

# Believer's Baptism

*"And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised, and wash your sins away, calling on his name." – Acts 22*

Before Jesus came preaching 'the good news' and proclaiming that the kingdom was near, the gospels [of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John] record that his coming was announced by a messenger, one John the Baptist. *"Prepare the way of the Lord"*, he proclaimed, *"Clear the road for him."* (Matthew 3:3)

John was a rustic wilderness figure, a wild man clothed in garments made from camel's hair who ate locusts and wild honey. His message was singular and direct: *repent and be baptised; for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.*

People flocked from all over to see this enigmatic figure and to hear what he had to say. Those who were stirred in their hearts by his message confessed their sins and were baptised. Their baptism signified the rejection of their former way of living and repentance of their sinfulness.

Many Pharisees and Sadducees\* also joined the procession of people coming from Jerusalem, Judea, and all over the Jordan Valley, keen to participate in "the baptism of John the Baptist". Yet they viewed baptism as merely a hip life experience rather than a complete lifestyle change.

John castigated these leaders of the people for their lack of true repentance. *"Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins."*, he proclaimed, without apology.

John the Baptist made it clear when addressing the crowds that a little water meant nothing if they weren't prepared to change their lives. Baptism needed to ignite the kingdom life within a believer, changing a person from the inside out. If anyone wanted to be part of the Kingdom of God that was soon to arrive—that was indeed at their very doorstep—they would

need to be truly born again, dying to their old life and being reborn as a new kind of human.

His words would be echoed years later by James, the brother of Jesus (also called James the Just). He was a leader in the early Christian church in Jerusalem and he would write specifically to Jewish believers on the topic of true, saving faith (of which repentance is a key ingredient). Faith without deeds, James would comment, is dead, and nothing more than a corpse.

Deeds do not save you: the work of salvation was accomplished fully and completely by Jesus on the cross and ratified by his resurrection from the dead. But your trust (faith) in that work is proven by your life of action.

We are made right with God by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless it's demonstrated by an active, loving response to God's grace (James 2:17-24).

Repentance—true repentance—involves both a state of the heart and the action of the individual: faith, that is, *trust in God*, worked out in real and tangible ways in every detail of our lives.

## **Get Up, Be Baptised, And Wash Away Your Sins...**

The Book of Acts, which recounts the early days of the first-century church, tells the story of how the great commission of Matthew 28 was outworked, first in Jerusalem, then throughout Judea, in Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. Jesus had told his disciples, "*Go and make disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*"

The same good news that Jesus preached—that through him, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and

reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose—was taken and preached by Jesus' disciples to all who would listen. This message was then followed by the directive: "*Repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins.*"

A 'baptism' without the repentance that precedes such an act would be a contradiction—in the words of John the Baptist, a little water means nothing if you aren't prepared to change your life. But 'repentance'—turning to God in faith—without the action that demonstrates that faith is, in the word of James, counterfeit faith, in reality dead and completely useless.

The full meaning of '*believe*' in scripture includes action. The first *act of faith* by a person believing the good news about Jesus is to *be baptised*—a public declaration of a personal conviction.

The Bible knows nothing of baptism without repentance and it also knows nothing of repentance without baptism. They go together and are intrinsically linked. To separate them from each other is to destroy the power and significance of either.

## **Baptism: Faith Expressed in action**

Obedience to Jesus' commands—not just in verbal assent but in practical application—is proof your reorientation is genuine. The first step of obedience, the first *action of faith*, is the decision to be baptised. While the act of baptism doesn't contribute to God's saving work in Jesus, it does prove that your faith in that work is real. The kind of faith that makes us right with God does not remain alone but bears fruit.

Countless references are given throughout Acts and in the pastoral letters and epistles of the New Testament to this life-changing Christian ordinance which became one of the key practices of the early church.

Water baptism, then and now, represents significant truths of the Christian faith, the first of which is the identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus:

1. Paul the Apostle talks about this in his letter to the Romans, where he says that being baptised joins us to Christ and, in doing so, also joins us to his death. We die and are buried, with our old sinful life 'crucified with Christ'. In doing so, we are no longer 'slaves to sin', set free from its power in our lives. And just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too rise from the waters as a 'new creation', made alive in Jesus by the glorious power of the Father. Someone who has been baptised, Paul says, should consider themselves dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus. This, alone, is one of the most transformative, joyful, and incredible aspects that water baptism symbolises – the reality that sin no longer has power over us and that we have been set free!
2. While baptism itself doesn't contribute to the saving work accomplished by Jesus, it is God's arrangement for a person to gain a clean conscience based on their faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—an outward demonstration of an inward conversion. It represents a moment of crossing over, of rescue and redemption from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God's love (Colossians 1:13). Just as the people of Israel were rescued from the darkness of slavery and bondage in Egypt, the finality of which was marked by 'baptism in the Red Sea' (1 Corinthians 10:2), so too a person's rescue by Jesus from the power of sin is marked by baptism in water.
3. Baptism demonstrates the reality of our great

adoption as true sons and daughters of God. And when we are saved by faith, we are also brought into family. Baptism is a sign of joining the family of God, the community of Christ's body. Other metaphors are given throughout scripture to describe the reality of this *belonging*, of the new identity which each person bears; we become citizens of heaven (Ephesians 2:19), we are a stone built into the holy temple of God (1 Peter 2:5), we are a branch, grafted into the great vine that is Jesus (John 15:1-7) and, collectively, we are part of what the Bible calls 'the bride of Christ', [a living, breathing woman of valour.](#)

## **Believer's Baptism**

If repentance forms part of the equation [of baptism] and if belief must be personally affirmed (Romans 10:9), then it would seem that the practice of infant 'baptism' finds no place in the biblical narrative. While I don't personally believe it's 'wrong' or 'unbiblical' to dedicate a child, as part of a family's commitment to Jesus in some kind of ceremonial way, this is not the baptism described by the Bible and we therefore ought not to confuse the two.

Baptism also requires full immersion in water, not merely a sprinkling. The symbolism commented on in Scripture in relation to water baptism, some of which I've touched on above, is compelling. Infant sprinkling is simply not 'baptism', in biblical terms.

The argument is sometimes made that baptism replaces the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision and therefore, just as infants were circumcised, so, too, Christian families can 'baptise' their children as a sign of their covenant with God.

While there are some similarities between circumcision and the ordinance of baptism—and baptism can be seen as ‘the new circumcision’ (as referenced in Colossians 2)—there are also key differences:

**Firstly**, circumcision required no faith, personal conviction, or agreement by the child. Circumcision was a rite undertaken without a child’s knowledge and without their understanding. Their *belonging* to God’s covenant people was therefore understood within a completely different framework. And while only males were circumcised, both male and female Israelites (and even Gentiles who had undertaken the rite) were taken to be fully included as God’s covenant people (Exodus 12:48-49).

**Secondly**, baptism forms part of the new covenant, sealed in Jesus’ blood. This new covenant, unlike circumcision, is not exclusive to Jews but, as Peter the Apostle came to learn, is offered to all people. “*In every nation, God accepts those who fear him and do what is right.*” (Acts 10:41). The great commission, which included the directive to baptise those who believed, was intended to encompass “*all the nations*”. *Belonging*, as one of God’s people, would no longer be defined by the rite of circumcision but rather by faith in the saving work of Jesus, demonstrated to be genuine through baptism.

This particular issue caused some angst in the early church, with Jewish believers finding it difficult to accept circumcision was no longer required. This belief—that circumcision was still necessary—formed part of the ‘false gospel’ that Paul the Apostle tackles in Galatians 3 .

**Thirdly**, baptism is always linked with personal faith. The Book of Acts bears record to the necessary requirement for personal repentance, belief, and confession. There is no single occasion of someone ever undertaking baptism ‘on behalf of someone else’. When we read of ‘whole households and families’ being baptised (Acts 16:15, Acts 16:33), we should therefore infer, from what scripture teaches about baptism,

that this generalisation necessarily excludes infants or very young children. They are not able to repent or believe, a key ingredient in the ordinance of baptism.

A word of caution, though—the gospel is profound and weighty, with far-reaching and transformative implications. As we journey through the Christian life, we uncover deep theological truths worth exploring.

Yet at its heart, the good news is simple—clear enough for a child to grasp. We shouldn't assume that biblical baptism is 'only for adults'. It is for believers, and often, children with their simple, trusting faith are the clearest examples of what a genuine relationship with God looks like.

Salvation is about faith, not intellectual ability. The 'whole households' could certainly have included children, whose faith, repentance, and baptism were equally as valid as their adult counterparts.

## **Inward Conviction = Outward Change**

The baptism that the Bible speaks about involves personal faith and conviction, a reorientation of one's life (repentance), and full immersion in water.

The word *baptism* comes from the original Greek word "**baptizō**" (**βαπτίζω**), which means "to dip, immerse, or wash." It was used in ancient times to describe submerging something in water, often a cloth being dipped in dye or ceremonial, full body washing.

As with dying cloth or washing the body, some *change* is to be expected by the act of Christian baptism. While it is deeply symbolic, it is also physically and spiritually real. The person who rises from the water isn't just *metaphorically* made new, but is *actually* changed. They are a *new person* in Christ, joined to God's family, a precious stone added to the house that God is building.

Faith that convicts and faith that commits is like the meeting of two atoms. It is the spark that ignites the kingdom fire inside a person, but not to be merely contained within but radiating outwards, shining like the brightness of heaven, leading many to righteousness (Daniel 12:3).

## “And now, What Are You Waiting For?”

Are you someone who is convicted in your heart about the message of Jesus Christ? Have you decided to follow him, put your trust in God’s saving work, and reorient your life in his direction? If the answer is yes, *you should be baptised* (Acts 22:16).

Are you someone who was ‘baptised’ as an infant but now understands that faith must be personal, convicting, and demonstrated in action? If the answer is yes, *you should be baptised* (Mark 16:16, Hebrews 11:6).

Are you someone who would define yourself as ‘a Jesus follower’, whether for a little time or a long time, and yet have never been baptised? If the answer is yes, *you should be baptised* (Matthew 28:18-20).

## The Call To Obedience: A Faith That Acts

Baptism is not just a symbolic ritual—it is a declaration of faith, a step of obedience, and a testimony to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Throughout Scripture, we see that true faith is not merely intellectual agreement but a conviction that moves a person to action. Repentance and baptism are inseparable in the biblical narrative, each reinforcing the reality of the other.

The act of baptism does not save, but it reflects the **faith that does**—a faith that turns from sin, trusts in Christ, and commits to walking in His ways. Just as John the Baptist warned against empty religious acts, so too must we ensure



that baptism is not simply a tradition, but an outward expression of an inward reality: a life truly surrendered to Jesus.

So, what are you waiting for? If you have placed your trust in Christ, baptism is the next step—a public witness of your decision to follow Him. Whether you have recently come to faith, were baptised as an infant without personal belief, or have been following Jesus for years but never taken this step, the command remains the same: **“Get up, be baptised, and wash your sins away, calling on His name.”** (Acts 22:16)

\*The Pharisees and Sadducees were two influential religious groups in first-century Judaism, often seen in the Gospels opposing Jesus. The Pharisees were a strict, law-keeping sect that emphasised obedience to the Torah (Jewish Law) and the oral traditions of their ancestors. They believed in the resurrection of the dead, angels, and the afterlife (Acts 23:8), making them more aligned with popular Jewish beliefs. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were an elite, priestly group who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem and rejected many of the Pharisaic traditions. They denied the resurrection, angels, and the afterlife, focusing only on the written Law of Moses. Though they were often at odds with each other, both groups resisted Jesus because His teachings challenged their authority, exposed their hypocrisy, and redefined what it meant to truly follow God.

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## **Gideon's Fleece + The Dark Night Of The Soul**

There was a time, not so long ago, when my world was very dark. Have you ever stood outside, on a moonless night, with the thick, velvety air pressed all around you and the inky

black sky above, and realised that you could see precisely nothing? That's the kind of dark I mean.

Of course, I had all the feels as well; sadness, disorientation, confusion, an underlying sense of panic, but, primarily, the overwhelming sense was one of complete obscurity. I couldn't see through the impenetrable blackness all around me, I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face.

I had never been in a place like that before. It wasn't until a long time afterward that I was able to be thankful for such a darkness, but right in the middle, I longed for light, for the path to be made clear, for God to give me a sign.

## **GIDEON'S FLEECE**

A story kept coming to me during this time—one about a man named Gideon from the Old Testament, whom God raised up as a mighty hero and rescuer of Israel (Judges 6-8). The Israelites had been harried for seven long years under the hand of the Midianites (who were related to Israel through their common ancestor, Abraham).

The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon one day while he was secretly threshing wheat, so as to hide the grain from the marauding Midianites.

The angel told Gideon, "Go with the strength you have, and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I am sending you."

Gideon wasn't so sure. It wasn't so much that he doubted God, but rather he doubted God would use him. He wanted proof.

He asked God for a sign. He would put a woollen fleece out overnight on the threshing floor and if the fleece was wet with dew in the morning and the ground around it was dry, he would know for sure that God was with him and would help him rescue Israel.

The following morning, Gideon awoke to find a wet fleece on a dry floor. In fact, it was so wet that he was able to wring it out into a bowl, filling it to the brim. Convincing, yes?

Not quite enough for Gideon. Maybe it wasn't God's doing, just some strange quirk of overnight temperatures and precipitation and such.

He asked for a second sign, imploring God not to lose patience with him. He would put the fleece out again, but this time he asked that the fleece be dry in the morning while the ground all around would be wet.

Amazingly, that's exactly what happened. And that's where the story also ends, at least in relation to the signs.

Gideon does go on to march against the Midianites, winning a decisive battle and freeing the Israelites from their control. The book of Judges, which chronicles these events, tells us that the Midianites never recovered from that day onward. The people of Israel were so impressed with Gideon's bravery and leadership, that they tried to make him king, but he refused,

We're told nothing, however, about Gideon's thoughts or feelings after receiving the second sign, only that he went confidently into battle soon after, clearly believing God to be with him.

I had always taken this story to mean: 'ask God for a sign and the way will be made clear.' And so, as I entered my dark night of the soul (although I didn't know that's what it was at the time), I repeatedly asked God for a sign. Not so specifically as, 'make this or that happen', but more like 'show me which way to go.' Metaphorically speaking, I was laying out my fleece each night, *looking for a change*; either a wet fleece and dry ground, or a dry fleece and wet ground. I didn't much mind which one it was, I just wanted some indication of God's presence, showing me which direction to take.

Like Gideon, I wanted to be brave but I didn't want to make a decision without knowing for sure that God was with me in it.

Bafflingly, it felt like God remained silent. I couldn't understand it, I felt like I desperately needed a sign, I was actively *looking* for a sign – and yet my world remained dark.

## **THE SIGN WAS THE SIGN**

I kept wondering about the story of Gideon and the message I thought the story communicated – *ask God to show you, and then go that way* – yet I couldn't understand why God wasn't coming through for me.

And then, suddenly, it hit me. The sign *was* the sign.

The story of Gideon wasn't so much about *direction* but about *trust*. God already knew the way and could see the future mapped out, even if Gideon couldn't. And Gideon didn't need to be able to see that future to *trust* that God was already in it and that He had already gone before him. He just had to believe.

God had proven to Gideon He was able to do both things in relation to the fleece, and that, in fact, nothing was impossible with God.

This was the God who had led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Red Sea on dry ground. This was the God who had spoken to Moses from the depths of a burning bush which had not been consumed. This was the God who had called faithful Abraham out of the wealthy and prosperous civilisation of Ur to come to a place that only God knew, *to a place that would become his home*.

The sign *was the sign* – God can do anything. He already had my future mapped out, I just had to trust Him with it *and step out*.

I needed to make a decision.

## STEPPING OUT IN FAITH

I'd like to be able to say that I then stepped out boldly and unafraid into a darkness that seemed all-encompassing. In reality, however, the fact that I couldn't see where I was about to place my first step was terrifying.

Although deeply unhappy with where I was, I was also really scared to leave the place of no-decision. At least it was safe. At least it was known. At least I didn't have to wrestle with all the doubts and fears that come when trying to make a decision – will it be *the right one*, will my *family be ok*, what if this *changes everything...?*

I was really scared to say 'yes' to God, without a single clue as to where He would take me. But I finally understood that the lesson of the story of Gideon wasn't about waiting for the perfect sign before stepping out, but rather stepping out in faith, believing God had gone before me—and then watching God go to work.

They say that courage isn't the absence of fear, but feeling the fear and doing it anyway (although the definition of stupidity is much the same which is why life can get complicated at times).

I noticed, almost immediately the moment I stepped out, a small glimmer of light. Things shifted in my world, doors began opening, new relationships began to flourish, and the darkness began to edge away. Like someone who has been deep underground, I felt my eyes adjusting to the light, my skin soaking in the warmth of the sun.

*"Sometimes when we're in a really dark place, it can feel like we've been buried, but we've actually been planted."* – Christine Caine

I discovered that what had felt like a sentence of death was really a season of dormancy. I was like a seed, waiting for the right kind of conditions to grow. And, strangely enough, the truth is that most seeds germinate best in dark conditions.

The darkness wasn't an unhappy accident of fate, but a determined season of God. Things needed to die in the darkness in order to be reborn again in the light.

## **THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL**

Even now, still thinking about that time, I become still and quiet, deep within my soul. It's a difficult period to contemplate, a time of profound pain for me.

The dark night of the soul is, as Inayat Khan writes, *a total annihilation of all that you had believed in and thought that you were*. Yet as Joseph Campbell states, *"the dark night of the soul comes just before revelation. When everything is lost, and all seems darkness, then comes the new life and all that is needed."*

I've recently been reading 'Confronting Christianity' by Rebecca McLaughlin, who tackles the topic of suffering in Chapter 11 of her book. This chapter perhaps wouldn't have resonated with me back then as it does now; I would venture to say that I had, generally speaking, suffered very little in my life up until that point.

Rebecca offers a biblical framework around our concept and experience of suffering, sharing the story of two sisters, Mary and Martha, whose brother Lazarus had died (John 11:1-26). When Jesus finally arrives at their house, Lazarus has been dead for four days and both sisters are grief-stricken. We wonder that Jesus, who could have come sooner, didn't, and instead chose to stay away. Yet even when Jesus does come, he does not fix Martha's problem but instead

invites her into a deeper, more profound realisation...

*“Jesus looks her [Martha] in the eye and says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” As you stand here in your desperate grief, your greatest need is not to have your brother back again. It’s to have me.*

*This statement is yet more shocking than Jesus’ failure to come in the first place. Far from being the “good moral teacher who never claimed to be God” of modern mythology, Jesus here claims not that he is offering good guidelines for life, but that he himself is life: life in the face of suffering, life in the face of death.*

*Jesus’ power over death is absolute. I believe it is the only hope we have in the face of our inevitable end. But what fascinates me about this story is how little focus there is on Lazarus himself. Rather, the narrative draws our gaze to profound questions...In this strange stretching of the story, we get a glimpse of the whole biblical framework for suffering. The space between Lazarus’ death and Jesus’ calling of him out of the tomb is the space in which Martha sees Jesus for who he really is: her very life.” | Rebecca McLaughlin, Confronting Christianity, pages 199-202*

## **OUT THE OTHER SIDE**

The dark night of the soul is the place where we confront the reality of death, natural or spiritual, perhaps for the first time. It’s the collapse of everything we thought we knew and understood, a painful shedding of possibly our identity, relationships, career, habits, or belief systems that had allowed us to construct some meaning to our lives.

It is often a time of existential crisis as we wrestle with our identity, our sense of self, and the purpose and meaning of life.

Yet it’s also the place where we confront Life, the true Life

of the world, maybe, too, truly for the first time. *"Our suffering is an entry point to relationship, a relationship formed through suffering as much as through joy. If, as Jesus claims, the goal of our existence is relationship with him, finding him in our suffering is the point."* (Rebecca McLaughlin)

As C S Lewis, British writer, literary scholar, and Anglican lay theologian, who experienced overwhelming grief at the loss of his wife, commented, *"Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pain. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."*

I wasn't necessarily a *better Christian* walking out the other side of that dark tunnel. I wasn't necessarily *wiser, braver, or more certain* of my next steps. The pain I experienced didn't *suddenly evaporate like mist* in the bright light of day, and I wasn't instantly *fixed*.

And yet, somehow, I *had* changed. When I emerged, finally, I did so with a deeper recognition of where I needed to be putting my trust, a better understanding of what is truly of value, and a resolution to allow the painful experience to shape me into a better person moving forward.

And I can still recall the moment in the middle of that dark night of the soul when I suddenly understood the call of God to mean that I must step forward into the darkness. And that, as I took that first step, light began to spill in through the darkness, illuminating my path, and I discovered that the One I was following had been there all along.

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# Keeping The Faith

The question isn't "do you truly believe" but, "who do you trust"?

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# Crossing Over

There are many crossings a human will make in a lifetime. Our introduction to life is just the first.

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# Living Intentionally

The goal of being more like God doesn't come naturally or happen randomly, it requires purposeful choice in a specific direction.

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# Religion // Cruciformity

There is no standard scholarly agreement on what exactly is meant by the word *religion*, so defining *religion* (from the Latin *religiō*) can be a bit tricky. In fact, prior to the 16th and 17th centuries, the concept of religion, *as a distinct set of beliefs or doctrines*, didn't really exist.

Today, we would probably summarise religion as *a unifying social-cultural system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred, supernatural, or spiritual elements*. We may tend to also think of religion, particularly in a Christian context, as somewhat *creedal*, that is, as a set of ideas, formulas, regulations, or practices that are defined in some formal way, such as through statements, creeds, confessions, and denominational distinctives.

The word religion, from the Latin *religiō*, meaning 'to bind', is a word which in the ancient and medieval world was used to refer to *individual virtue of worship; respect for what was sacred, and a reverence for the divine*. It described an attitude of *being* rather than a *creedal position* and it related to the *individual* rather than the *collective*.

The act of *binding to* – of *religio* – is an act of faithfulness to something or someone, to which one is bound as if by a pledge or duty. It's similar to when someone makes an *oath of allegiance* to their country, effectively *binding themselves* to that country and pledging to respect, uphold and obey its laws.

In fact, companions to the word *religio* would be words like *duty, fealty, allegiance, or obedience*. Used with its original meaning in mind, it's a worthy addition to a list of descriptors we might use for the relationship that is formed when someone surrenders authority over their life to Jesus.

*Religion* is actually a necessary undertaking of every Christian who wishes to give their life and allegiance to Jesus as king and who chooses to surrender to his guidance and leadership in their life. This *binding to Jesus – religio* – and the reality that he becomes everything in a person's life – is what it means to become a child of God, joined to the mission of God to the world and submitting to His will, in Christ, for our lives. It is an act of individual virtue of worship, not simply an acceptance of a creedal statement or

list of practices.

*“So, then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” | Ephesians 2:19-20 CSB*

For many of us, however, this isn’t our experience of religion.

What we may have experienced or grown up with and what we would describe as *religion* is probably; adherence to a distinct set of beliefs, doctrines, or practices (some of which find their roots in scripture, some which don’t).

Perhaps our family’s beliefs eventually became our own; their set of doctrines were absorbed as ours, and we found ourselves one day ‘a Christian, attending church’, without giving too much thought to the process by which we got there. We accepted, without question, someone else’s *religion*, as we might accept an old, hand-me-down sweater, thinking to make it our own.

*Religious* is perhaps what many of us became; that is, we converted to Christianity by adopting a set of beliefs and practices related to the historical figure of Jesus. Our *religiosity* as Christians might have been further defined by our identification with one particular denomination’s creeds and practices over another.

Yet both these actions are not describing the true nature of *religion*. The differences may be subtle, almost indistinguishable from one another; however the reality is that what we may have ended up giving our allegiance to was a *system*, rather than to *Jesus*.

While being a Christian is certainly communal, and while

Christians tend to believe mostly all the same fundamental creeds, and while the creeds and practices of Christianity can be taught and preached and are, in many ways, intrinsically invaluable to religion, *true religion is the individual and deeply personal matter of an individual's binding to the person of Christ.*

*Religion, in the true sense of the word, cannot be passed down.*

*'Part of the genius of genuine Christianity is that each generation has to think it through afresh. Precisely because God wants every single Christian to grow up in understanding as well as trust, the Christian faith has never been something that one generation can sort out in such a way as to leave their successors with no work to do.'* (N T Wright)

*"Don't think of worship in terms of attending a church service, singing praise and worship songs or honouring the name of Jesus. The meaning of worship touches much larger questions. Namely, worship is all about who has the authority over our lives. Who will have our submission? Who will be given first place? Who will win our love, allegiance and devotion? True worship is absolute committal, surrender and submission to God." | Frank Viola, Insurgence*

## **Counterfeit Religion**

Paul the Apostle wrote his letter to the Galatians addressing an idea that had taken root at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did plus additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken, that we are made "*right with God by what we do*".

However, this is performance-based Christianity – in fact, probably a rather apt description of our modern understanding of *religion*. Paul reiterates to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the

performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

*“Foolish Galatians, who has cunningly deceived you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly set forth as crucified? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now completed in the flesh? He therefore who supplies the Spirit to you, and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by hearing of faith?” | Galatians 3:1-5, New Heart English Bible*

Patterns of thought, actions, or behaviours, which are deemed ‘godly’ ‘spiritual’ or ‘biblical’ can often become the outward markers of people who are perceived to be *religious* but may, in reality, mask a heart far from allegiance to Christ.

Anything apart from ‘binding to the cross of Jesus’ results in toxic faith – *religion* that has gone wrong, leading to dependence on others’ approval and not God’s. Anything that adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and binds us to human systems of belief or worship, and not to God.

Yielding our allegiance to a set of beliefs, as *the primary driving force*, will result in Christians who may have a form of godliness but who deny the miraculous power of transformation implicit in such a life; a Christian life marked by the cruciform love of Jesus (John 13:5).

It is, quite simply, putting the cart before the horse.

As Christian Evangelist Gordon Fee comments, *“If you had asked Paul to define what a Christian is, he would not have said, ‘A Christian is a person who believes X and Y doctrines about Christ,’ but ‘A Christian is a person who walks in the Spirit, who **knows** Christ.’”* (Gordon Fee, 1934-2022)

There is a subtle yet crucial difference and the long-term effects of mistaking one for the other can be disastrous.

Christian life will become joyless, suffocating, without meaning, and without power. This kind of Christian morphs into 'clouds without water, carried along by the wind, inflated but empty; fruitless trees in autumn, whose branches are disappointingly empty at harvest time.' They become rooted in performance, rules, patterns of behaviour, and intractable systems of belief that leave very little room for any theological growth or deeper understanding. The lifeblood of faith – the crucified and resurrected Christ – seems almost an afterthought when laid alongside the many parameters they will use to define their *religion*.

Critically, a true and meaningful relationship with God will never be sustained on this basis.

*“When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.” – Abraham Heschel*

This is why Paul makes what initially seems to be a brief and insignificant statement regarding the gospel (but is, in actual fact, one of the most powerful statements he makes), *“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David; such is my gospel.”* (2 Timothy 2:8, ISV).

The starting point – the impetus behind the act of binding to (*religio*) for the Christian life is *faith by grace alone in the crucified Christ*. The animating and life-transforming force in a Christian's [walk with God](#) is the [resurrection life](#) of the living Christ; a cruciform life.

This, and this alone, is what any Christian must first and foremost be bound to.

*“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” | 1 Corinthians 2:1-3, CSB*

## **Journey To Cruciformity**

Choosing Jesus, truly choosing him above all else, means rethinking everything you thought you knew about your faith and what – or who – your life is bound to. It means learning that your identity must rest on the rock of Christ, not in others’ opinions of you or in the set of beliefs to which they subscribe, even if those beliefs are ones which you would agree with. It means making decisions others can and will criticise and judge you for. It means being much less certain in your own abilities and more certain in the reality of God’s grace in your life.

It means wrestling and arguing with God, with fervent prayer and pleading, to finally arriving at the understanding that God will provide everything that you need. It means, perhaps, starting again at the place where Jesus needs to truly become the Lord of your life; that he has your complete allegiance and your life is bound to his.

You may discover that what you have been searching for, all this time, to feel whole and secure, will only be found in the one who loved like no other, laying down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

*“To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus, for my life is wholly bound (religio) to his. Oh, how strange and divine, I can sing: all is mine. Yet not I, but through Christ in me.” | City Alight*

Jesus taught his disciples that following him meant that one had to be willing to “*pick up their cross daily*” (Luke 9:23; 14:27). Cruciformity is, in essence, *conformity to the cross*; a life that is shaped by the narrative of the cross.

Cruciformity was the beating heart of God’s mission to the world demonstrated in full measure by the ministry of Jesus, who came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:1-17). The cruciform life, therefore, is one that is a living exegesis of the story of Jesus, beginning firstly in identification with his death and then flowing outwards in a living embodiment of his resurrection.

Cruciformity does not mean ‘*being spiritual*’ or ‘*belonging to a faith community*’ or ‘*seeking spiritual direction*’. Of course, it may involve those things but the cruciform life is grounded in the wholehearted trust that God will keep His promises, demonstrated in the crucified Jesus, and this trust is constantly affirmed and expressed by a transformed life.

A truly cruciform, gospel-shaped life starts with the activity of God. It is God who is saving us and it is God who is renewing us. It is God who accepts our belief in the sacrifice of Jesus and sends [His Spirit](#) into our lives to regenerate us as new creatures in His Son.

**A cruciform life is one that is pointed in pursuit of Jesus and utterly and completely *bound to him*.**

*“A person who lives by the indwelling life of Christ through the Holy Spirit is a person who is under Law. But it is not the Law of Moses. Nor is it a Law that some preacher created from his own personal standards. No, the Law I’m referring to is ‘the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:3). This Law is like the law of gravity; it’s a constant force or power. You and I have an indwelling Lord. The Law of God has been written on our hearts because Jesus Christ lives*



*within us by his Spirit. This is the promise of the new covenant. Spiritual people (religious people)(italics, ours) are those who live by the Lord's life that indwells them. They know by instinct what the will of God is (1 John 2:27). Where the Spirit leads them, they yield to it (for the most part) – no matter what the cost. And life and peace are the results (Romans 8:6). The external Law, then, is no longer an outward thing full of dead letters and cold commands. It has been transferred into the indwelling life of Christ. To live by Christ is our highest calling as people of the insurgence.” | Frank Viola, Insurgence*

*“Christ carried the burden of our sins. He was nailed to the cross, so we would stop sinning and start living right. By his cuts and bruises, you are healed. You had wandered away like sheep. Now you have returned to the one who is your shepherd and protector.” | 1 Peter 2:24-25, CSB*

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**\*“The word ‘theology’ literally means ‘*thinking about God*’. One classic definition of theology was given by St Anselm. He called it ‘*faith seeking understanding*’ and for many this is the true function of Christian theology.” | Paul Badham**

**Our theology – what we think about God – is therefore important. How can we begin to know and understand ourselves and our place in this expansive creation if we have no sense of the One who made us and the purpose for which we’ve been made?**

**However, a robust and living theology will spring from knowing and experiencing *who God is* and what *He has done for us*, in Jesus, and is not simply giving agreement to a statement or creed of ‘theological beliefs’.**

**By affirming the biblical narrative, that we are saved by grace through faith alone, we begin a journey towards a deeper**

understanding of *who God is*, which only grows as our Christian life progresses. Our theology is, perhaps then, best described as an expedition of discovery, rather than a destination at which we arrive. We discern more and more about the heart and mind of the Creator as our life progresses. This knowing and experiencing – this [walking with God](#) – renews us day by day to become more like the crucified Lord we follow.

Jesus was the exact representation of God and the very imprint of His nature ([Hebrews 1:3](#), [John 14:10-11](#)), the Word-made-flesh who took up residence amongst us ([John 1:1-14](#)). By knowing him, we can know God (Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3, 2 Peter 1:3).

To know God is to know Jesus, whom He sent (John 17:3) and, therefore, the true starting point of our *theology* as Christians is looking to Jesus and, fundamentally, to Jesus crucified. Our *theology* begins with *cruciformity*; a life first and foremost surrendered to the crucified Christ in faith.

Theology, *true theology* – thinking about God – will be seen and witnessed in cruciformity (Galatians 5:22-23); a life pointed in pursuit of Jesus and utterly and completely *bound to him*.

This article was first published 10 February 2021

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## Dual Citizens

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

*“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it, we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” | Philippians 3:20-21, ESV*

*“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” | Mark 12:17, ESV*

I was born and raised in New Zealand, the land of the long white cloud and a ratio of nearly six sheep for every one person. I often remember as a child watching the sun in summer sink below the horizon late at night, and, in winter, layering up as warmly as possible through the short, dark, freezing days of relentless rain and oftentimes snow.

My husband and I moved from New Zealand in 2008, the year our youngest child was born, and we settled in the beautiful Northern Rivers region on the east coast of Australia. We have lived here now for nearly 14 years (this month, in fact) and, even though New Zealand will always be ‘home’, Australia now feels like home too.

So, it felt more than overdue that I and our three children became Australian citizens and, during this past year, we did just that, an event that, frankly, I didn’t expect to feel quite so much emotion over.

As I took my pledge and officially became an Australian citizen, I realised there is nothing quite like the feeling of belonging, of becoming a part of the whole, of finally being a bona fide member of a community. Being able to *properly* call myself an Australian was a feeling of joy and welcome I hadn’t quite expected.

I’ve never really given the concept of citizenship much thought in the past. As a New Zealander, my citizenship was something I was born with; all its rights and responsibilities intrinsically held simply by virtue of my birth in that country.

Yet applying for citizenship in another country was a different matter altogether. This was a choice, a conscious intention on my part to assimilate with the country and its

people. I would be required to understand the nature and values of the country to which I wished to belong.

I would be asked to commit to contributing to and participating in the community. Together with the privileges and advantages that would come with my new status, there were also rights and responsibilities I would pledge to uphold.

This experience and the process of applying for and being accepted as a citizen of Australia turned my thoughts towards citizenship of a more serious and spiritual kind; that of our status, as Christians, as citizens of the kingdom of God.

## **Adam's Country**

We're all, by birth, citizens of an altogether different country, Adam's country, born deep in the darkness of the kingdom of men. Adam's country is one in which we are both spiritually dead and physically aging; bound by mortality on a one-way, downhill journey from cradle to grave.

Death is not just the enemy of life itself but also thwarts the purpose for which humanity was created. Even the smartest, wealthiest, or most influential men and women soon pass from the world's stage, their personalities and achievements more often than not fading from memory.

In Adam's country, humans invariably live for their own purposes and intents, rather than the higher calling for which God created us. As the world rapidly moves towards an increasingly secularised society, much of what we now see around us is just a shallow and warped reflection of the heart of our Creator, the One in whose image we were originally made.

Adam's country is one that is corrupted by greed, injustice, and selfishness. Inequity is rife; and more often than not, the rich simply get richer and the poor get poorer. It's estimated that in 2022, around 689 million people live in

extreme poverty (on less than \$1.90 a day). One of the most striking examples of the unequal distribution of resources on the planet is the existence of chronic hunger in many parts of the world.

Our stewardship of the earth and its resources has been negligent at best and grossly egocentric at worst. The land has long been mismanaged and polluted, with toxic chemicals sprayed on crops and then making their way into the rivers and lakes.

Extensive farming and deforestation have destroyed the habitats of many species of wildlife causing a shocking decline in their numbers or even extinction. It's estimated that we've single-handedly managed to send over 900 species extinct since 1500, with over 40,084 species (across all taxonomic groups) thought to be threatened with extinction (estimated in 2021).

This is the country that, as humans, we're all born into, participants in the global species we call *Homo Sapiens*, the *kingdom of men*. This is the reality of what it means to be *human*.

(Yet even in this *kingdom of men*, God is still working, setting up whomsoever He will, and one day, we know the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and Messiah (Revelation 11:15).

## **Heaven's Country**

When we become Christians, we don't stop being *human*, but we're well on our way to becoming *a new kind of human*. Made spiritually alive in Christ, God sends His Spirit into our hearts as both a seal and promise of His commitment to renew and transform us. We continue to live *in the world* but we're no longer *of it* in quite the same way, belonging now to Heaven's country.

Heaven's country is one that is full of love, justice, and glory. It's one of abundance, flourishing, and life everlasting. The One who rules over it is perfect, all-wise, and completely righteous, and He intends to restore and renew this world and its inhabitants, filling it with His glory and majesty.

When Heaven's country finally comes to earth, there will be no more tears, neither crying, suffering, or pain, for God will have made all things new. This is where our citizenship is now held and this is where our Saviour will appear from, carrying, as it were, our citizenship card with him.

I read the following commentary (below) at the time I was applying for Australian citizenship and it seemed to me an accurate analogy of the spiritual reality that occurs for anyone who becomes a Christian:

*"In the citizenship pledge, Australian citizens pledge their loyalty to Australia and its people. Australian citizens may also hold the citizenship of another country or countries if the laws of those countries allow. This is known as dual, or multiple, citizenship. However, even if a person is also a citizen of another country, an Australian citizen within Australia must follow all Australian laws at all times. Some Australian laws must also be followed by Australian citizens even when they are overseas."* – [Australian Department of Immigration](#)

Our spiritual reality now becomes our primary allegiance. We have become dual citizens; still human, and living and belonging, to some degree, to Adam's country but now also not *just human*, more specifically, now a *different kind of human*, a citizen of Heaven, with all the responsibilities and privileges that are afforded us as children of God.

Paul the Apostle describes this strange state of dual citizenship in this way:

*“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” | 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, ESV*

We’re still living in the *here-and-now*; we experience the routine, mundane, messy reality of ordinary human existence, but we’re also living in hope and expectation of the *soon-to-be*; mortality swallowed up by life and our earthy existence completely renewed and transformed, as the privilege of our heavenly citizenship degrees. God’s Spirit, present and active in our hearts and lives, assures us of this truth.

## **Render Unto Caesar**

It’s often a difficult tension to navigate, the halfway space between *here* and *there*. How, in practical terms, do we ensure our primary allegiance as people who look for a city whose builder and maker is God?

Yet how are we also to be salt and light, to fulfill our Christian commission, among the communities and people with whom we live and work? How *exactly* are we to be in the world but not of it?

Jesus addresses the reality of the tension of Christian citizenship existing alongside the commission given to Christians in John 17.

*“I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I*

*am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one...I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” | John 17:9, 11, 15-18, ESV*

He doesn't pray that Christians are removed from the world, but rather that they are protected from the evil one. He then seems to give a summary of the relationship that exists between Christianity, secular government, and society in Mark 12:17 where he comments, *“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's”*.

Our responsibilities, as citizens of Adam's country, remain, even after we become Christians, and, as the early church had clearly understood, Christians are to be model citizens in the countries in which they live, showing respect to all people, including those in authority ([1 Peter 2:13](#)).

As Christians, we recognise that *“...there is no power but of God, the powers that be are ordained of God”* (Romans 13:1). Therefore, *respect authority, pay your taxes, don't engage in illegal behaviours, be law-abiding citizens, pray for those who have the rule over you.*

But we also need to remember that our primary citizenship is now a heavenly one. Our allegiance has been given to Jesus, the king, and our commission from him is to be salt and light in the world.

Christians need to be aware that we are not attempting to patch and repair the kingdom of this world, Adam's country, by our continued involvement or participation in it. Like a religious system built on faulty foundations, the entire structure of Adam's country must be dismantled, and be replaced by something far superior (Heaven's country).



Rather, we are to point the world to a far better kingdom and to the just and righteous king who rules over it. We are people of the new heavens and the new earth and we long, with all of creation, to see this finally become the reality in all the world.

We aren't improving the kingdom of this world, we are bringing the kingdom of God into its midst, and we do this most effectively and faithfully together through the reality of the local church.

*"In one simple sentence: what Christians want for the nation should first be a witnessed reality in their local church." | Scot McKnight*

## **The Radical Mission Of The Church**

The radical mission of the church is this: *First we are to seek peace in our local fellowship, to end strife, and to seek reconciliation with God and with one another. Out of this peace-shaped, kingdom-shaped church we spill over peace into the world* (Scot McKnight).

The church, where you will find the citizens of Heaven's country, will glow with the redeeming love of Jesus, demonstrating this love both inside and outside the church through [\*kingdom mission\*](#).

In the world but no longer of it in quite the same way, we, the church, must navigate with care and wisdom the duality of our existence; rendering the appropriate dues to the Caesars of our world, but never to the point of collusion, knowing we no longer serve this world's king.

Whatever we do is now in service to God and becomes the sacred vocation of our heavenly citizenship. *"The hope for the world is the local church, and that the heart of God's plan is found in creating a whole new society in a local church"* (Scot

Mcknight).

Our mission is not secular but spiritual, and this guiding principle will help us navigate the decisions and choices we need to make on a daily basis as *dual citizens*.

*God's church exists not for itself but for the benefit of those who are not yet members. . . . [and] the church which lives for itself will be sure to die by itself." The church is not a religious club and it does not have a secular mission. Instead, it is a worshipping and sending community."*  
| Michael Green

*By faith, he [Abraham] dwelt in the promised land as a stranger in a foreign country. He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."* | Hebrews 11:10, ESV

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## Beyond The Pale

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

*"By the 14th century, the Norman invasion of Ireland was struggling. Too many Normans had "gone native", assimilated into Irish life. The remaining settlers had retreated to just four eastern counties: Louth, Meath, Dublin, and Kildare. These four "obedient shires" were the only part of Ireland still under the control of the English crown. The king's perimeter was marked with wooden fence posts pounded into the Irish turf. These were called "pales," from the Latin palus,*

meaning “stake.”

*Over the following centuries, the English settlement fortified its boundaries by turning the fenceline into an impressive barrier: a ten-foot-deep ditch surrounded by eight-foot banks on each side and ringed by a thorny hedge. These ramparts were never meant to be an impregnable wall, but they did provide a daunting obstacle to raiders stealing across the borders for English cattle. Within the Pale ditch, settlers lived under the protection of the crown. But once you passed “the Pale,” you were outside the authority and safety of English law, and subject to all the savageries of [rural Ireland](#). “Beyond the pale” then became a colloquial phrase meaning “outside the limits of acceptable behaviour or judgment.” | [C N Traveler](#)*

I [recently wrote about my separation from](#) the religious community I grew up in and the overwhelming response to my article was both encouraging and thought-provoking.

Many people wrote to me, both publicly and privately, to let me know that the article had deeply resonated with them. They expressed that they, too, have had many questions over the years, wrestling with inconsistencies while attempting to find their place in a system they secretly suspected they didn't fit.

Not many people feel free to speak publicly of their reservations or doubts and I understand this fear and hesitancy. They want to avoid similar censure and they know the penalty for dissenting is potentially severe; loss of relationship, rejection, and ostracisation.

Many also wrote expressing their distress at my experience (regardless of whether it had been theirs or not) and offering their blessing on my continued journey. I deeply appreciated their warmth, kindness, and understanding.

Others expressed dismay that I was no longer part of the community; how would I receive *nurture and support*? With whom would I now *fellowship*? Couldn't I have just stayed to *change the culture*? Beneath their words there seemed the suggestion of a more serious question; wasn't this just the beginning of a descent into loss of faith and the inevitable and eventual drift from God?

Others were less complimentary with their feedback. My article was deemed to be slanderous and inaccurate, and I, the author, simply a narcissistic, bitter ex-member, obsessed, while I was "in", about my 'rights' being impinged upon or 'the (annoying) call of true discipleship interfering with my personal life'.

Now that I was "out", I was simply an aggressive and confrontational vandal, looking to break something with whatever stones I could throw.

My 'questions' were excuses, and, they implied, I ought to be cancelled.

While I thought a lot about the people for whom this article resonated, and I deeply appreciated that they had shared their thoughts with me, I thought more about the other two kinds of responses.

Firstly, I wondered about those who had simply dismissed me and what I had to say. I pondered the mentality that refused to acknowledge any part of my experience as valid, believable, or worthy of discussion.

I wondered at the psychology that would paint me as the intolerant troublemaker rather than the wounded truth-teller.

And I wondered at such blind certainty of their supposed privileged position and their categorical dismissal that God could legitimately be found anywhere outside their own walls. Their confirmation bias was on full display by the way in which they chose to interpret and respond to my narrative.

I thought, secondly, about those who now considered me beyond the pale, out beyond the protection and comfort of the only community that was able to provide such things. Blessings and opportunities galore had been mine for the taking, had I only just remained within the palisade walls. No such blessings or opportunities (or if there were some to be found, they would be few and far between), awaited me outside those walls.

No one survives out there, they seemed to be whispering to one another. She'll die, for sure.

Well, I didn't die.

It hasn't been an easy journey, I'll not pretend otherwise, but outside those walls is not the wilderness you might imagine it to be. I'd been told that there was nothing worthwhile out there, but I discovered those are simply the words of fearful men, hemmed in by their own definitions and not living free in the Spirit of Christ.

God is out there. He is everywhere, and the more you listen for Him, the clearer He speaks. He is with us always, even when it feels like we're wandering through a wilderness, even if we're walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

Beyond the pale, I found men and women, fellow Christians, who deeply love Jesus and are committed to following him. I found people who are not afraid of difference but are compelled by the love of Christ to listen, to reason together, and sharpen iron one with another. To my astonishment, I discovered that *they knew the names of the faithful; Abraham, David, Deborah, Isaiah, Mary of Magdala, Paul, and many more.*

I discovered my place in the history of the church and learned the names of people from long, long ago – *Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Polycarp, Junia, Prisca, and Quintilla*, brothers and sisters in the great family of God.

I became reacquainted with Scripture in new ways, seeing the

Bible as a book to marvel at and pore over, the spirit-breathed and living words of Heaven's Creator, active and able to deeply transform our hearts and lives, shaping us for His purpose. I learned to loosen my grip on needing to *know and understand everything* right now, and learned instead to say, "God, show me more of *You*."

My way of thinking about the Christian life shifted dramatically. It became very simple (note that I use the word *simple*, not *easy*): *Confess Jesus is Lord and Saviour (believe the story of Jesus as told us in the gospel) and then take up your cross and follow him, bearing the fruit of a life of repentance.* All else is just noise.

I discovered the messy but vital reality of the local church; filled with sinning and flawed humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God, asking their questions and voicing their doubts along the way.

I learned what it felt like to be pastored to and personally prayed over, concepts that, bizarrely for a Christian, felt foreign and strange to me.

I discovered some churches that weren't for me and found others that were. The Christian world is nothing if not perfectly imperfect and there's a lot of diversity out there. It's not for me to judge the legitimacy of their place as one of the Lord's lampstands (Revelation 2:5), but it is my responsibility to use discernment when choosing a church home (1 John 4:1-5).

I found myself asking: what am I responsible to *bring* and what am I responsible to *nurture*? *In this sea of Christianity, how do I best serve and represent Jesus in the place where I now find myself?*

Let me now answer some of the questions that have been put to me. It may be that these are questions on your mind too.

## Who Do I Fellowship With?

Well, other Christians of course. A Christian is someone who has “*confessed that Jesus is Lord and believes in their heart that God raised him from the dead.*” (Romans 10:9). They’ve demonstrated their belief by repenting of their former way of life and by being baptised into the saving name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). They’ve been transferred out of the dominion of darkness and into the kingdom of the Son of God’s love, [a kingdom of life and light](#).

The first letter of John puts it this way:

*“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have observed and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may also have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*

*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in Him. If we say, “We have fellowship with Him,” and yet we walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. **If we [walk in the light](#) as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.**” | 1 John 1:1-7, CSB*

If we abide in Jesus, then we are in common union – community – with all those who are also abiding in him, both in our present time and throughout the ages, a great cloud of faithful witnesses of the risen King, [the people of the kingdom](#) (1 John 2:28, John 15:1-27, Hebrews 12:1-2). We are

connected to one another by the precious blood of the lamb and nothing can separate us from the love of God, apart from us choosing to leave the light and walk again in darkness (Romans 8:31-39).

The [ordinance of communion](#) – taking bread and wine together – is an important part of our Christian life, as members of Jesus' body and God's family. It is a key element of Jesus' covenant with each one of us individually and collectively as his church, the price of which was his own blood.

Written about 300 years after the birth of Christ, [the Apostles' Creed](#) summarises the foundational Christian beliefs taught by the early church and is a bold declaration of Christian faith in Jesus Christ. It particularly affirms the teachings regarding Jesus, that of his virgin birth, his crucifixion, his death, and his subsequent resurrection; core elements of the gospel of good news.

It is a primary statement of faith shared by Christians around the world, uniting them in common with the work achieved in and through Jesus. No Christian worth their salt denies this creed.

The church, the universal church, exists outside denominational walls and extends beyond historical boundaries. There is only *one body* of Jesus Christ, and holding to this spiritual reality means holding to the reality that *fellowship with the body happens when we abide in the body*.

## **Why Couldn't I Stay And Change The Culture?**

Cultures don't happen overnight. Made up of an interconnecting set of goals, roles, processes, values, practices, attitudes, and assumptions, the culture of an organisation is practically its DNA.



Changing a culture takes committed leadership, and often requires years of concerted and consistent effort, including intensive work to communicate and reinforce new ways of thinking, desired values, and changed behaviours. In fact, in the case of organisational transformation (such as church), it can take a minimum of seven to 10 years to change the culture.

But we humans are very resistant to change in general and attempting to change the culture of an organisation is particularly difficult as it's deeply embedded in the system. When people believe that their culture is superior to other cultures, they tend to resist any influence other cultures may bring (you can read more about this [here](#)).

I came to realise that I didn't have 15 years, or 10 years or even seven years up my sleeve. My children had reached their formative and impressionable years and there were many aspects of this culture that I didn't want them to absorb or be absorbed into. I also realised that while I had been hopeful of the possibility of a shift in culture, I had not fully understood how deeply embedded it was in the heart of a system so strongly resistant to change.

This was a culture that has existed for years and years, unchanged and unchallenged. It did not want to change and it saw no need for change. I began to understand it would take many years of sustained and concentrated effort by many more persons than myself, to see any kind of tangible difference.

I felt I had more hope of reaching the moon than I did of changing this culture by staying.

## **Have I Lost My Faith?**

I said that this journey hasn't been easy. And it hasn't.

When a person experiences loss of community, they also have to contend with what can feel like loss of identity. While we would all agree in theory that our identity rests, or should

rest, in Jesus, in practice we are also deeply shaped by our place within community, in knowing and being known by the people who surround us.

Beyond the pale is initially daunting and lonely. Everyone you ever knew is on the other side of that fence.

I was [reminded during this time](#) of the story of Hagar, who had been driven into the wilderness by the harsh treatment of her mistress Sarah (Genesis 16:6-13).

Miserable, lonely, and afraid, the Lord found Hagar beside a spring in the wilderness and spoke words of comfort and hope to her. She names God in that place as 'El Roi', meaning, "You are the God who sees me."

I have repeated this to myself many times in the past few years when doubt and discomfort has crept in. Not doubt *in* God, but doubt that He still had His hand over my life, that He was the God who looks after me, that I was still seen and known.

Having faith is firstly a posture of the heart, an orientation of trust in or towards something or someone. My faith was placed in Jesus at 16 years old and my trust in God remains firm. I remain confident that the Spirit will lead me in all truth and that the important things God wishes me to know, He will make known.

I trust Him, even when I am confused about His plans for me, even when I don't understand the lessons He's teaching me, even when I can't see what the future holds.

I trust Him even when I'm wracked with anxiety and overwhelmed by uncertainty. I trust Him even when life is challenging and change is necessary. I trust Him because I believe that the same Spirit that rose Jesus from the dead *lives in me*. If God is for me, who can be against me?

This journey has challenged me in ways I never imagined and I've wondered many, many times, *how did I get here?* But I know, for sure, He is still the God who sees me and takes care of me.

I have not lost my faith.

## **Where Would I Find Nurture And Support?**

The wilderness is an unforgiving landscape, where all reliance on self is brutally highlighted for what it is, inadequate, insufficient, a lie. To my dismay, I initially found myself echoing the murmurs of the children of Israel in the wilderness. I wondered, had God brought me out here to die?

This was the first lesson I had to learn: Jesus never promised this Christian life would be easy.

The second was this: God always provides.

It was not the wilderness I imagined it to be. God sent people into my life during this time: good, loving, solid, Jesus-loving people, who prayed with me, ate with me, opened their homes and shared their lives with me.

They personally testified to God's goodness in both good times and bad. They encouraged me to persevere in faith, nurture forgiveness, run after grace, and ground myself in God's love. *"Love bears all things"*, they reminded me, *"believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."*

Like the children of Israel who had wandered in the wilderness, God had ensured I was still provided for.

***"There's honey in the rock  
Water in the stone  
Manna on the ground  
No matter where I go  
I don't need to worry now that I know***

## ***Everything I need You've got"***

Honey In The Rock | Brooke Ligertwood

### **Where To From Here?**

I am a Christian for the rest of my days. *I believe in Jesus Christ, descended from David, risen from the dead. This is my gospel.*

But as to the next step? *I don't know* what God has in store for my future.

I hope to be a part of a flourishing and vibrant church. I hope to serve and witness alongside people whom I get to love and know deeply, and by whom I feel seen and loved in return.

I hope to be a worthy example of faith for my children and a trusted companion and woman of valour to my husband.

I hope that God uses me in many small, indiscernible ways to help grow His kingdom here on earth. If He has larger, more visible plans in mind, I hope I have the courage to step into His calling for me.

I hope to avoid pain and difficulty and loss, but I know these will inevitably come my way, so I hope to be brave and true when they do.

And in all these things, I recognise that I will be flawed, always flawed, but I continue to give thanks for the grace of God and the blood of Jesus, which cleanses us from all sin.

Most of all, I hope to hear the words of the king on that final day: *"Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Lord."*

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# The Faith | Works ‘Conundrum’

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

## Acceptance By Grace Through Faith Alone

The simple truth that we find acceptance with God by grace through faith alone is the Bible’s most beautiful theme. Grace began long ago when God set in motion the means for humanity to find their way back to Him, to find their way home. He promised Adam and Eve that [a redeemer](#) would come who would save humanity from the [consequences of their sin](#). That redeemer would be His very own Son, born for the specific purpose of reconciling the world back to God (John 3:17). The earth waited, enduring times of difficulty and futility, restless and expectant for the promised Prince of Peace to appear.

With the arrival of Emmanuel, ‘God-With-Us’, the reality of a whole and healed relationship with God for every person was realised. Brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death was finally overthrown in the person and ministry of God’s Son, whose death on the cross struck the final blow to mortality.

*“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.” – Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV*

## Salvation Isn’t Earned

This work of salvation, in its entirety, was set in motion and

completed by God. Humanity had no contribution in any of this. The Bible is very clear that salvation is given freely, as a gift, and is never attained by works.

*“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.”*  
– Romans 5:1-2, NIV

Paul the Apostle was a champion for the need for a grace-led, faith-full life. He had been converted from a life steeped in religious tradition and law, a life in which a man could become ‘more righteous’ before God than his fellow man, simply by achieving greater adherence to law. Yet Paul learned that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and in fact was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God’s promises. Paul learned of the true gospel and He speaks of it often throughout his letters in the New Testament – that of being ‘saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, least any man should boast’ (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Paul is very adamant that justification – that is, “right standing with God” – is by faith alone. What are we to make then of the words of Paul’s contemporary, James, who writes “As you can see, a man is justified by his deeds and **not by faith alone.**” (James 2:24). It seems, at least initially, that these two men are in contradiction with each other.

## **Justified By Deeds And Not By Faith Alone**

In reality, James and Paul are actually in complete harmony and a closer look at James’ letter not only gives us a better understanding of what *faith really is*, but also warns us of the sobering reality that *information doesn’t always equal transformation*.

Paul wrote his [letter to the Galatians](#) addressing the growing idea at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did **plus** additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken, that we are made "right with God by **what we do**". This is performance-based Christianity and Paul reaffirmed to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

James, when writing his letter and speaking of 'what we do' is concerned with counterfeit Christianity of another kind – the unauthenticity of a life that is 'Christian' in name only. He is tackling another dangerous distortion of the gospel of grace, the idea that believers can 'continue in sin that grace may abound'. That the new life is the same as the old life, the only difference being that a person has become 'saved'. That is to say, that nothing about the way the believer behaves or lives after being [saved](#) is necessary to change, that verbally expressing our faith in Jesus is enough and that we don't need to 'do better' because God's grace covers all our shortcomings anyway.

The truth, James says, is that *yes, we are made right with God by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless its demonstrated by an active, loving response to God's grace.* This is, as Paul agrees, "faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6), demonstrated in a Christian's life by 'what they do'.

James starts his letter by asking an important question:

*"Do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without*

*providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup – where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense.” – James 2:17-24 MSG*

He goes on to reiterate his meaning in the plainest of language, saying “Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.” (James 2:26, CSB).

## **Works Are Essential Evidence Our Faith Is Real**

The kind of faith that is real, saving faith is shown to be vital, living and demonstrable in action.

To illustrate his full meaning, James gives two examples from the life of [Abraham](#), whom he describes as ‘the friend of God’ (James 2:2). The first was when God promised Abraham a great line of descendants, even though at the time Abraham and his wife were both old and childless. Abraham didn’t doubt God for a second and James cites this faith (Genesis 15:6) as “reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” Abraham believed God was ‘good for His word’ and this is why, James says, he was justified.

Paul, when also commenting at length on the life of Abraham (Romans 4), does not say “Abraham *worked* for God and therefore was justified.” Neither does he say “Abraham *undertook acts of love* and, because of this, was justified.” or that “Abraham *made progress in character reformation* and therefore was justified. He says, “Abraham **believed** God and that faith was credited to him as righteousness.” He and James are both referring to the same event in Abraham’s life and are both drawing the same conclusion – that Abraham was ‘made right with God by his faith.

However, James goes on to reference a second event in Abraham’s life, found in Genesis 22. Here, God is testing



Abraham, looking for the kind of works that show Abraham's faith to be not just words but real and living – demonstrable in action. This is not the same kind of justification which gave Abraham right standing with God, but rather a test of Abraham's original profession of belief. Was it the living kind of faith which produces a genuine response or a dead faith that has no effect on life at all?

James therefore has a different meaning in mind than Paul when Paul concludes that people aren't justified by works. James is answering another question entirely: **Does the ongoing and final reckoning of our righteousness depend on works as the necessary evidence of a true and living faith?** The answer to that question is an unequivocal yes!

If you were to ask James and Paul, "How does a person obtain right standing with God and receive '[the righteousness of God](#)'?", both men would answer "As a gift of grace. Trust God, believe His promise and that faith alone will be counted as righteousness."

However, if you asked them, "Does our final right standing with God depend on works of love?", Paul will answer "No, not if by 'works', you mean deeds done to show that we somehow deserve God's blessings" (his point in Romans 4) but James will answer "Yes, if by 'works', you mean evidence of a faith that is alive and active in a believer's life". Both are in agreement with each other, based on those definitions.

Works, in the way that James defines them, prove that our faith is real. When James says that we are not justified by faith alone, he means that the faith which justifies or makes us 'right with God' does not remain alone but bears the fruit of the new, spirit-led life. Any other kind of faith is counterfeit, in reality, dead, and completely useless.

# What Does Living Faith Look Like?

*“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” – 1 John 4:11*

Living faith is really another name for [discipleship](#); learning to replicate the pattern and example left by Jesus in both word and action. Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians by discussing this very thing, making it clear that being called to ‘freedom in Jesus’ is not an excuse to do whatever we want, but rather ‘freedom to serve one another in love’ (Galatians 5:14). It’s in the **believing** and **doing** that faith is made alive, vibrant and visible.

James agrees with Paul in this, again referencing the life of Abraham:

*“Wasn’t our ancestor Abraham “made right with God by works” when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn’t it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are “works of faith”? The full meaning of “believe” in the Scripture sentence, “Abraham believed God and was set right with God,” includes his action. It’s that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named “God’s friend.” Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?” – James 2: 21-24, MSG*

Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we ‘earn God’s favour’ but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

*“But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.*

*Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” – Galatians 5:22-25, MSG*

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our ‘loving union with God’ doesn’t result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as 1 John 4:7-21 says so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn’t real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a corpse.

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