

Radical Social Change: A Letter To Philemon

“Injustice: unfairness, unjust act, Unfair: not equitable or honest, not impartial or according to rules, society: organised and interdependent community, system and organisation of this” – The Australian Oxford Dictionary, Third Edition

The issue of social injustice* has always been one that is close to my heart. It's something that I like to talk to my kids about often, to try to impress upon them just how fortunate they are in many aspects of their life. They live in a modern, western country and are possessors of freedoms and rights still not available to many other peoples of the world. My daughters, particularly, have liberties still not accessible to many other [girls and women](#). And on the delicate subject of race, my children haven't had to endure the criticism or racial bigotry experienced by those who clearly display the truth of their indigenous ancestry by the colour of their skin (and who have been and are still being treated unjustly because of it).

Historically, social injustice has often been tolerated or, even worse, promoted on the basis of prejudice and [erroneously applied religious doctrine](#). Religious intolerance has fuelled many of this world's wars and God has been made the “scapegoat” for much of what is the worst of humanity.

One only needs to look, for example, at the [founding document](#) of the devoutly Christian American nation, the Declaration of Independence, to see that what people say and what people *do* are often two quite different things.

The statement in the second paragraph, **“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,**

that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” did not prelude American citizens from denying those same rights to thousands of men and women during the infamous period of slavery, based simply on the colour of their skin.

Mistreatment of slaves was further bolstered by their ignorant and prejudicial application of Bible passages. It took nearly 250 years for the official practice of human trafficking and slavery to be abolished in America and yet the affects of slavery are still felt and are at work today in many parts of America, and indeed the world.

Social injustice, however, is not just an American problem, or a historical problem. It's a world problem, manifested in many different ways, and is still a very relevant conversation for modern times.

“Over and over again, in the history of the world, man has made life into chaos.” – Oswald Chambers

What Does God Have To Say About Social Injustice?

God, the creator of all, made all equal. The only difference commented on in Genesis, at the creation of humanity, was our genders – both uniquely special and individually reflective of God's glory. We're told throughout the Bible that God makes no distinction between people based on their social status (Jeremiah 22:3), their ethnicity (Acts 10: 34-35), or their gender (Galatians 3:28).

In fact, we're told that God is just, fair, and completely impartial (Deuteronomy 10:17, Romans 2:11). He despises mistreatment, discrimination or prejudicial treatment:

“Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” | Isaiah

1:17 (ESV)

“This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other’ | Zechariah 7:9-10 (NIV)

“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.” | John 7:24 (NIV)

This impartiality is thrown into sharp relief against the story found in the letter to Philemon.

Philemon, squeezed between the epistle to Titus and the letter to the Hebrews, is often overlooked and under-read. But it is a truly astonishing and socially radical exposition of exactly how God views all men and women. It tackles the serious and often difficult shift in thinking that is required and shows that belief in and love of God must affect our relationships with others in positive ways and with complete impartiality.

Sometimes, these effects are profound and far-reaching, as in the case of Philemon.

Who Was Philemon?

Philemon was a wealthy, Christian slave owner, living in Colosse, a city which is now in modern Turkey. The area of Asia Minor was a huge melting pot of ethnicities and also one of the [first areas to flourish with converts to the new religion of Christianity](#). Overlaying this was the fact that this area was part of the hugely expansive [Roman Empire](#), at the height of its glory and, as such, was subject to Roman law and Roman customs.

In many cities in the Roman Empire, up to [30% of the](#)

[population were slaves](#). They undertook the bulk of the work required to keep the empire running and were considered to be the legal property of their owners. There were some rules against cruelty, but we would recognise them as the equivalent of 'animal rights', certainly not as human rights. Owners, like Philemon, essentially had the right to treat slaves however they wanted.

Who Was Onesimus?

Typically, a slave would take on the religion of his or her master and Onesimus, the subject of the letter to Philemon, was one such slave. Having converted to Christianity, he then, at some point, fled his master's household and travelled hundreds of miles to where Paul was, the heart of the empire itself, to Rome. Rome differed from Greek city-states in that freed slaves were allowed to become citizens and perhaps this was Onesimus' objective in seeking out Rome.

The testimony of a slave could not be accepted in a Roman Court and they had no rights at all under the law. A master could punish a slave, however he wanted, and punishments included branding, scourging, torture or death. The punishment for a runaway slave was often branding in the forehead and the deliberate breaking of bones or joints.

This was Onesimus' expected fate, under Roman law, and Philemon had every right, as a master and Roman citizen, to enforce such punishment.

