

“This book is like a stick of dynamite set under the seats of those who have allowed themselves to be hoodwinked by polite, conservative, respectable Christianity. It paints a picture of possibility. It cries out for a generation who are willing to rise and risk everything for the sake of the Kingdom and for the cause of Jesus Christ. Buy it, read it, act on it. You need not agree with everything you read in this controversial book, but you have to admit that Malcolm Duncan is a prophetic voice to the church in our day and generation.”

– TONY CAMPOLO, PhD, Eastern University,
St. Davids, PA, United States

“This book recaptures the vision and vitality of the Acts Church but refuses to be locked into the past; enslaved by tradition; corrupted by prejudice; chained to pre-conceived ideas; and shaped by the ecclesiastical status quo. The fresh air of heaven and eternity blows freely and refreshingly through its pages. *Risk Takers* needed to be written but it now needs to be read. This, surely, is the Church as it was meant to be!

“It is a book for every Kingdom citizen but, if you are a pastor, why not buy a copy for each of your church leadership team and base a retreat day on it? Malcolm Duncan is not only an able thinker and deeply theologically aware but he has a tender, passionate pastoral heart that cries out for reality here, challenging mediocrity and yearning for radical renewal.”

– JIM GRAHAM, Pastor Emeritus,
Gold Hill Baptist Church

“No one can read about the life of the prophets, the ministry of Jesus or the exploits of the early church in the book of Acts and come away with the idea that the Bible is calling us to bland belief. Jesus calls his followers away

from the shallows of predictability to live on the edge of possibilities where God does his best work in us. *Risk Takers* leads us firmly in that direction.”

– JOEL EDWARDS, International Director, Micah Challenge

“Malcolm Duncan is not afraid to ask hard questions. You may not agree with everything that he says, but you ignore the challenges in *Risk Takers* at your peril. We will never see the world changed unless we are willing to step out in faith for Christ – and that involves taking a risk. Read this book – you will never be the same again. Buy a copy for your church leader. *Risk Takers* pushes us to confront our inner fears and dares us to dream that the next chapter of the church could be the brightest one so far. We can stay as we are, or we can take a risk and change. The choice is ours, but the consequences are enormous.”

– EDDIE LYLE, CEO, Open Doors

Risk Takers

Living as God intended

Malcolm Duncan

**MONARCH
BOOKS**

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Anne Graham and Peter Bond, both of whom had a deep impact on my life. I miss them terribly, but know we will see one another again. It is also dedicated to the following people, each of whom have inspired me to be a risk taker:

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Like all books, the good bits are the result of many people's input. The bad bits can be entirely blamed on me!

Introduction: Of Russian Bears and Freedom

Old longings nomadic leap,
Chafing at custom's chain;
Again from its brumal sleep
Wakens the ferine strain.

From "Atavism" by John Myers O'Hara

I want to live well. I want to reach the end of each day and know that I have really lived. Somehow, I want to grab the cup of life and drink deeply from its draughts, tasting the grandeur of every moment and the potential of every encounter. I want to live as if change is really possible, so that I can see the unique and wondrous beauty in others. I want to find the green shoots of life in my community and water them with love, feed them with faith and nurture them with hope. I want to be a character that is painted in the masterpiece called *The Adventure of Life*, a note played in the Master's symphony entitled *Being Truly Alive*. I want to go to bed each night knowing that I made a difference.

I don't want to paddle in the shallows of existence; I want to swim in the ocean of being alive. I want to be a "you can do it" preacher, a "have a go" pastor, a "you were made

for this” encourager. I want my enthusiasm for life to be like a virus that infects those I know and those who love me. I want the church I am part of to be known as a community where dreams are born and destinies are fulfilled. I want it to be like a maternity ward for vision. I want my life to be used like a rag to wipe away the dirt that has obscured the breathtaking beauty of God. I want people to be able to see Him for who He really is. I want my life to point to Someone. I want to make a difference. For all of that to be true, however, I must learn what it is to take risks. So I want to be a risk taker. In fact, if the truth be told, I want to be part of the band of risk takers who change the world.

You see, I am not alone. Across the world, on all continents and in every country, in most cities, towns and villages, there are men and women and boys and girls just like me. We come from different cultures. Our skins are different colours and our languages are diverse. We are like a dazzling tapestry of life and hope and purpose. We get up every day and we put our minds to what lies in front of us.

