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Covenant People

A vision for Christian commitment today

A MULTIPLY
'Let's talk' book
for those wanting
to experience
living Christianity

Covenant People

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Chris Whyatt was born in 1954 in the Greater Manchester area of the UK. He became a Christian in 1977 after a time in prison and in 1993 became a member of the Jesus Fellowship congregation in Manchester, making covenant that year. Chris is married to Gaynor and has six children, Rebecca, Christopher, Calam, Thomas, Ella and Jack. They now belong to the Jesus Fellowship Church household, Fountain of Life, based near Stockport, where Chris is the main leader. Chris lives in his own home as a Style 2 member with his family. He runs his own business from home, working as a tree surgeon.



Marple, the sleepy, picturesque little town where Chris grew up, lies a few miles to the east of Manchester and only a short distance from the Peak District. Surrounded by gentle green hills, fields and woods, its widening river flows over scattered rocks and under an old stone bridge, making it an ideal place for children to play and be brought up in. Indeed, there was much in Chris's childhood that was happy and secure but, as a teenager, his security was to get severely undermined and he began to follow a downhill path. In time this was to lead Chris, after becoming a Christian, to want to belong to a church where commitment and faithfulness in relationships was high on the agenda. Chris relates his story:

'I was the eldest of three, having two younger sisters. Dad was a Catholic schoolteacher and Mum had a hair-dressing business. I went to the local Catholic school until I was eleven and then to a secondary Catholic school in Glossop. While I was there Mum and Dad's marriage began to break up and I was sent to the school where Dad

taught, at Salford. I hated it – I didn't have many friends as Dad was a disciplinarian! After three years I was taken out and sent to another school at Stockport.

'When Mum and Dad's marriage broke up I began rebelling and I got in trouble with the police a few times. I went to college after school but didn't work at it. I left and had a number of jobs in different garages and a toffee works! Then I joined the Army for nearly two years.'

Meanwhile, Chris's mother, Lilaine, who he had always been close to, had been through a lot of emotional upheaval due to her marriage break-up and had begun searching for a new direction to her life. To Chris's surprise, she came home one day and gladly announced: 'I've been born again!'

'I thought she'd gone mad!' Chris says – and afterwards, her zeal seemed to know no limits! 'She left tracts around the house. One day I picked up a little book called *Journey into Life* that she'd left around about how to become a Christian. I got to the words in the book that said, "Do you want an easy life? Then don't read further." "Yes, I do want an easy life," I thought. I put the book down and didn't read any more.'

A few days later Chris was out drinking with two friends at a local pub and they began plotting a crime. Not long after, hooded and gloved, they held up a petrol station but the plan failed. The three of them had been drinking beforehand and one of them was caught by the security cameras as he took off his stocking mask to see what he was doing. The next day the serious crime squad arrested them and Chris was landed with a four-year prison sentence.

Chris's mother, meanwhile, asked members of her church to pray for Chris and she sent him a copy of *John's Gospel*. 'I read it and it touched me,' said Chris. 'This time round I knew I had to make a response. The Lord showed me my life, how it would end if I continued as I was – I'd be in and out of prison and ahead of me I saw blackness and had a sense of death. On the other hand, I knew I could commit my life to Christ and go His way. I couldn't get away from the decision I had to make. I wanted to respond to the Lord and I knelt down in my cell and asked His forgiveness and surrendered my life to Him. Straight away something clicked into place and my

conscience came alive – from that moment on I couldn't lie or steal any more.'

Frightened of being laughed at, it was with some hesitation that Chris told his two cellmates he had become a Christian. It was not long before they, too, were converted. 'Within a few days,' said Chris, 'we were all reading the Bible together and had the sense of God's presence and power with us and we prayed together for the other prisoners.'

Meanwhile Chris had heard of people around the UK being filled with the Holy Spirit, just as the early disciples had in the first days of the Church when they spoke in tongues on the Day of Pentecost. He, too, longed for this gift from God.

'All three of us knelt down and asked God to send us the Holy Spirit. I expected fire to come through the bars of the window, like in the *Acts of the Apostles!*' Chris said. Nothing happened and he felt bitterly disappointed. He continues the story:

'Three days later, as I was lying on my bed, I was filled with the Holy Spirit until I couldn't speak. Such an overflowing came, filling every part of me! I lay there for hours in this state – it was a foretaste of heaven!'

Chris tried to call out to his friends in the cell to tell them what was happening but words failed, so great was God's overwhelming presence upon him.

Chris was to see miracles of changed lives, not only among his cellmates but among his family too. He had grown apart from his eldest sister but now, in prison, he began writing to her and, on his release, he went to visit her. One day he found her, face grey, after taking a bottle of Paracetamol during a fit of suicidal depression.

'It was 50-50 if she survived or not,' he said. 'I prayed to God to save her.'

On her recovery, he took her to the church both he and his mother went to and she, too, found her life transformed as she gave her life to Jesus.

Chris longed for more! Church could be disappointing – both in terms of relationships that lacked commitment and depth and in terms of God's life and presence being evident amongst His people. Where was the reality of the New Testament Church when all members were filled with

long before the answer came – ‘Begin a house group and ask the chaplain of Strangeways Prison (where Chris had been an inmate) to lead it.’

Chris’s mother, meanwhile, had brought a house to convert into a guesthouse. While applying for a licence to sell drink, God had stopped her in her tracks and put a new dream into her mind: ‘Make the house a place of prayer and fellowship – and don’t sell alcohol!’ Even the local paper caught wind of it and Chris smiled when he saw his mother’s vision splashed across the centre pages!

Exciting times followed. People found the reality of Jesus’ risen presence among them – and, on occasions, His miraculous healing from physical ailments. God’s power was sensed strongly in the meetings. Chris was beginning to see his vision realised.

