



MICHELLE FARRALL (ABOVE), 29, EXPLORES HOW WE'RE APPROACHING OUR FAITH LIKE A MOBILE PHONE CONTRACT – WHAT'S THE MOST WE CAN GET FOR THE MINIMAL INPUT. SOME HONEST REFLECTIONS (AND AN IPHONE) LEAD HER TO REALISE THE POWER OF A SELF-SACRIFICING, COVENANTAL APPROACH.

I had been feeling trapped for a while. I was getting the classic seven-year itch, desperate to escape. The offers just weren't doing it for me anymore... nothing could entice me to stay.

Finally, my phone contract was coming to an end.

All my friends had moved on to bigger and better devices – namely, iPhones – and I was embarrassed to bring out my clunky old brick (sooo 2007!). I shopped around for a month or so leading up to the Big Change, doing research online and seeking sage advice from my masseuse and eight-year-old cousin. I was determined not to be conned by secret fees, high voice call rates and slow internet speeds. I was clever enough to get the best deal for the best mobile: I was in control of my destiny.

And so it was with not a little smugness that I walked out of the shop one bright sunny day, triumphant that I had beaten the phone gods and their evil ways, having joined the club of iPhoneers (yes, there is a club).

Not even a week later, the promotions began for the BRAND NEW iPhone that was much better/sleeker/quicker/cleverer. I felt severely ripped off, stuck in a two-year contract with an inferior device.¹

THIS HUMBLING EXPERIENCE GOT ME THINKING ABOUT THE REST OF LIFE. HOW WAS I APPROACHING MY HUSBAND, MY WORK, MY CHURCH, MY FAITH LIKE A MOBILE PHONE CONTRACT: DESPERATE TO GET THE MOST OUT OF IT FOR MINIMAL INPUT?

My pastor, Mark Sayers², has been wrestling with this for a while. He reckons we're scared to commit to anything – or anyone – because it limits our options. Kind of like holding off on RSVPing for that party in case a better offer comes up.

"The mobile phone contract worldview tells us, 'Don't get stuck in a relationship. Somewhere there are better friends, a better experience and a better product, so don't get tied down.' Look at how church has changed in the last 30 years – before, you'd go to church as a sense of duty, now you choose one that best suits your needs.

"That's in contrast to a covenantal framework, where community and commitment are valued over our own rights. The covenantal worldview is so distant from us that we find it completely unimaginable. So we must enter a re-learning process, constantly asking ourselves why we're running away from commitment.

"AS OUR CULTURE SHIFTS MORE AND MORE TOWARDS A DAMAGING CONTRACTUAL FRAMEWORK, THE MORE THE COVENANTAL SOAKED REALITY OF BIBLICAL FAITH WILL BE A KEY IN THE CHURCH'S FUTURE MISSION."

OK, let me see if I've got this straight: the more we as Jesus-followers embrace deep relationship and community, willing to stick it out for the long haul no matter what we get / don't get in return... the more people will start to discover Jesus? Interesting.

But I wonder if *talking* about a covenant mentality is easier than *doing* it in real life. Like how Bruce and I have been talking off and on during our six years of marriage about doing some missions stuff in Africa – giving up a year or two of our lives and becoming better people through the experience.

In light of this covenant mindset, suddenly all our good intentions seem a bit, well, mediocre. Cross-cultural workers take at least five years to really learn the local language and culture and even *begin* forming deep relationships. But for some reason I think I'll be able to change the world in 12 months.

I took my conundrum to Chris Barnden – the guy at Global Interaction who looks after all the cross-cultural workers.

"In the past when there was a longer-term call to a missionary career, there was far less pressure for someone to produce results in a short period of time," Chris explains.

"It's the contract mentality that says, 'I'm only in it for a certain period of time... I'll put in effort then walk away with no strings attached'.

"SOMETIMES I WORRY THAT LONG TERM CHANGE IN THESE COMMUNITIES WON'T HAPPEN UNLESS TEAMS ARE IN THERE FOR THE LONG HAUL."

So, Chris, what would you say to Bruce and I who are considering giving a couple of years, but a bit worried that we're approaching it like a contract?

"You should ask yourselves seriously what you've got to lose – are you going to miss out by doing this long term? Can you trust God to take care of your future?"

I think what Chris *meant* to say was something more along the lines of, 'It would be amazing if you guys would give whatever time you can to overseas mission, without affecting your lives too much or giving up any control. The world would be a better place for any contribution you make, with God indebted for all eternity'.

Perhaps it would help to chat with Pip Miner, 31, who's been in Cambodia for the last four years, having done a short term trip at 18 and now committed long-term to the Khmer.

"When I came to Cambodia, I was expecting to see an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a transformation of many lives. Have I seen it yet? No. That's why I'm still here! I'm working for it, praying for it and longing for it.

"Yes, a few people have come to faith in Christ. Others have grown in their faith and become more mature believers, able to lead and encourage others. There are small signs of God's grace every week."

That's pretty exciting, but surely Pip is different to the rest of us; she must always know God is at work, even when she can't see it, and never think about what she's given up.

"The truth is I still have moments where I think about packing up and going back to Australia. On days of doubt, discouragement or simply struggling with the latest infection, I sometimes think about quitting. Yet I stay in Cambodia because God is faithful, even when I'm not."

AND SO WITH THOSE SIMPLE WORDS 'BECAUSE GOD IS FAITHFUL' WE BEGIN TO UNCOVER THE POWER OF A COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP. ENCOURAGED TO LET GO OF OUR CULTURE-SOAKED-CONTRACT-APPROACH TO LIFE, WE NO LONGER LOOK FOR WHAT WE CAN GET, BUT RATHER WHAT WE CAN GIVE UNCONDITIONALLY. WE BEGIN TO HEAR GOD ASKING US TO STOP WORRYING ABOUT OUR OWN STORY AND INSTEAD CONTRIBUTE TO HIS BIGGER STORY.

¹ Please note: no funds were exchanged between Apple and the journalist for this endorsement. However, Michelle would happily accept a new Mac in exchange for the free promo.

² Don't think I'll forget that one too soon, Apple. You owe me.

³ Check out more of Mark's thoughts at: marksayers.wordpress.com