Some of us are single and some of us are married. Some of us are young and some of us are old. We look after our children and we love our spouses. We have dinner with our friends. We chat to our neighbours and play our part in our communities. Some of us sit at desks and type letters. Some of us plough fields and plant seeds. Some of us teach others and some of us are taught. Some of us make things. Some of us are politicians. Some of us serve in the army. Some of us write. We are found in every stratum of society and in every walk of life. A few of us, like me, work in churches, but most of us do not. Wherever we are and whatever we do, our

lives matter. Our choices matter. We matter. We are ordinary people with an extraordinary power. We are part of the most dynamic family on earth – we are the church.

Pardon?

Say that again?

Did I just say “the church”?

For many of you, the pin of the word “church” has just burst the burgeoning balloon of your excitement about what I have just been saying. You were with me up to that point. We were rising together, but we have just come crashing down to earth again. If I had been trying to sell you something, you were about to sign up, but with the mention of the word “church”, the deal is off. Church? Dynamic? Life-changing? Risk-taking? Hardly. More like stuck, disconnected, predictable, boring. I don’t blame you for thinking that. I have even thought that myself at times, but I’d like to invite you to think again. There is more to the church than you or I might have experienced thus far. There is life in her yet.

Years ago Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, Illinois, wrote a book in which he said that the local church is the hope of the world. I was inspired by what he said then and I am still inspired by it today, but with a caveat. A local church *living as Jesus intended* is the hope of the world. A local church that does its own thing and ignores Jesus is the blight of the world. And therein lies the dilemma that many of us face when we hear the word “church” in the same breath as the idea of being a risk taker. We just cannot put the two ideas together. For many of us, “church” has become a word associated with the *wrong* things. I think we might have lost sight of who we really

are and of what God really wants us to be, how God really wants us to live.

In 1976, the movie *The Omen* hit the screens – and the boy’s name “Damien” changed forever for many people. In the movie, Robert and Katherine Thorn’s first-born son dies in Rome and is “replaced” by another boy who is actually the antichrist. I don’t want to enter a dialogue about the suitability of the film or its content, but there is no mistaking that the movie was a blockbuster. It took millions at the box office and in 2006 a remake told the story all over again.

What I want to highlight is the impact the movie has made on the name Damien. I happen to really like the name. It actually means “to tame” or “to soothe”, but millions of people think it means something like “the devil’s child”. They think as they do because the film gave the name Damien a wrong meaning. *The Omen* made a connection between a beautiful name and a very nasty character. Ask anyone with the name Damien if they have been given a hard time at school. You will invariably hear tales of being called “the devil’s spawn” or “a child of satan” or something similar. The name became distorted by the wrong story.

The same thing has happened to the name Judas, incidentally. Judas actually means “praise”, but because of the life and story of Judas Iscariot, it has become associated with deceit, selfishness and betrayal. Beautiful names can end up being used wrongly. As a result of bad examples we can become confused by what names and words mean.

The problem with “church”, “Christian” and “Christianity”

That is precisely what has happened with the idea and identity of the church. It has also been the fate of the words “Christian” and “Christianity”. All three of these words have beautiful, moving and inspiring histories. Far too often those histories have been eclipsed by bad examples or horror stories of selfishness, greed, pride and bigotry. For many, if not most, people outside the church and even for many within her, the idea of the church as a dynamic family of world-changers seems to be rather incongruous. The words “Christian” and “Christianity” are more often associated with oppression than liberation. When people hear the word “Christian” or “church” they often think of structures rather than a community, or of an institution rather than a movement.

All of these negative images may be what people conjure up when they hear the words “church”, “Christian” and “Christianity”, but I think they are wrong. Furthermore, I think the general negativity and misunderstanding of the words has been coupled with the lethargy and struggles that many followers of Jesus encounter in their own communities of faith. This combination has led to the real danger of losing a right understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus or a Christian. Based on misinformation or bad experiences, we are painting a rather grim picture of what it means to be part of Christianity and a member of the church that bears the name of its Founder.

Jesus did not come to found a religion. He came to change the world. Christ’s intention was certainly not that those who followed Him would end up living lives of boring

irrelevance locked away from the challenges of society. He did not call people to live in ghettos. He called people to follow Him and, in so doing, to become part of a movement that would change the world. Jesus did not come to create a safe and enclaved community. He came to turn an upside-down world the right way up, and all who claim to follow Him are called to participate in this same purpose. He came to call us to a risky life of pursuit. He wants us to step into His story, to see a bigger picture through His eyes. He invites us to say “Yes” to Him and to follow where that takes us. He wants us to live His way.

That is what this book is about. *Risk Takers* is about learning to live as God intended. It is about discovering the joy and the freedom that come from following Christ.

Safe or good?

C. S. Lewis is one of my favourite authors. I suspect that is true for many people. I love the Chronicles of Narnia – they are stories of adventure, risk and danger as four young people set out to save the world. They have been the stories that millions of us have read to our children at night, watching as their eyes open wide in wonder and then slowly close in exhaustion. Many of you will be familiar with the section in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Lucy enquires what Aslan, the great Lion, is really like:

“Is – is he a man?” asked Lucy.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr Beaver sternly.

“Certainly not. I tell you, he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea.

Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a

lion, the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh,” said Susan, “I thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and make no mistake,” said Mrs Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the king, I tell you.”

Aslan is not safe, but he is good. God is not safe, but He is good.

Therein lies the challenge for many of us. Our God, and therefore our lives, have become too safe. We need to learn the freedom and the joy and the exhilaration that come from following a God who calls us to take risks. Our God is compassionate and merciful and strong and loving and good, but He is not safe.

I think we know that. I think that deep within millions of us there lies an implanted whisper of adventure. In the words of John Myers O’Hara:

Old longings nomadic leap,
Chafing at custom’s chain.

Despite the conditioning that many of us have experienced in our churches, our denominations and our lives, we know that there is more to faith and more to life than simply getting by.

You, like me, want your life to count. You have read the

same Bible as I have and you have heard some of the things that Jesus says. Things like:

I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

John 10:10

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

John 8:32

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8:36

When you hear these words, like someone who has been suffocating, your spirit gulps in the promise that Jesus offers. None of us really want to muddle through. We do not want to limp across the finish line; we want to stride across it. We want to put our heads back and run! We want to inhale God's strength and purpose in our lives and exhale His glory to the world. We are not content to build an institution; we want to change the world. We are not willing to stay enslaved under false impressions of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We want to follow Him into a life of glorious possibility. We want to learn how to take risks again. We want to follow the God who is good, but never safe. To do this, we need to be liberated for life, freed for faith. I hope *Risk Takers* will help you to do that.

It was for freedom

The story is told of an animal rights group that freed a Russian bear. We shall call the bear Boris.

He was mistreated in a circus for many years. Forced to

perform at the end of a chain, poked with sticks and beaten badly, he had finally surrendered to a chained life. When he was not forced to dance and parade in front of ogling onlookers, Boris was confined to a cage that was twelve feet square. He spent over 90 per cent of his time in this confinement.

As animals do, Boris displayed his stress and tension in the cage by walking up and down in it. He walked twelve feet one way, then twelve feet the other way. He walked up and down in his cage all day, every day. It was all he knew.

The animal rights group liberated Boris from the circus and returned him to his native Russia. After finding a forest that was his natural habitat, they released him to return to where he belonged. The cage door opened and Boris was startled by his impending freedom. He hesitated, then ran into the forest. He was free!

A few days later, the group needed to check on Boris's progress before leaving Russia. They wanted to continue their quest of freeing others like him from their imposed captivity. Having tagged Boris before his release, they were able to track him easily. When they found him, Boris was in a glade in the Russian forest. With the sun shining down upon him, his coat shimmered in the early morning light. He stood in the resplendent beauty of the freedom that was now his.

There was something wrong, however. Boris, who was now free from the confinement of his cage and liberated from the abuse of his oppressors, was doing just what he had done when he was caged. He was walking up and down in the glinting sunlight, twelve feet in one direction, then twelve feet in the other direction. He walked up and down, again and

again. Boris had become so used to being caged that he had forgotten what it was to be free. He may have been physically liberated, but he remained psychologically stuck.

God sets us free.

He liberates us for life.

He opens the cage of sin and lets us out.

He places us in the habitat for which He made us. He gives us the freedom of walking in His ways and the noble task of living according to His purposes. He enlists us in a movement that is called to change the world (there's that phrase again!). He gives us what we need by equipping us for the task and emboldening us for the cause.

The tragedy is that many of us continue to live in the cage of our confinement. We have been conditioned to live the life of a caged prisoner rather than stepping into the liberty God has given us.

What holds us in? What stops us from stepping outside the cage? What keeps us from exploring the territory to which God calls us? Perhaps we are held by the fear of the unknown. It might be that the fear of failure holds us back. For some of us, we have never been allowed to try something new or do something different. Maybe we are chained by wrong thinking about ourselves and about our place in the world. This wrong mindset is like a straitjacket tied to the bars of the cage. It keeps us from making the journey of exploration and hope that lies before us. Could it be that we, having spent so long in a cage, now think we belong there? Or is it the false assurance of knowing that if we stay where we are, we will be safe? Is our cage gilded with safety and predictability?

There are many reasons why we choose to remain where

we are rather than venture into the unknown. My prayer is that we will never let our understanding of God and His purposes be reduced to the level of our disappointment and our past. Our salvation is not about managing mediocrity or organizing the disappointment of our lives. It is not about an unspoken acceptance of the status quo. To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, we are not called to look at our lives as they are with resignation and shout, “Why?” We are called to catch a glimpse of our lives as they could be, springing out of what God has done for us, and shout, “Why not?”

When our yearning to make a difference becomes greater than our acceptance of the status quo, then we are ready to embark on the most exciting journey of our lives. That is the journey to become all that God has made us to be.

I invite you to join me as we step out together as risk takers.

This is the life God has intended for us.

It is what we were born to be.

Please pray with me.

*Lord, I stand on the brink of a new horizon. I can see it—
but it seems so far away. Help me to give You the aching and
yearning that sits deep within my spirit. I have stayed in this
cell too long. I do not want to stay here any longer. I want to be
free of the wrong thinking that holds me in this confined place.
I want to step out of the small world that hems me in and into
the expansive, open places where You want to take me.*

*So I give You my restlessness and my discontent. I give
You my frustrations and my disappointments. I give You the
deepest desires of my will and the affection of my heart. I
believe that You have a future for me that lies beyond this cage.
I want to step into the wonderful possibilities of tomorrow. I*

want to step through the breathtaking empty space of the open door that lies in front me.

Help me to step out.

Amen.

Spiritual Myopia

A prayer for those embarking on the adventure of a lifetime.

We need healing, Lord!
Our spiritual myopia
is eroding our vision
of a bigger plan.

So the inevitable
collision
of our church Utopia
with the limited
scope it has
is making us
more comfortable
than we should be.

Our ground is getting
smaller
so we get a bigger crowd
but on a smaller space.
We make the music loud
enough to drown out the cries
of the broken
and the poor
but it is never loud enough to drown
Your cries.

Bigger congregations
won't answer segregation.

Locking ourselves in prayer
won't show that we care.

Enjoying when we meet
won't change the street.

Becoming more respectable
won't change the spectacle
of communities that need
hope infused
sin refused
tension defused
satan confused
saints enthused.

We need healing, Lord.
New eyes to see
new ears to hear
that You are here.

Faith to believe that You win.

Courage to push the envelope
until You envelop
people
streets
communities
towns
nations
continents
and turn the world
right way up.

We don't need bigger buildings,
we need bigger hearts.

We don't need to increase our capacity for seats,
we need to increase our capacity to love.

We don't need more blessing,
we need to be blessing more.

We don't need more grace,
we need to be more gracious.

We don't need more of You,
You need more of us.

There isn't an answer around the corner,
we are the answers hiding in a corner.

You don't need to fit into our plans,
we need to fit into Yours.

And Your plan is change from the inside out.
Hope from the foetus of faith
to the adulthood of the Kingdom.

Courage that pushes us out.

Birthing pangs that scream a declaration
through the heavenlies:

GOD IS HERE!

You won in the Jerusalem dirt
when Christ was planted
like a seed in the ground
beside Golgotha's mound
and three days later
the Seed pushed through the earth...

The plant has been growing ever since
and we are now its seed,
called to germinate
to propagate
to profligate
the Gospel.

God wins.