Jesus Changes Our Culture

Paul's letter, however, is full of warm entreaty on behalf of Onesimus. He reminds Philemon that God's rule of love transcends any man-made law and that, in Jesus, both slave and master are equal. They are considered brothers, both children of a Heavenly Father. Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon, not as just a slave, but as family.

Paul tells Philemon to add any debt owed by Onesimus to his own account but, in fact, considers it a favour to be done for Jesus. Paul is more than confident of Philemon's response and gives much emphasis to "this faith we hold in common...and that people recognise Christ in all of it".

The remarkable transformative power of the Gospel spills from the words in this letter – showing the dramatic ripple effect a response to God has in our personal lives. It challenges everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It compels us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. **It compels us to do better and be better, simply because Jesus is.**

The Gospel of Good News often causes radical upheaval in our own lives as it forces our practices and beliefs to fall into line with the ideals of a true, loving, and socially just God.

"He's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what GOD is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple. Do what is fair and just to your neighbour, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously – take God seriously." | Micah 6:8 (The Message)

***In this article, "social injustice" is used in conjunction with the dictionary definitions noted at the beginning. Social injustice can be considered to fall into two categories, which are often inter-connected. These categories are defined as 'Inter-Social Treatment' and 'Unequal Government Regulation'. "Inter-Social Treatment involves unequal treatment of a group(s) of people within the local and regional scale. The basis for this unequal treatment is usually due to a personal belief about that group(s): Unequal Government Regulations are laws and regulations that purposefully or otherwise,**

discriminate a group(s) from the same opportunities and resources, based on differences that are unique to that group(s)”

(cited: <https://www.pachamama.org/social-justice/social-justice-issues>) Examples may include: unfair labour practices, racial, gender, age or ethnicity discrimination, inequality of health care or education based on certain criteria and to the worst degree, systematic genocide based on certain criteria.

This article was first published 25 February 2018

Beneath The Skin

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

What's beneath the skin of our collective Christian identity?

Has Christianity lost touch with its original radical and beating heart? Are we so enamored with the power and prestige of this present world that we have forgotten our own history?

Are we, the church, so entertained by the lights and sounds, by the choreographed music, by the dimly lit stages and almond-milk-lattes-after-service that we've forgotten the ancient truths our early Christian brethren lived and died for?

Have we become mere spectators to our own Christian faith?

The Birth Of 'The Jesus Movement'

The modern western church lives a comfortable existence. She wants for nothing.

With both resources and freedom in worship and expression of faith, the church looks remarkably different today than she

did in her fraught, early days. Birthed during the reign of Tiberius Caesar Augustus (14 AD – 37 AD), “the Jesus movement” initially attracted little attention from the Romans; assumed to be merely an offshoot of Judaism. Yet it soon became clear that this movement was more than a Judaistic sidenote, that it could not be contained nor extinguished and that it threatened the authority of Caesar himself.

Christians everywhere preached the news of Jesus, not just as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but as Lord, Saviour, and King; over and above Caesar. Unlike the Jewish community, who lived and worshipped largely by themselves, Christians were active evangelists, eager to share the good news about Jesus with all who would listen.

The first century was a spiritual explosion; fueled by the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The preaching of the gospel found its most fruitful response amongst Gentiles – pagans – who would have formerly given allegiance to Caesar and embraced a belief in many deities. Now, these new converts rejected their pagan gods and confessed belief in one God – the God of Israel, giving their allegiance to Jesus, His appointed Saviour and designated King. They were convinced by the witnesses who spoke boldly of Jesus’ resurrection, particularly the compelling evidence of men like Paul the Apostle, also later called *‘the apostle to the Gentiles’*, who had seen the risen Christ for himself.

People responded, literally, in their thousands, and Rome realised it had a real problem on its hands.

“By the end of the second century, the new faith was on its way to becoming the most forceful and compelling movement within the empire.” (Bruce L Shelley)

By simply living in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, giving him their allegiance, they had effectively rejected

Caesar, a pagan ruler, and broken from the tradition of emperor worship.

This worship of the emperor, which, by AD249 had been made universal and compulsory for every nation in the Roman Empire, was primarily a test of political loyalty. Those who would not swear allegiance to Caesar and acknowledge him and each successor to the title with the words "Lord of the Earth, Invincible Power, Glory, Honour, Blessed, Great, Worthy Art Thou To Inherit The Kingdom." were branded revolutionaries and traitors of the empire.

The Spread Of Faith And Conviction

Had the Christians been willing to simply formally verbalise that 'Caesar is Lord', they could have continued worshipping Jesus as much as they wanted...but the Christians would not compromise.

What was beneath the skin?

