

User Error: Church life According to the Manual

These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; ¹⁵ but if I am delayed, *I write* so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14–15)

In our computer age, a popular term that is now used is *user error*. It originally meant that it was not the computer that had made an error, it was the user who entered the wrong thing, or used the wrong method. User error meant that the computer's hardware and software was fine, but it was the human who had made the mistake. It has now become a kind of slang term for whenever someone messes up, or is incompetent. But what we're saying with user error is that it is the fault of the person, not the device they are using.

As I've pastored over the years, I've become aware of how many people commit user error when it comes to the church. It is not that they intend to misuse church, but they nevertheless do. They try to apply to the church what they have learnt in other social places: work, the mall, the market, the movie theatre, the charity, the corporate environment, the sports club. But the church is not one of those places or contexts, and so when you apply approaches that don't fit the church, you commit user error. The result is frustration, disappointment, even anger.

And just like the person who isn't computer literate gets frustrated with the computer and blames the computer, so people have the same experience in church.

I see people with the same kind of anger you'd expect if you were using a drill to slice cheese. “This doesn't work!” says the frustrated person. But it is not the tool, and not the cheese. It is user error. So you see user error with people and the local church. “This church is not friendly!” “This church's worship isn't passionate!” “It's hard to get involved in this church!” “I don't feel like I belong in this church”: these are all often statements of user error. One of the ways we know that is because you will sometimes hear the very opposite. You will hear, “This is the friendliest church I have ever attended”, or “I have never experienced such meaningful worship” or “there are so many needs and people to serve in this church”. Now how do you explain these opposite opinions of the same church? It's hard to explain a false positive impression. But it easy to explain negative impressions with user error. When people repeatedly apply the wrong approach to the church, especially a church that is not catering to worldly tastes, then those people will be disappointed with their experience of the church. When they are disappointed for long enough, they either leave altogether, or settle into a kind of complacent disillusioned detachment.

But sometimes it is just because someone has never been taught. No one took the time to explain: this is how it works in church. Many people didn't grow up in church, or the churches they did grow up in weren't particularly biblical, and so they just do the best they can with knowledge from other places and situations.

So I'd like to take a sermon to just address some common user errors that people make in church. We've spent a few weeks looking at the pastor's ten commandments in chapter 4, so before we dive into chapter five, I thought it appropriate to look at the responsibilities of members, and to prevent the kind of user error that causes people to be frustrated and often leave. This is an application of 1 Timothy 3:15- how to conduct yourself in the house of God.

In our church we often summarise life in the church with a few words that end in ship: worship, fellowship, discipleship, leadership, membership. So using some of those, here are five important user errors to avoid.

1) Worship: Prepare to Participate, Not Be Passive

Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. ² Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God *is* in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few. (Ecclesiastes 5:1–2)

Ecclesiastes tells us that when going to the house of God, you should approach with a sense of understanding of what you are about to do. Don't approach casually, haphazardly, mindlessly, and just do and say anything. Realise that worship is an encounter between you and God, so you are there to participate thoughtfully.

Now unfortunately, our culture has taught us that whenever you are in a context where there are lot of people in seats facing one way, and someone or something at the front facing them, then what is happening is a performance, some kind of entertainment, or maybe some kind of talk. A stage play, a music concert, a movie, a comedian, or perhaps a speech or a lecture. But the mode you are in when you attend entertainment is mostly passive. You watch, you enjoy, you listen. But you are mostly inactive, waiting for the performance up there to win your interest, engage you and keep you amused.

Now if you come to church with something like that expectation, you will commit user error. You will treat worship as a performance, and when it doesn't entertain, you will assume something is wrong with the church. But worship is not entertainment. Worship is the response of people who have understood the worth, the value, the beauty of God. Worship is both where the treasure that is God is held up for us to admire and see, and the responses of admiration and love and awe.

But that requires active concentration and engagement. We are going to read the Bible, an ancient book, and you have to pay attention to its meaning carefully. We are going to sing some beautifully crafted hymns, with poetry and images that are not immediate. They are not like a lollipop, they are more like steak. You have to chew on them, digest them. We are going to explain God's Word in a sermon, and it takes a good bit of time to explain the context, the meaning, the application. You have to work, you have to engage. That means if you come with the movie theatre attitude, you will be bored, and frustrated, and disappointed. You will walk out and say, "I didn't get much out of that" or "That didn't really touch me" But this means you've bringing wrong expectations into Christian worship. Don't come to see if the music is entertaining. Don't come to see if the sermon hooks you. Come to make the music great with your voice. Come to make the prayers and readings and sermon interesting by your active learning, listening, engaging.

To properly experience what we do, you need to prepare. You have to begin before you get here. You can go over the sermon text to be preached and look at it more carefully. You can get ready on Saturday night so that Sunday morning is not a panic and last-minute rush. You can arrive and prepare your mind and heart in prayer, be thoughtful, ready and eager to learn and respond.

If you want to avoid user error, then prepare to participate, not be passive.

2) Fellowship: Be As Friendly As You Hope the Church To Be

A man *who* has friends must himself be friendly, But there is a friend *who* sticks closer than a brother. (Proverbs 18:24)

The Bible gives us a simple formula for experiencing friendship: being friendly. And I've seen this proven over and over in church. Friendly people visit our church, and remark how friendly it is. Sulky, sullen people attend and remark how unfriendly and cold the church was. Coincidence? No, that's human nature. Sit in your chair with a mini-storm cloud over your head, with gravity winning the war on your facial muscles, and you will likely find you are not swarming with interested people around you.

But wait. Aren't Christians supposed to love the unlovely, reach out regardless of what they get in return? Yes. They should. As you should. But that doesn't erase the truth of Proverbs 18:24, does it? If you would like to experience spiritual friendships, you must take an interest in others. You must initiate conversations, introduce yourself, ask people about their needs. You must be warm and welcoming, hospitable and kind, if you hope to experience warmth and openness.

The same is true regarding openness and transparency. I've met people who are very hurt when they don't get the inside scoop of the pastor's family's week. But ask them about their week and their problems, and watch how close they hold those cards to their chest. They want openness and honesty and refreshing transparency, but from others. You can't expect me to do that, right? If you want friendship and fellowship, be friendly and open.

The Bible is teaching is a symmetry of relationships. Be as friendly and as welcoming and as open as you want others to be.

The user error here is to think that because this is a church of loving Christians that you can depend on relational asymmetry, that others must do all that, but not me. There are some other people, who are somehow on the other side of the tennis net, and they must be the welcoming, friendly, inviting ones. It's their job. They must hit the ball to you. And if you let it plop, they must cheerfully hit another one to you, and another. Someone must invite you to start serving in church, give you special invitations to events on Saturdays or Wednesdays, and keep phoning and calling you to make sure you are there. And if you're not, those people must worry about you and call you and check up on you.

Now praise God that there are often people like that in a church. But they are not always in abundance. And they may not always have found you. In the meantime, you need to be as friendly, and as interested in others as you want them to be in you.

You don't wait for invitations to service. You look for needs and start meeting them. You don't wait for a formal introduction to the leadership. You come up and offer a friendly hello. You don't wait to be invited to every church event. You arrive with a friendly expression and start greeting the brethren. Don't expect others to welcome visitors. Be friendly and do it yourself.

You cannot know if you don't want to be known. You can't experience friendship if you are not a friend. You can't have fellowship, unless you desire to love and be loved.

If you want to avoid user error in the area of fellowship, be as friendly as you want the church to be.

3) Discipleship: Come To Church Weekly Or Attend Somewhere Where You Can

²⁵ not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25)

One of the user errors committed by modern church people is to attend church with enough

regularity to make you feel you go to such and such a church, but with enough irregularity so that it will really have no practical benefit in your life.

God has created the world with cycles of time, days, weeks, months, and years. From the Old Testament into the New, the cycle of coming to corporate worship, to know and see God among His people is a weekly cycle. That means, normally, you should be in worship every week. Now, we all take holidays once or twice a year. We may be sick a Sunday or two in a year. And work may take some of us out of church a few times a year. So maybe, depending on your work and your health the average person could expect to miss between 4 and 8 Sundays out of 52.

When you miss more than that, there's usually something going on that is more than just being prevented from coming. There is the "I just needed some me-time" or the "we needed a family day together" or "weekend getaways are the only way for us to survive".

But let me explain something to help you avoid user error. Sunday worship is not like going to the gym, where no matter how long it's been, you will always benefit from a bit of a workout. No, Sunday worship is a weekly occurrence of a long sequence of worship services, each of which follows on from the next. So while you can miss a few here and there, and pick them up, if you miss multiple services, you're not picking up much of anything. If you come every second week, every third, once a month, you are like a person who watches every third episode of a TV series and skips the rest. You are like someone who skips every ten pages in a book you are reading. You are like someone who listens to a phone or Zoom conversation, but only hears every fourth comment. You are like a student who takes a course, reads the middle chapter of the textbook, and attends lectures 3, 7, 9, and 16 out of twenty. Nothing will really stick, and nothing will really make sense.

In a good church, people are working through God's Word in sequence. Verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book, we are unfolding and understanding God's Word to man. If you come every third or fourth Sunday, attend, skip, attend, miss, I cannot imagine how you hope to make sense of the pulpit ministry of a church like NCBC. It must be like a bad radio receiver that tunes in for brief snatches, and then dissolves into scratchy static. How can you make sense of a book with a beginning and an end, with books within the book, all written in an order, with a sequence if you never attend in sequence and get the flow? You're robbing yourself of properly understanding the whole counsel of God.

The only explanation is user error: thinking that a sermon is a sermon, one is better than none, and if you pitch up when you can, you'll at least get something. And you will, but not in the way God meant you to. God meant you to return to weekly worship, and steadily make progress through the Bible.

If you want to avoid user error in the area of discipleship: attend weekly, or make sure you can do that somewhere. Get the benefit that God intended for you: weekly worship with God's people.

4) Leadership: Follow Your Leaders or Fire Them, but Don't Hope for Both

¹⁷ Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17)

The Bible gives congregations the authority to choose their own leaders. We see in Acts 6, the church chose its deacons. The church at Antioch chose its missionaries. What this tells us is that churches have a say over who leads them. But once the church has made that decision, it is also

then expected to let the leaders lead. It is expected to submit to those leaders and allow them the freedom to make hard decisions on the church's behalf, to grapple with difficult counseling cases, to work through perplexing financial decisions, to over see matters that need continual oversight.

It doesn't make sense to have leaders and then not follow them. That's not the point of having leaders. Leaders are not mere signposts, or consultants. Leaders are there to provide the way, to give guidance, and instruction, to correct, to supervise, and that means authority.

Now if that authority is radically abused, if the leaders are clearly disqualified from holding office, the Bible gives a mechanism for removing those leaders. We see it in 1 Timothy 5. Most churches, write some version of this into their constitutions: the procedure for removing disobedient pastors or deacons. You can fire your leaders when they are disqualified.

And if the majority of mature, Spirit-controlled people in a church are convinced he should go, then go he will. If you are the only one who thinks he should go, that should probably tell you something. When something is terribly wrong with a leader, most people have noticed it, and are trying to solve it.

But what no one can do is live in some no-man's land between following and firing a leader. If you join a church, you're accepting the leaders as leaders. If you come to the opinion that they are not worth following or that you cannot submit to them, and you know your opinion is in the slim minority, then you either need to change your opinion and happily submit, or you need to leave the church and find one where you can happily submit. But there is no biblical category for staying in a church where you are not in submission to the leaders, or where you tolerate the presence of the leaders but don't follow them.

No one can grow spiritually when he is living in resentment or in rebellion to his leaders. It is the equivalent of hating your brother while trying to love God. A happy, trusting relationship with your church's leadership is close to the kind of relationship children should have with parents in the home. There should be trust, honour, obedience, love, mutual joy. When that trust, respect, or love is no longer there, you either have to restore it through reconciliation, or one of you must go: you or the leader you've come to distrust. If others haven't shared your view, then it's obvious that the leader isn't going to go. And if you can't get your heart back to a place of respect, joy, and trust, then you're just wasting time. You need to move on and be in a church where you happily and joyfully trust that the leaders are faithfully and responsibly watching for your soul.

