

# The Church

that meets at.....

**Chorley Shropshire, and The Scotlands Wolverhampton**

Post to:- 11 Ludlow Road  
Bridgnorth  
Shropshire  
WV16 5AD  
23<sup>rd</sup> Nov 2010

**What follows is based on the text of a letter which Alan Vincent the then Managing Director of Jentech Computers Ltd, an IT company in Bridgnorth, Shropshire, UK, sent to a journalist called Phil, of the Shropshire Star Newspaper some years ago. It following an article Phil had written about a 'religious experience' he had had and the questions it raised in him.**

Dear Phil,

I read your article, and was struck from the start by your interest in the 'activity', institution, trappings, social aspects as well as your enquiring belief, stirred up by the 'religious experience' that you described. It's amazing how we have focused on the trappings, and not the relationship between a Father and his kids that Christianity is really all about. You might also be surprised to hear the writer was from the age of 22 to 47, a confirmed, evangelical, content, rational and well reasoned Atheist!

As a child, I was compelled to do the Sunday morning service and Sunday School at 3 in the afternoon, under well intentioned parental pressure. I went to a Church of England Primary school in Maghull, Lancashire, and was taught the doctrine of the age! I can't ever remember feeling welcomed, loved, inspired, or desirous for more of what I experienced! It seemed cold and dead.

As a teenager, I met one man (Tom Farrell, our PE teacher,) who I realised over time was different from other people, he had a real faith belief, and a relationship with his God. He was a good influence on me and many other kids at the Ormond Drive secondary modern school in Maghull, where I grew up. In hind site, mum and dad did pretty well, as they had both had tough lives growing up in the Liverpool area, and while we all accept our lot as children as 'normal', many of the relational aspects of childhood and home life are not as 'normal' or full, as they might be! With a poor education as I was dyslexic, being consistently 31st out of 31 in most subjects, and rock bottom self esteem, I discovered a ray of light in my life at the age of about 13, again at school. I discovered (or more accurately a teacher we

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called Taffy Thomas discovered) I had an aptitude for algebra and the science subjects, and through that, I found I had a place in life helping others. Some were much older than me. I helped with their maths, physics, engineering, and night school homework. This brought esteem, recognition, appreciation, value and self worth for the first time in my life I think. I trained as an engineer and had a great appetite for things scientific. I made a hobby of astronomy (not astrology I hasten to add) and was dumb struck by the unimaginable immensity of our universe. I was an addict of all the radio and TV documentaries and natural history programs. This was the dawn of the age of space flight, man could do all things, even the sky was not the limit any more!

Throughout my life and yours we have been taught by those we trust about a man centred, science based, evolutionary existence, with God as religious (not relational) optional, uncomfortable extra, that tends to mess the whole thing up, but is there if you really need him as a prop.

At the ripe old age of about 23, my first son, an 18 month old was struck and killed in a road accident. I had no faith and yet was helped in practical ways by an Anglican High Church Priest called Father Fred from Holbrooks in Coventry. It was no reflection on him but the experience of loosing a son brought me to face the big issue of life. "Is there a life after death?", "Is there a God?" Well, after much deep guilt driven heart searching over about a year, I finally resolved to answer that question! I had proved to 'my' own satisfaction that God did not exist! I was free! There was NO God! I am what I am. WYSYWYG (What You See Is What You Get), to use the jargon of my profession. When my days are up I will be buried or burned and that will be that. That's fine with me. What freedom! What a release from all that half understood, cold knowledge with no life, and no evidence of any truth in it. Religious Church! Wow! Let's get on with all the wonders of life and man's discoveries and see what we can make of this universe in which we live. What an amazing adventure.

I was an Atheist!

My life progressed wonderfully. I was successful in my career, I loved my work, I loved training and learning about new things science and engineering was revealing, and in every way life was great. My convictions and understanding grew and I was, even though I say it myself, quite a good Atheist! Even evangelical! I could debate, discuss, argue most people to a standstill with reason, logic, 'science' and 'facts' until I, or they were blue in the face. My views were rock solid.

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I had no doubts; no fear of death; other than I would prefer it to be peaceful, in one piece and a long way off. Life experience has taught me, facts are all there, we live in a Godless universe, science has proved it. I believed it. We see it endlessly on TV and our children hear it in every lesson at school! We know it's true. Don't we? Even so-called religious people will do handstands to accommodate it, even though it is directly opposed to much of the 'Book' of their faith! They just bend what they read and ignore what's a challenge or disagrees with their own chosen beliefs! Well that's what I thought anyway. Got the idea?

But..... There is always a but!

In the summer of my 46th year, my then wife Yvonne and daughter went on holiday with some friends. I was too busy being an important businessman to join them. When she came back she had been with her friends, to a 'church meeting' in a tent, on a camp site they had stayed at, in a place called Tren Creek near St Austell in Cornwall. She had enjoyed the friendship of the families she had stayed with and said they were very different from anyone she had known before. They were all Christians! She had even enjoyed the Church service and asked if I would take her to a Church in our home town Bridgnorth! Shock horror! Of course I wouldn't. I was an Atheist! I was not going to be a hypocrite. I said that if she wanted to go that was OK with me, but, 'You won't get me in a church' at any price.

She gently asked several times over the last months of 1990. My answer was unchanging. One morning, just after Christmas, my wife and I had had, 'one or two words'! I can't remember what it was about. Her parting shot, (you know; the one that hits below the belt just as she turned and left the room in a flurry of skirt,) was to say 'Well; you wouldn't even take me to Church when I asked you!' In a fit of pique, frustration and anger I shouted 'OK then! If that's what it's going to take to get things back to normal round here, it's Sunday today, come on, I'll carry your handbag.' My attitude was disgraceful, arrogant, I was so angry, you name it. I stormed out to the car, sat there revving the engine until she came and got in, I roared off down the lane to Bridgnorth, furious. As we approached the town, overlooking it, I pointed to St Leonard's big red sandstone tower which stands over the town, that one will do I said. No, Yvonne said, I think that one is closed! Well that one with the green top then, St Mary's! No, not that one either. I roared through the North Gate, along the High Street, turned down The Cartway, and screeched to a halt outside the URC church. 'No.' Yvonne said, 'not that one'. Off we went again, Peoples Hall was next in Low Town, then back up the New Road

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into High Town and suddenly Yvonne said "Stop!, I've heard some good things about that one!" Screeching to a halt again still very angry, I elbow into a parking space right out side! (That's a miracle in its self!) We had found a church she was happy with, and we went in..... Well actually, I stormed up the path still in a rage, marched in and threw myself into a pew at the back of the church, folded my arms, and thought! Now; Pick the bones out of that, telling me I wouldn't take you to church! There I was an angry atheistic hypocrite, sat on the back row, in church! Surely God works in mysterious ways? Well; I would not have gone quietly!

So Phil, that morning I was challenged by a little of what I heard from the minister Tom Smith, no dog collar, no robes. Most of what he said was just good moral living. You don't need God for that. The biggest impact however was through the faces of the people I met. They were radically different. They took time to come and say Hi, to 'me,' and to Yvonne. Welcomed us and where interested in making us comfortable, and enquiring we where from. So different! They clearly knew something, or as I was to realise much later, someone, I didn't know. The peace, love and gentleness in their lives was tangible. Very disturbing!

Over the next few days I wrestled with the little of what Tom had said which challenged me. By Thursday I had got it all sorted out. The world was flat again. I was back in the driving seat and ready for the fray. Come Sunday morning, 9:30, I grabbed Yvonne's coat and bag again, and said "Come on, were going back, for round two!" Over the next five months we did round three, and four and on, and this God who I knew did not exist, was just gently turning my life upside down. I hated it! What I realised was, that what you refer to as religion, is only a matter of external trappings, opinion, belief, custom or practice. It's not a friendship and relationship with the Creator. What happened to me was nothing to do with religion at all. It was to do with a growing relationship, with a 'calling' God, whose existence I was still trying to deny! He was taking His time through His Holy Spirit to gently draw me and convince me that He was who He said He was!

I didn't come quietly or easily Phil! In fact I fought tooth and nail. Everything I stood for was on the line here. He was patient though and was not about to give up on what He had started. I did eventually come to know that this living, loving Lord Jesus Christ had sought me out, to prove to me He was alive and wanted to give to me the wonderful gifts that only He is empowered to give. You see it's nothing to do with what we have been indoctrinated with, or making a choice about what to believe, it's to do with coming to know and recognise that Jesus is alive, and that He loved me enough to give His life for me, even though I had denied Him, not just

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three times like Peter, but probably three hundred or even three thousand times. He wanted 'me' to be with Him where He was!

Could this be true? 'ME' becoming a Christian!

On 19th May 1991 at about ten past eight in the morning, I prayed to this Jesus and asked him to be Lord of my life and committed my life to Him, just as I was warts and all, there and then. That's what it's all about Phil! He accepted me, just as I was, He will accept you just as you are right now. He wiped my slate clean. He placed on me a robe of His, and presented me to the Father as His friend and put everything right between me and the Father. He cleaned me up and put His Holy Spirit in ME! He and I made a new beginning. I started a new life like being reborn, and it's been wonderful. SO Wonderful! So TRULY full of wonder! It's not a matter of whether you are religious or not. It's a matter of hearing the knock of a faithful friend called Jesus on the door of your life, when He knocks, and remembering that as it says in scripture, 'He stands at the door and knocks, and whoever invites Him in, HE WILL COME and eat with them'.

You see, there is no handle on His side of the door. You have to do the opening, the inviting, or He stays outside. It's my/our/your choice. He is a gracious God and will not crash into your life, he wants to be wanted and invited. He gave you free will. He will not take it away from you, this is your 'free will' choice. He only enters in, when you open the door and invite Him. He is not bothered whether you are religious or not either. What He wants is for you to get to know Him personally as Lord of your life, to receive from Him all that He has for you and move into a brand new life. I did, and I would not go back for anything. He is a gracious, kind, compassionate, and loving God who is prepared to spend time helping you/me understand that He is who He said He is, who he was, and who he will be. The great I AM. That's my Jesus. The one that God raise from the dead, and can do the same for you, granting you (and me) a place in His wonderful eternity, with Him for ever.

Since coming to know Jesus he has helped me deal with all kinds of stuff which was bedevilling my life. He has forgiven me, released me from guilt, healed many wounds and hurts in my heart, and restored much of the good he put in me that life had milked away. He has cleansed my heart, is renewing my mind, He is drawing me into the Heart of the Father, so I can be where He is. He has brought Peace to a turbulent life, he provides for me and is an ever present help to me. He has filled my empty life with promise. What more could any human being long for.

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It's all available through Christ. We still have our share of trouble, but He is with us and sees us through so we can deal with it His way which is so much better than (as Frank Sinatra said) "My Way".....

Please don't try to excuse me by saying all those usual things about people needing a crutch, wimps, and do gooders. When God sought me out I still denied He existed. I was convinced I did not need Him or anyone. I was quite content with my lot and I was getting on quite nicely thank you, I thought. I was doing it my way. He revealed a so much better way that is how we were supposed to live, in Him and with Him for ever.

I now know the truth. How wrong could I have been! Thank you Lord for your grace and mercy, even to someone (even a God denying wretch) like me.

Don't be religious.

So Phil, I hope you're not religious. I hope at some point you will open your heart and mind to the One called Jesus, ask Him to reveal himself to you, find a fellowship of believers that knows this Jesus, and is preaching this Jesus and His Gospel, and living the empowered life he has called us to. Or join one of the many Alpha courses around the county which are designed to help people who have more questions than answers. Or please write back to me, I would love to help. Use e-mail [Alan.Vincent@The-Church.net](mailto:Alan.Vincent@The-Church.net).

Religion will not earn you a seat with the Lord Jesus in that place called paradise for all eternity, neither will good works! Giving your life to Jesus will! God bless you Phil for your courage and frankness in your article. I hope and pray my letter will help in some way to answer some of your questions.

Yours sincerely

**Alan**

**Leaders of The Church that meets at Chorley Shropshire and The Scotlands Wolverhampton.**

 Tel:- 01746 762365

 Mob:- 07875 979227

 e-Mail:- [Alan.Vincent@The-Church.net](mailto:Alan.Vincent@The-Church.net)

 web:- [www.The-Church.net](http://www.The-Church.net)

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