There are several reasons that the Christian faith experienced such a remarkable spread, despite persecution.

Firstly, the witnesses to the resurrection were clearly possessed by a burning, unshakeable conviction as to the reality of who Jesus was and what had been accomplished in his death and resurrection. They knew that this good news had the power to transform the lives of men and women, that finally humanity had been redeemed, and that they themselves were the recipients of immeasurable grace. They simply could not keep the news to themselves and their unswerving belief, despite every obstacle (including the threat of death or actual death) could not deter them.

Secondly, the practical outworking of the Christian faith, demonstrated in acts of love, was astonishing and quite unheard of in Roman times. It was their most defining feature, remarked upon by the pagans with grudging admiration.

It found its expression in care for the poor, widows and orphans, for those brethren who had been imprisoned or condemned, and particularly for brethren, who due to poverty, could not afford an honourable burial. The early church would often provide services for such persons, believing care in death as well as life was an active expression of love for those made in the image of God.

“Atheism (ie the Christian faith) has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the godless Galileans’ care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them” | Emperor Julian, (332-63)

As Jesus had promised, by demonstrating this kind of love, sacrificial and all-encompassing, all people knew that these believers were part of ‘the Jesus movement’. Just as *they* had been loved, they now displayed that same kind of love for each other and others, proving without a doubt that they were disciples of the Christ.

The Price Of Prestige

The early church flourished as a separate identity from the empire for a brief few centuries, with the struggle between Christian worship and Caesar worship defining the first 300 years of church history. Many martyrs went to their deaths, refusing to recant their faith in Jesus and give allegiance to Caesar.

Yet the church was to face a far more insidious threat in the centuries that followed; more dangerous than persecution, poverty or martyrdom. Power and prestige came to the church in the form of open favour from Rome’s pagan Emperor,

Constantine.

Formerly outlawed and persecuted, the Christian church now experienced a sudden reversal in fortune. But Constantine, represented as the ideal Christian ruler and ushering in a new age of salvation for the church, still retained much of his pagan origins.

What was beneath the skin?

The advantages for the church were real enough but there was a price to pay. Constantine ruled Christian bishops as he did his civil servants and demanded unconditional obedience to official pronouncements, even when they interfered with purely church matters. There were also masses that now streamed into the officially favoured church. Prior to Constantine's conversion, the church consisted of convinced believers. Now many came who were politically ambitious, religiously disinterested and still half-rooted in paganism. This threatened to produce not only shallowness and permeation by pagan superstitions but also the secularisation and misuse of religion for political purposes." | Bruce L Shelley

Did the church ever recover from this melding of state and faith, this union of empire and religion? Did she ever break loose from the seductive grasp of the pagan Caesar, no longer enemy, but sponsor and friend, and return to her first love?

Did she find again the burning conviction that Jesus alone was Lord and King over all the earth and her allegiance was to him?

At times, perhaps.

But, equally, at times, she has colluded with the powers of this world, exchanging her birthright for what amounted to a mess of pottage.

She has had, in many stages of her historical past, a reputation of being alive but *beneath the skin*, she was dying. "Wake up", her Lord and King has implored *"and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God."*

Faithful individuals remained; arguably, the heart and soul of the church herself, but often enough, the official church sacrificed such individuals in order to appease the empire, in order to maintain control, to the detriment of humanity's salvation.

What lay beneath the skin?

The Church Of Our Times

What of the church today?

What lies beneath her skin?

Behind the powerful vocals from a vast and blue-lit stage, beneath the skinny jeans with tastefully ripped knees, between the cleverly worded messages from the pulpit, is there still a radical and beating heart?

After asking Jesus into their hearts, do Christians still ask Jesus into their lives? The church may profess to still love Jesus *but would she die for him?*

Still. In every time and in every place, there has always been a movement, a people; the invisible church. A generation that does not lose hope in the church it sees but instead endeavours to become the church it dreams of.

As in times past, the message of good news continues to be enacted in the lives of ordinary people and in circumstances that are familiar and relatable to us all; stories of mothers and fathers, children and parents, wealthy people, and those in poverty, in bustling market places and domestic households.

This collective community of faith – the church – will look different throughout time and throughout culture, yet the ancient truths remain embedded within the lives of those faithful to the message of good news.

The skin is just the outward appearance. How the church has looked, from the outside, has changed many times during the centuries. Her skin is unimportant.

But what lies *beneath the skin* is vitally important. Is there more to the church today than simply a hip social media account or a buzzing Sunday service? Is there an emphasis on substance over reputation? Is she still to be found among the simple, the humble, those deemed by this world to be foolish and irrelevant?

