, because suddenly I find myself very uneasy about using the word to describe something that ideally would not be called a church at all. A congregation, a gathering, a fellowship of believers, whatever you want, but not a church. I'm not quite sure why it took me so long to figure this one out. Of course I've probably always known it but now I **know** it. I've internalized it. Now it's obvious.

I think we just get brainwashed by the language. Everyone's talking about this church and that church, and before long you get taken up by it and forgot just what the **Church** really is. It's the bride of Christ. The one, whole, universal, worldwide Christian Church. St Gregory's is not the bride of Christ, and New Creation is not the bride of Christ. Christ has only one bride, and that is the whole universal sum of Christian believers, the whole lot. That's how God sees it, and if we see it any other way that that, then we are out of tune with the mind of God, failing to align ourselves properly with him, simple as that.

I think a lot of the Christians I meet in this city-state of Singapore actually understand this pretty well. They've grown up in a connected world where distance no longer exists. Communities are no longer defined by geography, they are defined in other ways. You don't need to be in the same room any more. And the same is true of our Christian communities. It gets more flexible, fluid, and dynamic. Christian ministry becomes more of a resource to be mined. You go here for this, you go there for that, you take in online preaching from the



### WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

*I'm approximating here!*

*A quick search shows the word 'church' 114 times in the New Testament. Many, many times it is clearly referring to the one, total, universal church. Very often it talks of 'the church in such-and-such a place'. And then frequently Paul and others talk of 'churches', plural, to describe gatherings of Christians in certain places.*

*It's always unfortunate when one word gets used to describe two different things, as here, as it generally leads to confusion. There's nothing in my word-search to change my view that the word CHURCH should primarily be applied to the one, universal, bride-of-Christ, overall sum of all Christian believers, and that the other meanings are secondary to or derivative from that.*

most gifted preachers from around the world. Then you can drop down the road for this overseas visiting speaker, and meantime maintain your online Christian network with friends from ten different 'churches' spread over a dozen countries and a few continents.

That's the new world and the new Church in which we are living. For better or worse? Irrelevant question. It's here, it's the new reality and it's not going away. So we get on and live with it.

So people are more comfortable now moving from church to church. And it's healthy. People are taking—under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—responsibility for their lives, and that's what God wants us to do. That's why we have the Holy Spirit (one reason), so that we can make right and responsible judgments. So we can say, "Sure, it's a great church in many ways, but it grates on me their talk about give, give, give all the time. Or their overbearing authoritarianism. Or their legalism or their literalism or whatever. So I moved to another and now I feel at peace."

Of course, there's one group of people who are often—not all of them, but many—unhappy with this new reality. That's the church pastors.

Well, I can understand it and feel some sympathy even. In the first place these are the full time religious professionals, dependent for their livelihood often on the financial goodwill of their congregations. Movement into a more fluid kind of church structure is something that can obviously leave them feeling very, very insecure. It can require a lot of grace for a pastor to say something like, *Well. . . if the preacher down the road is speaking more to your situation than is mine, then clearly you must go. Go with my blessing.* A lot of grace. Particularly if you're taking your money with you.

But that's how it goes, and that's how it has to go. We hear a lot about the Christian in the market-place of the world, less about the church in the Christian market place. But that's what we have. And as with any other market place, it's the best guarantee of quality. If you're peddling rubbish, then sooner or later you'll be out of business, and the ones with the higher quality wares take over. So I can understand that insecurity. I'm not sure what the real practical answer to it is. Perhaps Paul found one answer—making tents.

There's a second and more insidious resistance by pastors to church fluidity. That's the green-eyed monster—jealousy.

I make it my habit now, when I want to evaluate a pastor, to look at how he speaks about other churches. The great men of God (as I perceive them) were all inclusive. D.L. Moody was inclusive. Billy Graham was/is inclusive. The small men of God are exclusive. That's the difference. An on that criterion there a lot of small men of God around here and not many great ones.

If that's the test, then I don't find many pastors here who pass it. Sad to say, it's rare indeed to hear one speak a good word about another congregation. In St Gregory's the silence is more eloquent than the words. You could attend for ten years, and you'd never even know that Christianity existed outside of Anglicanism and a very narrow circle of favored academic institutions. If you ask them you'll get a whole string of arguments about doctrinal inaccuracies, falsehoods, heresies, etc. If you push the point and ask why, if these churches are so wrong, they seem so much more effective than ours, that's easy. . . *Well of course, if you make it that easy, dilute the gospel enough, then you'll get that!* Really?

OK, obviously we all think we're right, and better in our belief and practice than the other. If we didn't, then clearly we'd change our belief and practice until we did. So by definition we believe in what we're doing. But it goes further than that. Some of it is about insecurity, which is understandable. A lot is about jealousy, which is worse. It can have green eyes, as Shakespeare told us, but it's actually a master of disguise. It's the great mimic. I'm running out of space and I've only just started! I'll sign off with one of my favorite quotes, and continue this next time. . .

***Moral indignation is jealousy with a halo.***  
*-H.G. Wells The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman*