

Living Intentionally

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

Sex + Gender

The world is not the same place it once was.

Certainty has given way to subjective reality. Truth can no longer be pinned down. Common sense doesn't seem quite so common after all.

At times, it feels like the whole world has gone mad.

And perhaps we have...

One of the biggest conversations of our time is the gender/sexuality* debate. It used to be that gender, now a contested term, and sex were largely synonymous. If your sex or gender was 'male' then you were a man. If your sex or gender was 'female', then you were a woman.

Certainly, more is perhaps encompassed in the use of the descriptor 'man' rather than just 'male' (or 'woman' rather than just 'female'), binary terms which refer to a human's sexuality (gender, not 'orientation'), but these terms are nonetheless indelibly connected to one another, two aspects of the same reality.

Historically, most societies have recognised only two distinct genders, a binary of masculine and feminine largely corresponding to the biological sexes of male and female.

Simply put, if you had an X and a Y chromosome, you were a male human. Two XXs and you were a female human. Immature undeveloped humans were called boys and girls, respectively. Mature, fully developed humans, were called men and women.

The discovery of sex differentiation chromosomes is a relatively new science but its discovery in 1905 only confirmed what humans [had believed and understood for millennia.1](#)

“During the first decade of the 20th century, it was established that the sex of almost all many-celled biological organisms is determined at the moment of fertilisation by the combination of two kinds of microscopic entities, the X and Y chromosomes. This discovery was the culmination of more than two thousand years of speculation and experiment of how an animal, plant, or human becomes male or female.” | [Nettie N Stevens And The Discovery Of Sex Determination By Chromosomes.](#)

The Human Genome

This XY sex-determination system is shared by humans, many mammals, insects, and other animals. The perpetuation and reproduction of many species, humans included, is a result of the combining of the chromosomes from one X individual and one Y individual. Humans have forty-six chromosomes (including the two sex chromosomes, XX in females and XY in males), 23 of which are inherited from an individual's father (a male), with the other 23 inherited from an individual's mother (a female).

Our sex chromosomes form only part of the approximately three billion base pairs of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) that make up the entire set of chromosomes of the human organism. One of the most significant and ambitious scientific endeavours of our time has been the sequencing of this entire set of chromosomes – the human genome, a project which was begun in

1990 and which, by 2022, had produced the first truly complete human genome sequence.

The [objective2 of this project](#) was 'to decode the human hereditary information (human blueprint) that determines all individual traits inherited from parents.' Dr Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, and one of the world's leading scientists, has long worked at the cutting edge of the science of DNA, which he describes as 'the language of God'. He argues that science and God are in harmony – that, indeed, science is of God, and that the sequencing of the human genome 'was both a stunning scientific achievement and an occasion of worship'.

The sequencing of the human genome only confirmed what many have long believed; that we are '*fearfully and wonderfully made*' (Psalm 139:14). Humanity has been created and brought into being by an intelligent designer, who has carefully constructed the complex genetic material that makes up a complete human, with the ability for that human to replicate and reproduce *in his or her own likeness*. We are not an accident, a vague collection of random cells which have collided together, but a highly complex sequence of chromosomes that have formed a complete human, with a soul, intellect, morals, capability, and purpose.

In fact, the Bible comments in its earliest chapters that we are *made in God's image*. We are unique in all of creation because *we are made like God*. *Who we are* is directly connected to *the One who created us*.

The Emperor Has No Clothes On

Post-modern ideology would try to tell us that there are (currently) 57 genders. Gender, it's claimed, is not something we *are* but something that we *feel*. Not only that, gender is something that is fluid, an experience that can remain static

or be in constant flux. Today we may *feel female*. Tomorrow we may *feel male*. Next week, we may feel *somewhere in the middle* or possibly *both at the same time*.

But, we're also told, gender is somehow some kind of social construct, that our gender *is expressed through the roles we take on, the expectations placed on us, our relationship with others, and the complex ways that gender is institutionalised in society*. Gender – *how we feel and who we know ourselves to be* – is unrelated to our biological and physical realities, that is, our sex and our gender *are not the same thing*.

The historical recognition of two genders – male and female (called the gender binary) is usually based on someone's anatomy (the genitals they were born with), but, we're being told, these markers are unreliable as to the *true person's self* (or gender) which emerges with time (or is forced upon them by society), and which may or may not *match [the gender they were assigned at birth](#)*.³

(At this point, I'm looking around, wondering, *when is someone going to tell the Emperor he has no clothes on?*)

We are more than just our genitals, this is true. But these outward markers are only part of a complex series of chemical reactions that were set in motion the moment that fertilisation took place, the moment that *we began*, and the unique individual that would eventually become *us* sparked into reality. This sex determination, which will include all the physical, emotional, and psychological traits we will uniquely possess happens during fertilisation, and *it doesn't change during the pregnancy*.

“All human individuals—whether they have an XX, an XY, or an atypical sex chromosome combination—begin development from the same starting point. During early development the gonads of the fetus remain undifferentiated; that is, all fetal genitalia are the same and are phenotypically female. After

approximately 6 to 7 weeks of gestation, however, the expression of a gene on the Y chromosome induces changes that result in the development of the testes. Thus, this gene is singularly important in inducing testis development. The production of testosterone at about 9 weeks of gestation results in the development of the reproductive tract and the masculinisation (the normal development of male sex characteristics) of the brain and genitalia. In contrast to the role of the fetal testis in differentiation of a male genital tract and external genitalia in utero, fetal ovarian secretions are not required for female sex differentiation. As these details point out, the basic differences between the sexes begin in the womb.” | [National Library Of Medicine](#)

We are not merely male or female because our bodies say so, we are male or female because our brains also say so; neurochemically distinct from one another as either ‘male’ or ‘female’ brains. While similar in many basic ways, male and female brains show consistent differences that have important implications for each sex. Our sex (most commonly observed and confirmed by our exterior genitalia at birth) and our gender – whether we are male or female – are one and the same, and this differentiation shows up time and time again in the way we think and behave.

Diane Halpern, PhD, and past president of the American Psychological Association, comments that “*there is simply too much data pointing to the biological basis of sex-based cognitive differences to ignore.*” She references a catalogue of human behavioural differences that have been [studied and observed](#)⁴:

“Women excel in several measures of verbal ability – pretty much all of them, except for verbal analogies. Women’s reading comprehension and writing ability consistently exceed that of men, on average. They outperform men in tests of fine-motor coordination and perceptual speed. They’re more

adept at retrieving information from long-term memory. Men, on average, can more easily juggle items in working memory. They have superior visuospatial skills: They're better at visualising what happens when a complicated two- or three-dimensional shape is rotated in space, at correctly determining angles from the horizontal, at tracking moving objects and at aiming projectiles." | [Stanford Medicine Magazine](#)

Halpen concludes; *"new technologies have generated a growing pile of evidence that there are inherent differences in how men's and women's brains are wired and how they work and many of these cognitive differences appear quite early in life."*

This process of sex differentiation, begun at fertilisation, continues throughout our life, influencing our physical and mental growth and development (bone structure, weight, height, genitalia, brain, and characteristics). The complex process encoded in our DNA resolutely follows the invisible instructions given at fertilisation, and, barring abnormality or mutation, results, without fail, in a *gender or sex that matches our physicality*.

*The **gender/sex of a person** is the final result of unique genetic, hormonal, and morphologic sex-differentiation at fertilisation. It is fixed and it is binary, either male or female.*

Your shy sensitive son isn't *a girl trapped in a boy's body*, he's simply a shy, sensitive *boy*. Your boisterous, energetic, sandpit-loving daughter isn't *a boy trapped in a girl's body*, she's simply an energetic, outdoor-loving *girl*.

While our sex/gender may be fixed and binary, our unique personalities and characteristics are not. Our identity is not the same as any other person on the earth. Even identical twins are not truly 100% identical, with a complex interaction between our genes, our environment, and our epigenetic markers

uniquely shaping who we are.

We are truly, each one of us, one-of-a-kind.

Historical gender roles may have played a large part in the troubling place where we now find ourselves as a culture, insisting that all men must behave in certain ways and perform certain roles (outdoorsy, tough, adventurous..) and, conversely, that all women must behave in certain ways (deferring and submissive, domestic, delicate) (another day, another blog, although I tackle some of this in relation to healthy church function in my article '[Stop Promoting Gendered Hierarchy!](#)').

However, I think a large part of what has contributed to the madness surrounding sex and gender conversations today is the abandonment of the idea of *God*, an intelligent, thoughtful designer who *insists we were created for a purpose*.

What Is A Woman?

One of the most startling, and troubling documentaries in recent times is a project undertaken by Matt Walsh, an American Christian conservative and political commentator. In his documentary, "[What Is A Woman](#)"⁵, Walsh asks questions that many people no longer seem willing to answer.

Can *a woman* be defined? (historically, a woman was defined as *an adult human female*). Is being a woman simply *a feeling* or *behaving a certain way*? Can a woman be *trapped in a man's body*? Does *being a woman* mean anything at all?

In the documentary, Walsh visits a women's march, where placards are lifted high, campaigning *for the rights of women*. Unfortunately, nobody seems able to define what a woman actually is, reducing the impetus of the march to nothing more than a ridiculous farce. Implausibly, many of those he interviews in his documentary seem 'uncomfortable with his line of questioning', deeming his tone 'malignant and

harmful'.

The prevailing (or, at least, the most vocal) narrative at play is built on a serious and disturbing detachment from subjective reality. If being a woman is *simply how one feels on any given day*, then being a woman can include everyone and no one. It's no kind of definition at all.

Gender and sex are no longer something that people are willing to define. Forget science, forget biology; how any one person *feels* is the prevailing truth of the day. And if you have a difference of opinion in relation to the gender + sex conversation, if you even dare to ask questions, you are deemed hateful, phobic, violent, or discriminatory.

As one person interviewed in the documentary comments, "*If you speak up about it ... your life will be over in some way*". Defy the trans groupthink and face profound consequences.

Walsh's long-ranging interview with a gender studies professor finds the star drilling down on a basic principle. Truth. [emphasis mine] One therapist asks, with a straight face, "whose truth are we talking about?" | [Hollywood Into To](#)

What Is Truth?

Truth.

A hot-button topic, to say the least.

And *truth*, it seems, is at the core of the issues we are facing in relation to gender, sexuality, and identity.

Most human activities depend upon the concept of 'truth' as an objective reality, including most of the sciences, law, journalism, and, indeed, elements of everyday life. As Sir Isaac Newton discovered, if you throw an apple up in the air, it (or anything else) will invariably come down. The old adage, '*what goes up must come down*' is attributed to his

discovery of this undeniable truth. The science behind this, is, of course, the law of gravity, one of three 'laws of motion' that Sir Isaac Newton formulated.

I have deliberately avoided overly referencing the Bible up until this point, endeavoring instead to defer firstly to science and reason (who are, in reality, both friends of faith) in my initial comments. But humanity has been long discussing the question, "*what is truth?*" and Jesus himself gave an answer to this question when it was put to him, circa AD33. He replied, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life*" (John 14:6)

Jesus claimed (and the Bible is in agreement) that truth is not subjective, just some abstract exchanging of philosophical ideas, but rather objective, rooted in the person of God, who has been revealed to us in Christ. Paul the Apostle comments in his letter to the church at Colosse in the early first century that every truthful thing in the universe is found in Christ as the Word, Wisdom and Knowledge belonging to God Himself. Everything that was created was through and for him, he existed before anything else and he holds all things together. (Colossians 1:16-17, Colossians 2:3)

For many, the Bible may seem outdated, irrelevant, out of touch, or even downright dangerous. And I can understand this. The Bible has been misused, misinterpreted, and misunderstood throughout history, often used to control and harm rather than heal and liberate.