Or does the church sit alongside the culture of celebrity and, in an age of consumer-driven interests, is she more engrossed in giving people what they *want* rather than what they *need*.

The early believers weren't just Sunday Christians, whose most active participation in their Christian faith was simply attending a weekly service. They didn't just turn up for one hour in the week; they shared their entire lives with each other, week in and week out.

They didn't *go to church*, *they were church*.

They ate and worshipped together, they divided their resources and distributed to whoever had need. They "*ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people*". They evangelised and discipled, their conviction deeply rooted in and flowing from this focused centre; that "*one man died for everyone*." They knew that what this meant for humanity was dramatic and life-changing; effectively turning the world upside down.

Believers were added to their fellowship through baptism, "*buried with Jesus into death*", and bound together in unity

through communion, Jesus' "*death and resurrection*". They became people of the kingdom, joined together in the fellowship of the King, the risen Christ, whose kingdom is over and above all other powers in this world.

Beneath The Skin

It's imperative for the church as she now progresses into the 21st century that she reclaims this identity and the authority that is deeply rooted in and connected to Jesus, her risen king. It's vital that Jesus is truly first in her affections and that his will and sovereign rule supersedes all. It's crucial that she rediscovers the transforming power that gave her life and empowers her still.

Beneath her skin, there must be a depth to her character, a sense of resourcefulness and humility, sacrifice and love. She must resolve to *authentically and completely* represent Jesus to the world, not just the parts of him that are palatable. She won't be satisfied to merely speak *of Jesus* but be compelled to lead humanity *to him*, to not just sing *of Jesus* but to baptise and disciple *in his name*. Strength and dignity are the garments she chooses to clothe herself with, and wisdom and kindness the teachings that spring from her lips.

Her form is unimportant: she knows that outward beauty can be deceitful and that it is the heart of her, the burning devotion and the fearless and uncompromising intention to live according to the teachings of Jesus, that will cause praise to rise up to God in Heaven.

The greatest hope for the church in our time and place is that we will see a passionate and stirring revival. That Christians, no matter their denomination or creed, will be emboldened to return to the foot of the cross and give their lives anew to the resurrected king. That collectively, we, the church, the 'woman of valour' for whom he died, will shine brightly in a darkened and impoverished world through our most

basic and guiding principle: that is, to incarnate Christ.

That *beneath our collective skin* is a radical and beating heart still.

“So come, move, let justice roll on like a river; let worship turn into revival. Lord, lead us back to you.” | insp. Amos 5:24

David's Story: God Sees The Heart Of Us

[David](#), the shepherd boy-turned-king and famous author of the Psalms, is perhaps one of the most complex characters in the Bible. At times, he displays examples of great faith, leadership and spirituality. Yet, these admirable qualities are often starkly contrasted against the deplorable choices and wicked actions for which he was responsible.

How can God have cause to say of him *“I have found David, the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, who will do all my will.”* (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22)? How could God say this about a man whose actions at times seemed deeply in contrast to the will and character of God himself?

Examining the **why** of this statement tells us so much about how God really sees us and, in turn, how we should see ourselves.

God See Beyond The Valleys

In the vast landscape that is our life, there are moments of grandeur, like lofty mountain peaks. And yet there are valleys too, times when we find ourselves in low and desperate places.

These are the times when we find ourselves making poor choices or bad decisions or, like David, being responsible for actions that are completely wrong and offensive to God.

Among the list of David's failures is found adultery (2 Samuel 11:4) and murder (2 Samuel 11:15). He was less than an exemplary example as a father (2 Samuel 13:15-22), and at times, as a king. It could be difficult to see what God saw or loved about this man, when collating the different snapshots of his life.

It seems contradictory that the very thing that God commended David for – his heart – is the very place in which these evil choices find their root.

"For out of the heart come evil thoughts: murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." – Matthew 15:19, NLT

Yet God sees beyond the valleys. He deciphers the intentions of our heart and looks past the lapses in our spirituality or even those sins we find most heinous. In a certain sense, our mistakes matter less than our motivations. He is more interested in who we can become than in who we are now and this is exactly what He saw in David, the potential and the will to **do** better and to **be** better.

This is why He was able to look into David's heart and see something of Himself there.

That David was considerably flawed is unquestionable. His love for God, however, is not. His ability to be deeply touched by truth and show genuine remorse for his wrongdoings is what God loved about him. That he **wanted** to do right, even though he often didn't, is what God took notice of. He displayed a truly penitent response when confronted with the reality of his decisions and his many psalms are evidence of his beautiful, contrite spirit.

Despite Our Flaws, God Still Loves Us

The Bible doesn't seek to gloss over David's mistakes. He could have been easily painted in quite a different light; recorded for history as a glowing example of virtue and goodness. Yet he wasn't and that, in itself, is telling.

God wants us to learn something very important from David's life, his choices and his mistakes. God wants us to learn that despite all our flaws and weaknesses or even despite the worst things we may have done, God is able to see into our hearts and love us for who we really are.

We see God's love displayed in the most ultimate way by the provision of His son as the saviour of mankind. God didn't send His son to die for a world of righteous men and women. In actuality, God knew how deeply flawed the human race was, yet still He sent [Jesus](#) to die for humanity. He knew what we **could** become and what He hoped we **would** become, and that was enough.

"For at just the right time, while we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. It is rare indeed for anyone to die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God proves His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." – Romans 5:5-7, NIV

Does this mean that we can do what we like, because God loves us anyway? Not at all. Paul the Apostle answers this question in Romans 6:1-2 where he says *"Of course not! How can we who died as far as sin is concerned go on living in it?"*

Just because God will forgive us, doesn't mean we should provide Him endless opportunity! Just because God's gift of grace has been given, doesn't mean we should abuse it.

Choices And Consequences

Did David “get away with” the terrible things he did, just because God loved him? Absolutely not. God’s universal law of choice and consequence, established in Eden, still played out in David’s life.

David suffered great loss, political instability, serious dysfunction within his family and heartbreaking betrayal by his peers, as a direct result of his actions. God didn’t shield him from these or remove them from his life, even though He certainly had the power to do so.

Just like David, we are [responsible for the consequences of our choices](#) and must learn to live with them. Yet, we can be confident that God can see to the heart of us too. That He is still working in our lives, despite our failures, to [bring us to Him](#). And that He alone assesses our motives.

“All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, But the LORD weighs the motives.” Proverbs 16:2, NKJV

How Should We See Ourselves?

It’s very easy to judge ourselves from the valley floor. We may be living with deep regrets about choices and decisions we’ve made in the past. We may feel judged by others and feel that no-one really knows us or understands our motives. We may even doubt God’s love for us and His ability to forgive us.

The deeply personal message of the Bible is that God **does** love us. He doesn’t judge us on our moments of failure or weakness – He knows and understands that we’re human. He surveys the landscape of our life, both the highs and lows and is able to weigh that all in the balance, seeing to the heart of who we really are.

“Then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive and act;

deal with everyone according to all they do, since you know their hearts (for you alone know every human heart)" – 1 Kings 8:39, NIV

God doesn't want us to remain in the valleys. He is ready and willing to help us climb out of them. We have a remarkable gift of grace and forgiveness offered to us, through Jesus, and it is God's power in our lives that can bring us up from the valley floor and on to the mountain heights. Like David, our hearts will sing the song of ascent:

"I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." Psalm 121:1-2

Paul the Apostle likens the gift of grace to treasure in jars of clay. This treasure is God's glorious light that has shone in our hearts, illuminating what lies within and giving us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It's grace that teaches our hearts to trust God and relieves our fears. And it's grace that will lead us home. Amazing Grace – how sweet the sound! How precious it is!

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." 1 Corinthians 4:7

This article was first published 28 May 2018

The Night Before Tomorrow | Communion

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Jesus looked around the table at the closest of his disciples gathered with him, their faces reflected in the warmth of the candlelight. It was early spring, and the nights were still cool; the disciple whom he loved leaned in a little closer, although as much for affection as for warmth.

The room was filled with the pungent aroma of bitter herbs, the freshly baked scent of *Matzah*, the rich meaty smell of roasted lamb, and the earthy sweetness of the wine.

They were a diverse and sometimes dissonant group, these disciples that His Father had given him. Some were initially strangers to each other, and others, as natural-born brothers, knew each other like the back of their hands. They all came to him from very different social backgrounds and held diametrically opposed philosophical and political viewpoints. Rivalries often broke out between them, and yet, in this largely dissimilar group, they had found unity in him, and in them, Jesus could see the seeds of the church – his church – that was soon to be born. These few represented the expansive and diverse family that God would build through him, for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

But the next few days would be very hard on these little sheep of his and they were to be tested like never before.

Jesus had celebrated Passover with his family for as long as he could remember; with his mother, Mary, his adoptive father, Joseph, and his brothers and sisters. Often, other families in their neighbourhood had piled into the single, large, comfortable room of their simple stone-and-mortar home to join

them. He remembers the time that it had been his turn, as the youngest at the table, to ask the *Mah Nishtanah* – the four questions, each one beginning with “*How is this night different from all other nights?*”

On all other nights, we eat chameitz and matzah. Why on this night, only matzah?

