

# “A New Challenge” Part 5 - The challenge of staying true to our mission. September 2024

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Thames Valley churches of Christ

## Introduction

'A New Challenge'. Are you facing new challenges? Is your group facing new challenges?

At this time in Thames Valley, we are making changes in our leadership team, shepherding structure, staffing, small groups, and board. None of those changes are earth-shattering, but they bring new challenges. One of those challenges is remaining spiritually focused while things around us change.

Romans 12.11

“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.”

Today, we will explore a key way God's people stay excited about the adventure despite the changes around them. The points below apply to us personally, but I'm going to focus on how they are relevant to a group of Christians. Where do we start?

## Learn to distinguish between your shadow mission and your true mission.

What is a shadow mission? I'm taking this term from a superb little book. In *Overcoming Your Shadow Mission*, John Ortberg defines a "shadow mission" as a distorted version of one's true mission or calling, shaped by selfishness, fear, or hidden motives. It's what happens when you take the unique strengths, desires, and talents that God has given you but use them for purposes contrary to God's will or your highest calling.

Ortberg explains that every person has a true mission that reflects God's purpose for their life, but alongside that is a shadow mission—driven by the ego, insecurities, or distractions. It's often a subtle deviation from the good you were meant to pursue, disguised as something appealing or easier. While the true mission leads to serving others and living out one's purpose, the shadow mission leads to self-serving behaviours and decisions that take people away from their best selves.

A key idea in the book is that we must recognise our shadow mission in order to resist it and live according to God's true calling for us. Ortberg applies this to individuals, but the principles are just as relevant to groups.

## Clarify Your True Mission

Why not do a simple but profound exercise? Gather with your group and ask yourselves what your mission is as a ministry. What mission has God given you? That is, for your group in this place at this time. By the way, I'm using the word mission here in general, not in the narrow sense of evangelism. When you can articulate your true mission, you will notice when you are off track, and it will be easier to call each other back to what you have already recognised and decided.

How do you discover this true mission? My suggestion is to read the Sermon on the Mount together. In that teaching, Jesus summarises the Kingdom's concerns and priorities. After reading and praying about it, come together and discuss what it will look like for your group to live out the teachings of that amazing sermon.

Write down what you find, and condense it to a few core values and principles. Having done that, work out what the practicals are for you at this time as a group.

## Challenge the Shadow Mission

All groups veer off course from time to time. That happened to the churches Paul and other writers wrote to in the first century. It is an all-to-human tendency to reshape things to our own benefit. Christians are not immune from this. It is tempting to make Christianity fit our preferences. Periodically, it is good to review what you discovered when you clarified your true mission and ask one another whether you are still on course.

If (when) you notice your group veering off course from its true mission, then do one (or all) of these three things:

### 1. Embrace the most painful issue.

- Figure out what you are avoiding as a group. That's likely to be the most painful thing.
- Is there conflict in the group? Does sin need to be addressed?
- Are double standards being tolerated, or half-heartedness left unchallenged?
- Are some of the marriages in a bad state? What about parenting? Is it healthy, Christlike, and loving?
- Is depth lacking in the relationships?

- Does the group enjoy hanging out together but not praying or talking deeply about Scripture?
- Whatever is being avoided is probably the most painful issue. That's where you need to go. Approach the topic sensitively, with prayer, a lack of judgement and patience. But do not run away.
- Reread the sermons to the churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. They are not harsh or negatively judgmental. They are loving. God is attempting to help the members of those churches return to a full and intimate relationship with him.

## 2. Speak candidly to one another.

- Ephesians 4.25  
 “So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.”
- Do you remember Esther's situation? She needed to talk to the king but was afraid (for a good reason!). But Mordecai knew that if she refused, the consequences would be dire.  
 Esther 4.14  
 “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”
- She heeded Mordecai's candour and saved a nation.
- "Who is the Mordecai in your life? Who loves you enough to challenge you when you're ready to settle for your shadow mission?" *Overcoming your shadow mission*, John Ortberg
- Let's help each other to be more devoted to our true mission than our more comfortable shadow mission.

## 3. Beseech God for his help.

- God is more than willing to help us.  
 Hebrews 4.16  
 “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”
  - In his book *Grace*, Max Lucado writes, "Sustaining grace promises not the absence of struggle but the presence of God...If God permits the challenge, he will provide the grace to meet it.
  - When we look to go for his help, we find that help and are reconnected to God himself. In another of his books, *Fearless*, Max writes:
  - "We aren't to be oblivious to the overwhelming challenges that life brings. We're to counterbalance them with long looks at God's accomplishments. "We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it" (Heb. 2:1 NASB).
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## Question

What is *your group's* mission, and what does the shadow mission look like?

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## Suggestions

Explore your true mission. Examine whether you are living that mission. Encourage one another towards repentance where necessary.

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## Conclusion

Next time, we will move on to our final theme of the year: "A New....."? Coming soon!±

Your brother, Malcolm

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Please add your comments on this week's topic. We learn best when we learn in community.

Do you have a question about teaching the Bible? Is it theological, technical, or practical?

Please send me your questions or suggestions. Here's the email: [malcolm@malcolmcox.org](mailto:malcolm@malcolmcox.org).

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