The reality, however, is that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God Himself, whereby He has revealed Himself to His creation and through which we are able to understand His intentions. It offers life-giving wisdom, leads humanity to salvation, and provides meaning and purpose for our human existence. In fact, the Bible is the expression of God Himself, who is *all about justice, redemption, and liberation* (and who is utterly opposed to injustice and evil).

As such, the implication is that it is entirely sufficient to answer all our tricky and troubling questions, and, because its author is God, those answers can be relied upon to be true. (I've written more about the accuracy, authority, and authenticity of the Bible [here](#)).

Let's suppose for a minute that the Bible really does have the answers to all our human problems, issues, doubts, and questions. Does the Bible have anything to say about gender and sex? What truths does God communicate to us about these issues?

Made In God's Image | Imago Dei

God is The Subject Of Life. The Centre Of Everything. The story of humanity starts with Him and ends with Him.

As I commented earlier in this article, we (humanity) are unique in all of creation because *we are made like God. Who we are is directly connected to the One who created us.* This belief formed one of the key cornerstones of the early Christian faith and, in many respects, set Christianity apart from other religions of its time; that is, the belief in the intrinsic value and worth of every human *because they're made in God's image.*

Science tells us *how* we're (uniquely and intricately) made (and I've talked about that earlier in this article) but faith tells us *why* (what we're here for and what life is all about). Scripture intends us to understand that we were created intentionally and with a specific purpose in mind; to be God's image-bearers – *imago dei* – on the earth, and to rule it wisely and well on His behalf. Nothing about our creation was accidental, and nothing was left to chance.

One of the first things that the book of Genesis confirms, alongside the commission for which we were created, is the binary nature of our humanity:

*So God created human beings in His own image. In the image of God He created them; **male** and **female** He created them. Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." Then God said, "Look! I have given you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. And I have given every green plant as food for all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the small animals that scurry along the ground—everything that has life." And that is what happened." | Genesis 1:27-30, NLT*

The narrative of humanity's creation is further fleshed out in Genesis chapter 2 with our gender binary of male and female being connected to our naming as 'man' and 'woman'. (Genesis 2:18-25) (Interestingly, we are also given the blueprint for marriage in this chapter; that is, a committed and exclusive relationship between a man and a woman).

Jesus himself confirms his belief in and understanding of the creation narrative (when discussing the legality of divorce) in Matthew 19: 4-8, where he says, *"Haven't you read the Scriptures? They record that from the beginning 'God made them male and female. This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.'"*

The differences between the two genders are unique and distinctive, both designed by God with a purpose in mind. Both genders are intrinsically valuable and precious to God, and we see His characteristics displayed by the perfect merging of both masculine and feminine traits. These distinct genders are the fundamental building blocks of God's creation and are part of God's plan for His creation.

God's original design for humanity was built on equality, cooperation, respect, commitment, and support, with both

genders bringing unique and valued differences to the partnership. This mutuality, this joint responsibility, forms part of the great narrative of restoration and redemption that Jesus himself came to inaugurate when he ushered in *the kingdom of God*. Part of this reality includes the binary of our respective genders, that of male and female (man and woman); deeply embedded into our DNA, the very building blocks that make us *us*.

The Bible insists that we were created for a purpose. It insists that there are two genders; male and female. And it names these genders; man and woman.

“The physical, human body has great significance within Christian understanding, from creation through incarnation to the resurrection and ascension. The Bible recognises and celebrates two sexes. The text does not seem to allow for, and actually on occasion prohibits, identifying as different from your biological birth sex. That said, we need to understand what the Bible means when it says we are made “male and female” and not unwittingly accept society’s stereotypes about sex and gender.” | [Premier Christianity](#)

Responding Pastorally

Unfortunately, for some individuals, gender identity disorder is very real. People with gender dysphoria genuinely have a deep sense of unease and distress at the perception their biological sex/gender does not match who they *feel* they are.

Sensitivity and compassion are crucial in engaging with and in these conversations.

(Additionally, there are individuals born with genetic anomalies (sex chromosomes, gonads, and genitalia) which don’t conform to the usual binary of male/female. Known as [intersex**](#), the prevalence of such occurrences is thought to be about 0.018% of the population. People with abnormalities

of development should be helped to find their place as they see it best, and it's not the intention of this article to discuss those particular cases in any detail.)⁶

Yet the statistics would suggest that the reportable numbers of those suffering from gender dysphoria are between 0.002% and 0.005% of the population, actually a very small number. It goes no way towards explaining the absolute explosion that seems to have happened in recent years, as young children and teens are diagnosed as transgender, rushed into hormone treatments, and, more drastically, undergoing life-altering surgeries.

This is such a difficult issue for families to navigate today. Many of us can feel out of our depth engaging in conversations that use terms and language that have shifted so dramatically from historically accepted definitions.

More seriously, parents are being told that failure to affirm a child who may be suffering from gender dysphoria could result in, worst case scenario, suicide and, in a recent amendment to the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 in Victoria, Australia, non-endorsement by parents of a child who wishes to transition [is considered emotional and psychological abuse \(ie family violence\)](#).⁷

Yet the reality is that affirming a person's belief (they are the opposite gender to that which they were "assigned" at birth), or advocating the use of hormonal or surgical intervention actually does nothing to truly resolve the issue. As Ryan T Anderson, PhD⁸ [comments](#), "Sex "reassignment" doesn't work. It's impossible to "reassign" someone's sex physically [because sex isn't something that is "assigned at birth"], and attempting to do so doesn't produce good outcomes psychosocially."

"Cosmetic surgery and cross-sex hormones can't change us into the opposite sex. They can affect appearances. They can stunt

or damage some outward expressions of our reproductive organisation. But they can't transform it. They can't turn us from one sex into the other. Transgendered men do not become women, nor do transgendered women become men. All become feminised men or masculinized women, counterfeits or impersonators of the sex with which they 'identify.' In that lies their problematic future." | [The Heritage Foundation](#)

Carving up bodies and dishing out synthetic hormones is not the answer. Speaking hope and truth into people's lives is.

"Our minds and senses function properly when they reveal reality to us and lead us to knowledge of truth. And we flourish as human beings when we embrace the truth and live in accordance with it. A person might find some emotional relief in embracing a falsehood, but doing so would not make him or her objectively better off. Living by a falsehood keeps us from flourishing fully, whether or not it also causes distress." (The Heritage Foundation)

John Whitehall, Professor of Paediatrics at Western Sydney University, comments, "People are not interested in discussing the science. We've all got to believe that there's no such thing as a boy or a girl, that we're all somewhere in between. I don't believe that. The good news is that in all the major articles, these children (who may be confused about their gender) will revert to the natal sex through puberty. What we should do then is have confidence in the statistics ***and not mess the child up along the way.***"

A Final Word

Truth. The final word in all of this is truth.

Truth spoken with compassion and care, with sensitivity and love, but truth nonetheless. Encouraging a false narrative will do no one any favours.

We need to confidentially speak what is true in relation to sex and gender, affirming reality, and encouraging acceptance of our physical being, understanding our embodied selves as male or female. Narratives that disguise or distort reality are misguided and do not actually result in human flourishing or wholeness.

It's not only untruthful to affirm these distortions, it's unloving and harmful to the individual. The most beneficial therapies focus on helping people accept themselves and live in harmony with their bodies.

And I would argue that nothing is more healing than being able to define yourself as one beloved of God, created with purpose (holistically male or female), and that this reality – that you are a child of God – is your true identity. This is the truth that the world needs to hear, the hope that it needs for whole and healthy flourishing, and the reality that we need to be affirming, with love and compassion.

“You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother’s womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.” Psalm 139:13-16, NLT

1.

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/230427#:~:text=According%20to%20most%20biologists%20and,Wilson%20\(1856%2D1939\).](https://www.jstor.org/stable/230427#:~:text=According%20to%20most%20biologists%20and,Wilson%20(1856%2D1939).)

2.

<https://www.genome.gov/about-genomics/educational-resources/fa>

ct-sheets/human-genome-project

3.

<https://teentalk.ca/learn-about/gender-identity/#:~:text=There%20are%20many%20different%20gender,or%20a%20combination%20of%20these.>

4.

<https://stanmed.stanford.edu/how-mens-and-womens-brains-are-different/>

5. <https://whatisawoman.com>

6. <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001669.htm>

7.

<https://www.hrla.org.au/not-affirming-transgender-children-is-family-violence-in-victoria>

8.

<https://www.heritage.org/gender/commentary/sex-reassignment-doesnt-work-here-the-evidence>

*Historically, 'gender' and 'sex' are words used to describe and define the anatomical and physiological differences between men and women. Modern terminology uses 'sex' to refer to biological characteristics and 'gender' to refer to the individual's and society's perceptions of sexuality, identity, and the concepts of masculinity and femininity. This article is using 'gender' and 'sex', as defined in the historical sense.

This article is not intended to be offensive or divisive in nature, but rather to open a channel of respectful conversation about a subject that is deeply important to many people. I do not encourage discrimination, hate-speech, or sexism towards anyone, at any time, but, particularly in this instance, towards anyone who does not share this point of view.

**This article also purposely does not address or discuss the

issues surrounding chromosomal abnormalities or intersex conditions.

New Beginnings

God is all about new beginnings. We see the story of humanity starting out in Genesis with a new beginning; light and order being formed out of darkness and chaos.

And we see this theme of light and order echoed in the [new beginning that Christians find in Jesus](#). In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul the Apostle confirms that *“if anyone is in Christ, they have become a new person, a ‘new creation’. The old life is gone, a new life has begun. And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ.”* (NLT)

This is, of course, one of the key aspects of the gospel message of good news.

The Gospel Initiative

In the beginning, God made humans in His image, to be in close, harmonious relationship with Him – His family – and be His perfect image-bearers on this earth. But the first humans, Adam and Eve, sinned and in doing so, caused damage and disruption to the relationship between God and humanity. They were no longer able to be God’s perfect image-bearers, as He had purposed for them, and were now subject to mortality and death, which would separate them from God for eternity.

Much of the Bible’s message is subsequently taken up in telling the story of God’s efforts to address the problem of sin, and its consequent outcome, on our behalf. God began this firstly through a single man [Abraham](#), in whom He promises to bless the whole world (Genesis 12:1-3), then through a chosen

people, the nation of Israel, who were Abraham's descendants (Isaiah 43:10), and then finally, through His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, the greatest of all Abraham's descendants (Revelation 3:14).

No one who came before Jesus was able to live a perfect life. Then Jesus arrived on the scene, a new kind of human, who fulfilled God's law and lived the perfect life as God's ideal image bearer. He willingly gave himself on behalf of the world as [a perfect sacrifice for sin](#). He died on the cross for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2) and was raised to life again three days later in a glorious new beginning (John 20:16-18). He was the first of many whom God promises will be just like him, if they confess Jesus as Lord and saviour (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). By [being baptised](#) "into Jesus", a person becomes a new kind of human – "a new creation"- and a whole new life begins.

This invitation to confess Jesus as Lord, to repent of our sins and to trust in Jesus' sacrifice for our forgiveness, committing to a new life 'in him', following him in all things, is offered to everyone! (2 Peter 3:9). God doesn't want [anyone to be lost](#) – so if you are convicted in your heart of sin and want to be baptised into Jesus, don't hesitate! (If you'd like to speak more about baptism with someone, I'd love to chat! You can get in touch via my contact details [here](#)).

Once a person has made [a commitment](#) to a new life by being baptised, they become part of the family of God. It's a new start, a new beginning, with a whole new life ahead of them.

But, as with new year's resolutions, new beginnings have a way of losing their gloss and the excitement and determination can begin to fade. The Christian life is full of ups and downs and we can lose our passion, become discouraged, or forget the reasons why we even chose this life to begin with.

There are a couple of great examples of new beginnings found

in the Bible that I believe can help us in this Christian life – whether we're just starting out or whether we've been at it for a while.

The Story Of Ruth

The first example is [the story of Ruth](#). You may already be familiar with the background of Ruth's story. She was a widowed Moabite woman, married to an Israelite man who had relocated to Moab ten years earlier. Upon his death, she chose to leave her country of birth and travel back to Israel, with her mother-in-law, both of them with little possessions and a very uncertain future. Her "new beginning", following on from the death of her husband, brother-in-law and father-in-law certainly looked bleak and her circumstances were very reduced. Her position in Israelite society would be expected to be marginal at best – the Moabites had been cursed in earlier times for their opposition and hostility to Israel (Numbers 24:9), and naturalised Moabites were forever excluded from the congregation of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3).

We might initially look at her story and assume she was to be simply an inconsequential outsider to the plan of God, peripheral to His purpose. Her 'new beginning' certainly didn't shine with the kind of hope and 'homecoming' we would expect.

Our lives can sometimes look like Ruth's story and we may struggle to see through the reduced circumstances of our current moment, viewing them as the end rather than the beginning.

But God loves a good plot twist. When we think things are hopeless and we cannot see a way through, He confounds us, perfectly weaving our own personal stories into the greatest story of all. What can seem like the end is really a different kind of beginning and those circumstances that seem hopeless are actually leading us to something beyond our expectations.

If you're in a season that feels like the end rather than the beginning, don't despair and feel that God has given up on your life. He hasn't.

If you're struggling with addictions, with issues in your relationships, with spiritual drift, or financial strain, don't feel that these things signal the end. God is still there and He is still working. You just need to believe that. The only thing that Ruth really had to go on was faith – faith that the end of her story would be worth the wait – and that's all you need too, even if your faith is only the size of a mustard seed!

Believe that God, who is Himself the beginning and the end of all things, is still intimately involved in your story, even if you're struggling to see the next chapter. The prophet Malachi tells us that the names of those whose lives honour God are specially written in His book – and that they are God's treasured possession. God's heart towards them is as a father of his son (Malachi 3:16). If all you take from today is this: remember you are greatly loved and God is for you!

The Story Of Nehemiah

The second example is the story of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. After being in exile for many years, the people of Israel had been allowed to return and had finally begun rebuilding the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. This occurred under the leadership of firstly men called Zerubbabel and Ezra, and finally, a man called Nehemiah, who was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, King of Persia. It was a time of great hope and fearless faith.

Rebuilding took place in three waves, with the building of the walls coming last, in the third wave under Nehemiah's leadership. This endeavour began with singleness of purpose and a spirit of reformation but after only 26 days into the project, people became discouraged and wanted to give up. Only

26 days in! Less than four weeks! They had become overwhelmed by fatigue, frustration, opposition, and fear.

Pressures from without, burnout from within, unreasonable expectations, and fear of failure. Many Christians feel all these emotions and challenges, probably many times, at different stages in their Christian life. As with the people in Nehemiah's time, Christians need to be reminded of their purpose and reinvigorated with a sense of mission!

"If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves" | Proverbs 29:18, MSG

If you're in a season of discouragement and feel like you're drifting or have lost your sense of purpose, this message is for you. Do not give up!

Although our purpose and mission may look different today from theirs back then, it's all part of the great story that God is telling. And we need to remind ourselves of this regularly, to maintain our focus and vision. New beginnings, even ones that start with passion and fearlessness, soon become simply 'the job at hand', and we need to be mindful of all the pressures, emotions, and challenges that come with it. ***It can be easy to lose sight of the fact that we're involved in the greatest, most radical project in all of history!*** What we do *is* important and *does* have value, even if we can't quite see through to the other side of the project right now.

The message from the story of Nehemiah is to make time to regularly step aside from everything that's going on in our lives and remind ourselves of the story that God is telling, and that we're now part of.

Humanity was always created with purpose, to be God's perfect image-bearers and the scope of this is so much greater than you or I, in our current moment. Remind yourself of the importance of the things you do every day, in pursuit of this

purpose and mission, whether small or great. And realise that every contribution you make, in your ministry to God, has eternal significance.

How do you do this? Well, here's some ideas. Take 10 minutes out to read your favourite Bible chapter. Haven't got one? Make it your mission to find one. Have a coffee with a friend. Catch up with a mate after work. Invite another family around for dinner and reconnect over the good news in Jesus. Listen to a Christian podcast. Take a half-hour out for your own personal worship session with all your favourite songs – or make it bigger and include others! Take some quiet moments to think about your personal skills and gifts and consider what you can bring to ministry in your church. Start a new Christian book. Volunteer your time to help those more disadvantaged than yourself. Have a heart-to-heart conversation with God.

How about setting a reminder in your phone, in your diary, calendar, or notebook, and, using the story of Nehemiah as an example, remind yourself at least every 26 days to 'check-in and show up'. Go on, do it right now!

The New Covenant

Finally, I want to remind us of what has made all of this possible – the new covenant that came about through the death of Jesus Christ.

"In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'" | Luke 22:20, NIV

"Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant." | Hebrews 7:22, NIV

"How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through

the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that He has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” – Hebrews 9:14-15 | NIV

God has personally dealt with the human condition of sin through the giving of His only Son. There is forgiveness of sins to all through this new covenant. By his blood and in his name, in his freedom we are free! There is no new beginning as awesome as the new beginning we find in Jesus Christ!

Amen!

This article was first published 13 January 2020

Stop Promoting Gendered Hierarchy!

This article is dedicated to two good men in my life, my father, Ken, and my husband, Luke. My father has always supported me, encouraged me, believed in me, loved me, and has never made me feel lesser. I wish there were more fathers like him. My husband's love and support mean the world to me. He has always treated me as an equal, affirmed my value in our marriage, and rejoiced in my worth as a fellow-worker in the ministry of Christ. I am thankful for them both. "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children." (Proverbs

One of the most damaging teachings that has defined the church throughout history – and still shapes it today – is the belief that God established a hierarchy of men over women at creation. This hierarchy, it's claimed, was either part of God's original plan or a prescriptive punishment on women because of sin.

If this structure was indeed part of God's design, then it supposedly flows from creation into the church – the second, or “new,” creation. Despite appearing outdated in our 21st-century, Western context (though it's far from gone), this so-called “divine order” is still taught and implemented in many churches, shaping how we view the relationship between men and women.

Off To A Bad Start

Many Christians claim to believe men and women are equal in dignity and worth. Yet they often point to one detail in Genesis: that Adam was created first.

Eve, they argue, was created second – and as a helper. This order, and her role, are used as proof of a divinely established hierarchy. The bottom line: men were made first to image God, and women were made second to help them.

It's a little painful to hear Eve described, in vaguely apologetic tones, as an afterthought – created to gather berries, collect firewood, and generally help Adam with other mundane pre-history tasks that would prove to be too much for Adam on his own. (God had hoped one of the animals might do the trick – but alas, no joy.)

More painful still is seeing this belief play out in the church, where women are still prevented – explicitly or

implicitly – from contributing meaningfully, even when clearly gifted. Some hesitate to limit women entirely (the “soft complementarian” view, which I’ll return to shortly), allowing them to use their gifts only under male oversight. Others, the so-called “hard complementarians,” are more direct – permitting little to no participation from women at all.

Firstly, What Is Meant By ‘Hierarchy’?

hierarchy

/'hɪərəʔki/

noun

1. a system where people or things are ranked by importance
2. those in the upper levels of a system who control it
3. a structure where authority is distributed by level

Inherent in hierarchy are ideas of **power**, **importance**, and **authority**. These concepts aren’t necessarily wrong. In organisations, it can be wise to entrust leadership to those with greater experience or training. Some items are more valuable due to rarity or function – gold, for example.

“All that sorting and ranking can be helpful if you’re a business administrator, but if you find yourself arranging all the produce in your fridge according to a hierarchy of colour, size, and expiration date, you might want to consider visiting a therapist.” – Vocabulary.com

But not all hierarchies are just. **Patriarchy** and **colonialism**, for instance, are historical hierarchies whose lingering effects show how damaging disproportionate power structures can be. The question is whether such a hierarchy exists *by design* between men and women – and whether Scripture actually teaches this.

Does God truly assign more power or value to men simply for

being men? Was this the original plan?

Hierarchy + Complementarian || Egalitarian

Within Christianity, two main frameworks attempt to describe the relationship between men and women: **complementarianism** and **egalitarianism**.

- **Complementarianism** teaches that men and women have different but complementary roles, especially in marriage and church leadership.
- **Egalitarianism** teaches that men and women are equally authorised to lead, teach, and serve – both in the home and the church.

Both positions acknowledge key truths. Men and women are different – biologically and psychologically. Some of those differences are shaped by environment; others are hard-wired by design. Scripture affirms the value of both sexes and depicts God's nature through the fusion of masculine and feminine traits (Titus 2:1–5; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Timothy 3–4).

At the same time, men and women are alike – equal in worth, dignity, and relationship to God. We are the same and we are different. Both truths matter deeply in marriage, in the church, and in how we relate to one another.

Complementarian Is Not Complimentary

The trouble is, complementarianism is not truly complementary in practice. In reality, it functions as a male-dominated hierarchy, often softly packaged but unmistakable in outcome.

I say *true* complementarianism because many Christian couples who identify with the term actually function as equals in practice. Many “complementarian” churches operate largely

egalitarian day to day – limiting only senior leadership roles to men.

However, prominent complementarian voices go much further. For some, male authority and female submission aren't limited to marriage or the church – they extend into every area of life. These teachers claim God *intended* a male-dominated structure from the beginning and that it applies universally.

As [\[John\] Piper said](#) in 2012, “*if people accept egalitarianism, sooner or later, they're going to get the Gospel wrong.*” ([The Conversation](#))

Why Is Any Of This Important?

Well, I agree with John Piper in one respect:

Whichever framework we believe is established in Genesis will shape how we read the rest of Scripture – and, by extension, the kind of gospel we teach.

I believe this issue directly influences the way we understand the gospel narrative and how it plays out in the life of the church, our identity in Christ, relationships between men and women, marriage, and how all these dynamics function in healthy, whole, and holy ways.

Genesis provides the framework. It's deeply connected to our theology and our view of God's intention for humanity. And crucially, **before we even reach the New Testament**, our interpretation of Genesis often predetermines how we read later passages – especially those that seem to support gender hierarchy.

In that sense, this is foundational. If we get the beginning wrong, we'll likely misread what comes next.

Setting Some Framework: Why Genesis 1-3 Is Foundational Theology

To argue that hierarchy is built into God's design for humanity – and thus into the church – many jump quickly from Genesis to Paul, usually 1 Corinthians 11:3: *"The head of the woman is the man."*

That verse, along with 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and Ephesians 5:22–24, is often used as proof that a gendered hierarchy is God-ordained. But the reasoning often skips context, bypasses qualifiers, and then reads these interpretations *back* into Genesis, retrofitting hierarchy into the creation narrative.

But 1 Corinthians, for example, is a letter addressing issues of unity, conduct, worship, and resurrection. And 1 Timothy is a letter about healthy church leadership, rooted in mutual submission (see Ephesians 5:21). Chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians, in particular, is one of the most debated and difficult passages in the New Testament – and requires far more care than a proof-text allows.

Yes, the New Testament has things to say about creation, gender, and marriage. But we **must read the New Testament through the lens of Genesis**, not the other way around.

Genesis sets the scene. And as the text makes clear, everything that goes wrong – sin, death, brokenness – happens *after* the fall. The beginning shows us how things were always meant to be.

*"The whole purpose of Genesis 1 is to **set the ideal human community** – a place in which the image of God, or the imitation of God, is actually going to be realised. That, of course, gets distorted in Genesis 3 when humans disobey God. But the first chapter is outlining the ideal. The book of Genesis is therefore **a means to a theological end.**" – Professor C. John Collins (emphasis mine)*

So what existed **before the fall** was God's original design – normative, life-giving, and intended for human flourishing. That design, marred by sin, is restored in Christ and reinstituted through the work of the Spirit in the new creation (the church).

Genesis 1–3 is foundational theology. It tells us who God is, who we are, and what redemption is restoring.

What Genesis Says

1. No Hierarchy In Our Humanity:

The crowning glory of God's creation was humanity, and Eve was the final masterstroke. Created from Adam's side, her status was equal to his – made in the image of God, with the same capacity to reflect His glory (Genesis 1:27).

“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind (adam in Hebrew) in our image, in our likeness...’ So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.” (Genesis 1:26–27)

The Hebrew words used to describe Eve's creation are *ezer kenegdo* – often translated as “helper suitable for him.” But “helper” in English doesn't capture the weight of the word. In the rest of the Bible, *ezer* usually refers to God as a protector or rescuer. The word *kenegdo* conveys the idea of someone equal and corresponding – a partner.

Eve was not beneath Adam, nor above him, but stood beside him as his equal – a woman of valour, worthy of him in every way (Proverbs 31:10).

Yes, Adam was created first, but this order isn't mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and Jesus doesn't refer to it. It comes up in two of Paul's letters, and even there, context matters.

In [this article](#), author Marg Mowczko takes a brief look at these two passages and at the significance that Paul places on man being created first and woman second, which she contends does not support a gendered hierarchy.)

2. No Hierarchy In Our Responsibility:

Genesis 1:28 tells us that God blesses both the man and the woman and gives them the same commission – be fruitful, multiply, and rule over the earth. Neither could do this alone. Together, they're entrusted with caring for creation and stewarding God's world.

This is the first place we see God's authority exercised through His image-bearers – and it's shared authority. The same theme carries into the new creation, where both men and women are commissioned by Jesus to go and make disciples (Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 3:6, 5:19–20).

Men and women are created equal in purpose, capacity, and calling. They were both given the same responsibility from the beginning.

3. No Hierarchy In Our Conjugality:

Adam and Eve weren't just the first humans – they were also the first married couple. Their equality wasn't just about identity, but also about how they related to each other in marriage.

Genesis 2:23–24 gives us a reflection on that relationship:

“The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...’ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

Marriage here is a mutual partnership. Two individuals, equal in worth and capability, choosing to leave their family of origin and form a new family together – united, cooperative, and committed.

Eve was made from Adam's side, not the ground. She shares something unique with him – a bond the animals didn't have. The phrases "*bone of my bone*" and "*flesh of my flesh*" show their connection and equality.

Why did God create Eve this way? Why make Adam first? Why does Adam name her? These are all fair questions – and we should explore them with care. But always through the lens of what Genesis is doing: illustrating God's intention to dwell with His people and restore creation through partnership.

Jesus + The Church

There are beautiful theological overtones in the creation story that point to Jesus and the church. Paul writes in Ephesians that marriage wasn't the model for the church – it was the other way around. The church came first, marriage second.

That might sound odd, since the church didn't exist in Genesis. But when we recognise that Genesis lays the blueprint for all God intended – a partnership between God and His people to reflect His glory – it begins to make sense. The plan was never for hierarchy, but for union and restoration. The church is part of that story.

Adam's deep sleep and Eve's creation from his side foreshadow something greater. Jesus falls into the sleep of death, and from His sacrifice the church is born. Just as Eve was made from Adam's body, the church is formed from Christ – His body, His life, His Spirit. She is of His essence.

The church exists only because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Her identity is shaped by her source. Through His sacrifice, she becomes a living creation. Paul calls the church Christ's bride – the *ekklesia*, called out from the nations, brought into being through His suffering and love.

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all

creation... He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.” – Colossians 1:15–18

God did it this way – creating Adam and Eve in that particular order and manner – to teach us something greater. The Genesis narrative speaks of marriage, yes, but even more, it points ahead to Christ and the church. That’s the theological foundation being laid.

Marriage in Genesis 2 is marked by mutuality – sacrifice, defence, support, commitment, faithfulness. That’s the pattern we see again in Christ’s relationship with the church. And that’s the model God intended all along.

Hierarchy: Things Go South

The first few chapters of Genesis paint a picture of how things were meant to be – ideal human community, kingdom living, perfect partnership. But then it all goes wrong.

Adam and Eve disobey. Sin enters. The world is fractured. God outlines the consequences for each of them.

To Adam, God says: *“Because of what you have done, cursed is the ground because of you. Through painful toil you will eat from it all your days... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground. For dust you are, and to dust you will return.” – Genesis 3:17–19*

To Eve, God says: *“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe... Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” – Genesis 3:16*

These consequences aren’t prescriptive – they’re descriptive. God is not endorsing hierarchy or suffering. He is naming what sin has broken. The ground is cursed, not Adam. Pain and power struggle are now part of human life, but they are not what God

originally intended.