‘Sadly,’ he relates, ‘after a few years it fell apart. We were asked to join a local church by the people responsible for leading and guiding us. We lost it, my faith level went down, and I ended up getting into things of this life that took me away from God and His people.’

More sadness was to follow as Chris faced two more heartbreaks. Firstly, his mother died suddenly in 1984. Then his marriage (he had married in 1981) began to break up.

‘I got into drinking and going out and, although we tried to hold it together, my wife ended up living with a lad I used to work with. God got me from one day to the next and stopped me doing something foolish. I wanted to kill the guy.’

Looking back with hindsight, Chris added, ‘God used all these things to break me of my prides.’

On top of all this, Chris set up a motorcycle club but this ended in tragedy when his best friend was killed beside him in a horrific motorcycle accident.

Then the tide began to turn. Chris started to find his way back to God. He also met a girl called Gaynor from the neighbouring town whom he later married. With renewed zeal, he began evangelising and organising a soup run for homeless people several nights a week in central Manchester with about ten others.

The zealous little group met and prayed with many people

but they hit upon one problem again and again. Who would take in some of the homeless people they tried to help?

‘We found the only people that could take people in were the Jesus Army!’ said Chris. ‘I was sceptical about them but decided I couldn’t send these homeless people anywhere I wouldn’t go myself!’ So, it was with some trepidation that Chris visited ‘Cornerstone’, the Jesus Fellowship house near Rednal, just south of Birmingham.

‘Everyone was praising God and I had a real sense of God’s presence’ said Chris, describing his first visit. At one of the events he attended while there, someone felt God say that a person present could be compared to a beautiful field with an ugly scar running through it. ‘That’s me! I need prayer!’ thought Chris and, as one of the leaders prayed for him, Chris admitted, ‘It was the first time I’d had peace for three years. I was very messed up and very broken when I came to the church.’

Chris was beginning to discover that there could be a lot more to church than he had realised. Again, sometime later when he was visiting the Fellowship, someone spoke up in another gathering: ‘There is someone present who is like a person standing in the shallow end of a pool, up to his ankles, and God is saying, “There’s a lot more!”’

What Chris found so attractive was the zeal for God he saw – particularly amongst the leaders like Mick ‘Temperate’ from Cornerstone. ‘This guy Mick is 100 per cent sold out for God!’ he thought. ‘I can trust and look up to these leaders – their lives are sold out and that’s what I want to be part of!’

‘This spoke to me more than anything’ Chris added, ‘a church sold out for God! I’d thought all churches were weak. I had been very disappointed. In prison I’d read about faith and moves of God and commitment but I didn’t see it!’

‘I wanted to join the church - but did God want me to?’ Chris said. ‘I was praying and I felt God say He’d bless me if I did or I didn’t. The choice was mine. I decided to make covenant – but I’d never been baptised.’

This, for Chris, was the next step and he continues: ‘When I was baptised (the day before I made covenant) I met with God in a new way! He so overwhelmed me that it blew me away. I had a sense of God stilling my

the whole church at the Derngate Theatre in Northampton, he was 'still overwhelmed with what had happened at my baptism.' Baptism – and covenant – had opened a new doorway in his life. From now on his life's journey would be inextricably joined with God's people and he was filled with intense longings that Jesus and the brotherhood-church would be the first, and greatest, love in his life.

'Since I was baptised I've grown and not gone back,' said Chris. 'Before, my character was quite weak. I'm now a main leader and sometimes I wonder if I'm up to it! Sometimes it overwhelms me and at other times I can cope, knowing God's anointing.'

Life carries its disappointments and this is all part of the willingness to share in 'suffering with Christ', one of the seven pledges in the Jesus Fellowship covenant. Not all are true to the covenant commitment they have made and at times this can be very damaging for a growing work of God.

'Some time ago many of the leaders in our area left and we had that to deal with' said Chris. 'I have a sense of loyalty to members of the church that goes very deep. People rely on me! I get heartbroken when they go somewhere else. I expect them too to be loyal and committed in a real way.'

Another part of the Jesus Fellowship covenant pledge is that 'together we will put on the full armour of God and resist the schemes of the devil and the forces of evil.' At times, Chris admits, this is very difficult.

'Sometimes I feel I can't be bothered! I just want to rest! That's part of the warfare. At other times I feel really encouraged.'

When he feels downhearted, Chris often turns to the words of David, King of Israel, uttered a thousand years before Christ: 'Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me!'¹

Covenant is very important to Chris as a solid block for church building. 'Most church congregations turn over every four years,' he said. 'People come and go and nothing gets built properly. We see building relationships within the church and being there for one another as a lasting commitment. In many normal church situations the members come and go when they want and do what they want. Nothing

¹ Psalm 51:10

gets built. Christianity is so often a “consumerism” religion – take the bit you want and move on!

‘Covenant is like marriage – intending to commit yourself to one church for the rest of your life is almost like a marriage vow. We work it out as best we can!

‘Part of the covenant is that we’re going to walk in the light. Unless we do that, it won’t work. We have to be prepared to work things out and stay open with each other. Covenant is a lifetime thing but it needs working out on a daily basis!’ Chris’s advice is ‘live for God one day at a time and don’t be focused too far ahead!’

Chris’s earlier years were marked by a lack of clear direction and he drifted into a life of crime. Between his conversion and baptism - and making covenant at the same time - Chris said there had been fourteen years ‘when I spent a lot of time in the wilderness.’ Now Chris’s desire is to be sold out – for Jesus and His church! Covenant has been one of the ways this desire has been anchored – and made a reality – in his life. And he is discovering too, as God told him several years ago: ‘there’s a lot more!’