The user error in the area of leadership is to want your leaders fired, but know it will not happen and stay nonetheless. No: follow your leaders or fire them.

5) Membership: When You Are No Longer A Visitor To a Church, No Longer Act Like One

⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41–47)

If you visit our church, it's your first time, or even your first month or first few weeks, it is understandable that you arrive two minutes before the service, say a few hellos to the people at the

door and maybe one or two people around you when you sit. It is understandable that you don't really know the hymns, fumble a bit with the hymnbook and the Bible, and battle a bit with the sermon. It is understandable that when the service is complete, you might head straight out to your car. That's what I would do if I or when I visit a church not my own. I'm an outsider, I feel like one, and I rather act like one.

But what has gone wrong with someone who continues to act like a visitor, though he has been attending a church for many years? Not months, years. Years of attendance, he arrives a few minutes before the main service, making no effort to enrich himself with adult discipleship. He has no concept of what went into preparing and organising the service; he just expects it to be happening when he arrives. He still doesn't really understand why the elements of worship are the way they are, but he plays along. And when the service is over, he looks to see if anyone will accost him and greet him and engage him. If not, he heads straight to his car. He is a visitor, but he is a chronic one. He is a serial visitor, a permanent visitor.

The user error here is the man who thinks that it is okay to treat the church like a lecture hall, where you don't know the other students, or like a movie theatre, where you don't know the other viewers. You all just happen to share the same venue, and the same interest in what happens up front. So you keep doing it, even though the experience is fairly cold, fairly narrow, fairly self-centred.

You see, at a certain point in any normal human social situation that meets regularly, the people who are regulars begin acting like regulars. That's true of a home, a school, a business, a gym, a sportsclub, even a pub, or a restaurant. It is their home, their haunt, their workplace. They know the place, they're on first-name terms, they know the rules, they know wherever everything is, and they begin to become hosts, not guests. They welcome guests. They care about the state of the place. They look after it. They even protect it, defend it, guard it, clean it, decorate it. They invite others to it. They want it to grow. In other words, they assume responsibility for the place. They stop acting like a consumer, like a guest, and become a provider, a host.

People who are regulars who keep acting like guests are committing a user error. And it's an error that hurts others. Whatever the reason for doing so, pretty soon, it is normal for the other regulars to become offended that some regulars keep acting like guests. It is normal for the regulars who clean the carpets, and set up the sound, and make the tea and coffee, and teach the children, and print the bulletins, and play the music, and set up the chairs, and clean the bathrooms, and read the Scriptures, it is normal for them to say to the serial visitor: what's wrong with you? What's the difference between us? I've been coming here as long as you have, but I treat it as my home to welcome others, while you keep acting like a guest. When will you join me in becoming a host for others? How long will it take? What will it take?

When you are no longer a visitor, you arrive earlier. You linger longer afterwards. You welcome true visitors. You know the state of your church: what's happening and when, the financial state of the church, what's being taught, when and where by whom, the ministries, the service opportunities, You know the missionaries. You have a prayer diary and you pray for people by name. And unless you have a conscientious objection to some point of our church's doctrine (such as believers baptism, or our position on tongues), then the next step is membership. It is a way you signal that you are moving from visiting to staying, from being a guest to being a host, from window shopping to buying, from dating to marrying.

To avoid user error when it comes to membership, once you are no longer a visitor, do not act like one.

I suppose I could list out other user errors of how people conduct themselves in church, but I'm confident that fixing these will fix a huge number of problems for people. Treat worship like something you need to participate in with preparation and understanding, come to church and be as friendly as you want others to be, come to church with weekly regularity, follow leaders who are biblically qualified, and once you are regular, become as responsible and involved as a regular person should be. People who begin doing these things suddenly find that the church is not broken, the church has in fact always been doing what it was supposed to be doing.

Begin conducting yourself in the house of God as you ought, and you may find what a glorious experience it is to be in the church of God.