On all other nights, we eat all vegetables. Why, on this night, maror?

On all other nights, we don't dip even once. Why on this night do we dip twice?

On all other nights, we eat either sitting upright or reclining. Why on this night do we all recline?

Everything on the table had represented something. Everything eaten with the humble dinnerware had told a story. The asking had then prompted a dramatic retelling of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt many hundreds of years before; a night that was forever etched in Jewish memory, a night of blood and fire, death and deliverance. The account of their exodus and deliverance had been retold ever since, in song and story, and especially now on this night of the year; so that they might never forget who they were, to whom they belonged, and to whom they owed their freedom.

Gathering now with his disciples to celebrate Passover once again, Jesus understood, as no one else did, the true significance of what was symbolised by this festival and what kind of deliverance God had always had in mind. Turning to his disciples, his voice warm with feeling, Jesus said “*I have earnestly desired to eat this with you before I suffer.*”

It was the night before tomorrow and this was to be his last Passover.

The Story Of Redemption

Passover was a festive meal, celebrating Jewish freedom from bondage but it was also a powerful metaphor for a greater story of deliverance that God would one day enact on behalf of the world. It told the important and significant story about Jesus, long before his arrival, and the work that he would come to do on behalf of humanity – the story of redemption.

Jesus now takes this commemorative Passover meal, already 1,500 years old by this time and full of ancient symbology and meaning, and repurposes it in order to institute his 'new covenant'. This new covenant would supersede the old and would be a covenant for everyone, not just Jews. In Jesus, all the families of the earth would be blessed and this covenant's promise would be sure, sealed by the body and blood of Jesus himself.

Known by many different names today (*'the breaking of bread'*, *'the table of the Lord'*, *'communion'*, *'the eucharist'*, or *'the Lord's supper'*), this 'new covenant' meal is a sacred reminder of a significant historical event; deliverance and new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Participating together in communion, Christians recount to one another their own stories of deliverance, asking, as it were, *"How is this night different from all other nights?"* They eat bread and drink wine together, blessing the name of the Lord and celebrating life and resurrection. There are few things more important or significant for Christians to share together.

Bread, the staple of life, is broken and shared, as Jesus once did for his disciples. In this bread is symbolised urgency, imminent death, and sacrifice; but also unity, commonality, and community.

Wine is poured and passed around; representing new life, joy,

blessing, sanctification, and grace, flowing from Jesus' own life to ours.

When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we recount, one to another, what the Lord has done for us in his death and the new life that is promised to us in his resurrection. We do this, as often as we do this, in remembrance and celebration of him.

*"I take the bread of life
Broken for all my sin
Your body crucified
To make me whole again
I will recall the cup
Poured out in sacrifice
To trade this sinner's end
For Your new covenant
Hallelujah
I'll live my life in remembrance
Hallelujah
Your promise I won't forget"*

Remembrance | Hillsong Worship

The First Communion

Many Christians no longer regularly celebrate communion. For many churches, communion has become highly ritualised and ceremonial. For some churches, communion has become exclusive, offered only to their own members.

Yet communion is an important part of our Christian life, as members of Jesus' body and God's family. It is a key element in our fellowship with one another. It is Jesus' covenant with **each one of us** and the price of it was his own blood.

The first communion is, at its core, a deliverance story in which all Christians share. It's a tale of liberation from darkness and the life that is found in Jesus. It's a reminder

and a witness that, in Jesus, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose. Sharing the meal of communion powerfully connects each member of Jesus' church to one another as they acknowledge their commonality in him, who is the life force that unites the church and whose love birthed it into being.

The first communion speaks clearly to us of sacrifice, freedom, belonging, and resurrection. It smells like bitter herbs and warm bread and sounds like singing and the familiar clatter of dinnerware. It takes place in homes, green spaces, sidewalk cafes and church buildings, hospitals and office spaces, on beaches, and in parks.

Its most defining feature is Jesus and the remembrance of him by those who are his.

It brings real people, diverse and divided in life, into common union together, into relationship, into the sweaty, messy, untidy reality that is the church, *not because they are worthy, but because Jesus died for them and [that is enough](#).*

It's significant that Jesus connects the institution of communion – which speaks of his sacrifice and death, motivated by love – with the importance of his followers showing his love by loving one another. At the end of their meal, he gives them a 'new commandment', to live by once he is gone:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

By loving one another as he has loved them, all the world will know that they are his disciples. *The world will see your love for each other and know, without even having to ask, that you are followers of the king.*

How we love, as Christians, therefore, is either a powerful witness to the truth and reality of the risen king and our allegiance to him; or a public denial of our belief in the king and his ability to truly transform our hearts. By not loving as the king loves, we demonstrate for all to see that the *ruler of this world* still controls us; that we are allowing this rule to flourish in our lives and govern our actions towards others.

Real faith in the king is more than the words we say, the emotions we feel, ideas we debate, or a truth we believe. Real faith is something we do; expressed in visible ways, deeply rooted in and flowing from this focused centre; that “one man died for everyone.”

Celebrating communion is neither an optional nor exclusive event, for some Christians only, but an essential and embracing reality for all Christians; regularly bringing all of God’s family together in celebration.

It’s a powerful reminder of who we are, to whom we belong, and to whom we owe our freedom.

Christianity + Missional Living

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

“You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you

light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:14-15 | MSG

The Eternal Light Of Life

Light illuminates, not just dispelling darkness, but making visible that which is unseen. Jesus came into the world as the light and life of humanity, making visible the way to the Father (John 14:6), shining the glory and light of God and showing us the path home.

He was the way, the truth, and the life – that eternal life that was with the Father in the beginning and revealed to us in the Word-Made-Flesh (1 John 1:2, John 14:6). Whoever follows him is enveloped in his radiance and has no fear of stumbling or becoming lost in darkness (John 8:12).

While Jesus remained in the world, he was the light of the world. At his return to his Father, his light remained still, shining brightly in those who had seen and believed the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4).

They are his ambassadors; the good news about the glorious, life-giving king placed in them like treasure put in jars of clay. They know their source of empowerment is from God, not themselves, and can boldly proclaim: *“We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14)

They have seen God and He's not a secret to be kept.

Christians + Missional Living

As Christians, Jesus' earthly mission, to reveal the eternal

life and light of God to the world, now becomes ours. We are tasked with the great commandment: “love God, love your neighbour” and the great commission: “preach the gospel”.

We are not just followers **of** Jesus, but are led by him out of the darkness into the light, to be witnesses **for** him. We are collectively commissioned people of his kingdom, reconciled to God and entrusted with this liberating message of reconciliation – the message of light and life – for all people (Colossians 1:18-20).

The phrase *being on mission* or *going on mission* has commonly been used to refer to those who travel overseas, often to poorer countries, to preach and teach the gospel. They are sent into these areas by their ‘home churches’ to promote their faith or provide services such as education, literacy, social justice, health care, and economic development, as an outworked ministry of their faith. Primarily seen as evangelism, *mission work* is rarely described as something that is undertaken locally, rather, something a Christian would participate in or be involved with overseas.

Missional living, missional churches, or missional communities are also phrases that have become popular in recent times. You may have heard them used in podcasts, online sermons or discussed by various authors. You may have assumed these phrases are referring to a special kind of Christian living or community; one that operates differently to ‘regular’ or ‘traditional’ Christian life or church.

*However, the reality is that, as Christians, **we are all on mission, right here**, in our quiet, suburban neighbourhoods and in our bustling city streets.*

The word “mission” is derived from the Latin *missionem* (nom. *missio*), meaning “act of sending” or *mittere*, meaning “to send”. The word mission (Latin: *missio*), as a translation of the Greek *apostolē*, “a sending,” appears once in the English

New Testament (Galatians 2:8). An apostle (*apostolos*) is one commissioned and sent for a purpose and we find the word *apostle* mentioned over 80 times in the New Testament.

The theme of *mission*, or *sending*, particularly in relation to God's mission, can be found all throughout scripture. His active involvement in humanity's story and His promise of reconciliation and redemption was finally realised in the greatest mission of all, the *sending* of His son, Jesus the *apostle* (Hebrews 3:1)

"Just as You commissioned and sent me into the world, I also have commissioned and sent them (believers) into the world. I do not pray for these alone [it is not for their sake only that I make this request], but also for [all] those who [will ever] believe and trust in me through their message, that they all may be one; just as You, Father, are in me and I in You, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe [without any doubt] that You sent me." | John 17:18, 20–21, Amplified Bible

Just as Jesus was sent into the world, to witness to the eternal life and light of God, so each Christian has been commissioned and sent as an ambassador for Christ. They have been authorised, by virtue of his saving work, to represent his kingdom and to carry the great treasure of the good message in their fragile, imperfect lives of clay.

They have been commissioned by Jesus himself, who declared *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age"* (Matthew 28:19–20; compare Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, John 20:21–22, and Acts 1:8).

Jesus lives in and through them and God has placed each one of them like a city on a hill, to bring light to the whole world.

They are to glow – with their open houses and generous lives – like homecoming beacons, drawing all humanity to the light that comes from Him, that in this, ‘His name is glorified’.

The reality is that *every. single. Christian.* is a missionary and *every. single. church.* is missional. It’s the very nature of our Christianity and an intrinsic part of our identity as people of the kingdom.

I am a missionary. You are a missionary. We are all missionaries. And we don’t need to be anywhere else apart from where we are right now to *run on mission*.

Like Salt, Like Light...

‘*Living on mission*’, ‘*living missionally*’ or ‘*missional living*’ is simply the way in which we choose to order and arrange our ordinary, everyday lives; springing from a life framed by grace and pointed in pursuit of King Jesus. It means that we live out his life, his words, his actions and his love towards others; attempting to show *his* love by *our* actions and *his* truth by *our* lives.

Jesus first declared to his disciples, “follow me and I will make you fishers of men” Missional living, therefore, flows from ‘following Jesus’ and representing him in the world, shining in it like light and flavouring it like salt.

The people around us that we interact with, in a thousand ordinary ways, all experience the same joys and difficulties that we do, turning, as we are, on the wheel of life. They have the same questions that we do, the same challenges that we face, and, most importantly of all, are formed in the same image that we are, the image of God Himself.

Living missionally means showing genuine interest in other people, simply because they are *human*, just like us. It means being curious about them, their children, their lives, and their passions.

Like Jesus, we celebrate with them in all their joys and grieve with them in all their losses.

“On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.” | John 2:1-12, ESV

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept.” | John 11:33-35

We are called to share the good message – that the gospel is able to speak to the heart of every human need – and, as missionaries (in our own backyards!), we look for opportunities to share this hope. In every relationship we encounter, we are acting as ‘ones sent’ for Jesus.

It means loving people well, being generous with our time and our resources, and open with our lives, that in doing so, we’ll prompt them to ‘open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.’ Our lives – our everyday, mundane, messy, uncomfortable, terrifying, joyful, and thoroughly human lives will be the greatest witness of all to the hope that lies within us.

So throw open all your doors! Be generous with your lives! Live bright and unafraid: remembering that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.

Missional Churches

All believers are ambassadors for Jesus’ name and the reality of the church includes not individuals simply gathered together in a building, but a collective kingdom and priesthood of people, worshipping and witnessing together to

the astounding truth of the gospel narrative and the risen king.

What happens, then, when Christians, 'living on mission', regularly gather together? Each individual Christian is personally on mission – this is a key aspect of their Christian identity, but the truly exciting thing is that now, collectively, these people become a 'church on mission'. The *being* and the *doing* of missional living doesn't change, it just multiplies!

Like the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Jesus' presence permeates their gatherings and multiplies the fruit of their labour. 'Like yeast through dough, or like stars appearing one by one as the night sky darkens', these local expressions of the church of Christ can cross all earthly boundaries, prevailing against even death itself. The world has never known anything like them. (Jonathan Leeman)

"I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."... | Jesus, Matthew 16: 18-19, BSB

"Christ did not die just to save us from sins, but to bring us together in community. After coming to Christ, our next step is to be involved in community. A church that does not experience community is a parody, a sham. Simply put, the purpose of the church is to stand for God's eternal purpose. In short, wherever the church gathers together, its guiding and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ." – Frank Viola, Reimagining Church

Missional Christianity = Intentional

Christianity

Whether a church is a 'mega-church' or a 'home-church', has five members or 500, is only made up of over 50's or is an eclectic mix of ages, it should always, by definition, be 'missional'. That is: intentionally living as a collective community representing the king and his mission.

A Christians' individual life is no different. The great commission to preach the gospel and take the good news of Jesus to all the world was given to all believers. We see this commission of witness declared firstly in [Matthew 28:18-20](#) and shown to be affirmed throughout the letters of the Apostles to the church.

Missional living, therefore, isn't a special kind of Christian identity. It's the *only way* of viewing our Christian identity and, by extension, our corporate church identity. Missional Christianity is being intentional in our Christianity, open to the work of the Spirit in our own lives and the lives of those around us, active in our communities, and purposeful in our involvement in the mission of God, the great ministry of reconciliation.

We carry, every day in our bodies, the death of Christ so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed (2 Corinthians 4:7-10). Through us, others can also be empowered and equipped to receive and live out the gospel message, demonstrating God's mission in all aspects of our lives, both personally and as church communities.

This is the essence of what it means to live a missional Christian life.

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were

together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 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, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” | Acts 2:42-47, ESV