So is this a punishment, or a prophecy? Has God changed His mind about Eve's value? Or is He simply stating the fallout of their disobedience?

When we read Scripture as a whole, we see the story arc pointing not to hierarchy, but to restoration – a return to the “very good” creation we saw in Eden. Revelation speaks of a renewed heaven and earth. And the early church gives us glimpses of that restoration in action.

Through the lens of Genesis, we can see how the early believers wrestled with and overturned cultural norms – racial divides, class systems, gender roles. The new creation brought change. Women ministered, prophesied, planted churches, and led alongside men.

If gendered hierarchy exists, it is not God's ideal. It is a result of the fall – not a design for human flourishing, and certainly not a model for the church.

Where Have All The Good Men Gone?

Some say this issue isn't central to the gospel. I both agree and disagree.

I agree in the sense that it's not a salvation issue. I fully affirm that people on either side of this discussion – complementarian or egalitarian – can be sincere, faithful followers of Jesus.

But I also believe it's more than just a side topic. Where you land on this shapes the kind of gospel you preach, the kind of church you build, how you see your identity in Christ, and how you treat others – especially in marriage and leadership.

What we teach our sons and daughters matters. The framework we pass down has real consequences.

There are many good men who identify as complementarian. They sincerely believe this is what Scripture teaches and try to live it out with gentleness and humility. But in practice, especially in healthy marriages and churches, these men often don't live as strict complementarians. Their relationships function with mutual respect and shared responsibility – they are far more egalitarian in practice.

Then there are other men – still under the complementarian label – who are not good. They are abusive, controlling, entitled, and demeaning. Some behave differently in public than at home. Others use Scripture as a weapon – quoting verses on submission, headship, and authority to justify mistreatment.

As Rachel Held Evans once said, *“Complementarianism doesn't work – in marriages or church leadership – because it's not actually complementarianism. It's patriarchy. And patriarchy doesn't work because God created men and women to reflect His character as equal partners with equal value.”*

One of the greatest challenges Christian women face today is recognising abuse that hides behind spiritual language – submission, obedience, roles, headship. And even when they do recognise it, they often feel powerless to name it, prevent it, or escape it.

Studies show that abuse within the church is far more common than we'd like to admit. A report from the Anglican Church revealed that many clergy remain in denial, despite years of evidence.

New Testament scholar Scot McKnight writes:

“Complementarians teach biblical hierarchicalism and patriarchy, and say men and women are equal – not in a substantive way, but in a spiritual sense. Their 'role' language quickly becomes power language. This hierarchy leads to entitlement and the submission of women. All abusive men

are entitled. They lash out, seek control, and demand submission. All abusive men believe women are inferior.”- Complementarianism and the Abusive Male

Abuse is never justified by Scripture. No matter how carefully someone tries to twist the text, the message of Jesus doesn't support it. As McKnight says: *“Males feeling entitled is a cultural product – and complementarianism creates a culture that feeds it. To change the outcome, we have to change the culture. And we have to change the men.”*

In Conclusion

The gospel is the story that runs through the whole Bible. It's not just a message about personal salvation from sin, but about what God has always intended for creation. It begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation – telling the story of God's glory, humanity's calling to reflect it, the fall, redemption through Jesus, and the restoration of all things.

From the beginning, God's design for humanity was never built on gendered hierarchy. It was built on mutuality – cooperation, commitment, trust, and partnership. Men and women, different but equal, both reflecting God's image.

That intention was damaged by sin, but it's restored in Christ. The new creation – the church – is called to model that restoration. We're meant to reflect God's original design, not reinforce the brokenness of the fall.

Genesis 1 and 2 should shape how we read the rest of Scripture. If we get the beginning right, we'll tell a gospel story that's full of life, hope, and freedom.

I don't believe gendered hierarchy fits the biblical gospel. I don't believe it reflects God's intention, or what Scripture teaches about men and women – not in creation, not in the church, and not in Christ.

And more than that, I believe the power imbalance created by complementarian structures often leads to real harm. Cultures that promote male authority over female participation – even subtly – create space where abuse can grow unchecked. That harms individuals, distorts the church, and obscures the beauty of the gospel.

Stop promoting gendered hierarchy. Stop calling it God's design.

It's time for the church to rediscover what it truly means to live as the body of Christ – each part honoured, each voice heard. The world is watching. Let's not reflect hierarchy. Let's reflect Him.

There is so much more to read, watch, or listen to on this topic. If you want to explore further, I recommend: *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women* – Lucy Peppiatt, *Gender Roles and the People of God* – Alice Matthews, *The Blue Parakeet* – Scot McKnight, *Man and Woman: One in Christ* – Philip B. Payne, *Pagan Christianity and Reimagining Church* – Frank Viola, and *The Kingdom Roots* podcast by Scot McKnight

Judging Or Discerning

It seems to me that it has become increasingly difficult to speak into many issues or situations that the church faces today; not because the Bible is silent, not because the church doesn't have or hasn't held a historical position on a matter, and not because we, as Christians, don't know *what we ought to be doing*. Rather, we are feeling pressed into silence, in many instances, simply on the basis of one little verse found at the beginning of Matthew 7; "*Judge not, that you be not*

judged".

This verse, plucked from Matthew's gospel, thrown around *ad voluntatem* by Christians and non-Christians alike, and often applied wildly out of context, is causing widespread paralysis for many Christians and indeed the church, preventing us from being able to affirm and proclaim the reality that Christian life calls us to.

Afraid of being labeled 'judgy', 'divisive', or 'self-righteous', we're clamming up about things we really should be vocal about, choosing silence over sincerity. We're focused on preaching love and acceptance (both good things, by the way), but we're failing to qualify how and what that looks like in a Christian context.

Not only does there seem to be a growing degree of confusion about the difference between '*judging*', particularly in the context of Matthew 7, and '*discerning*' for the individual Christian, there also seems to be some confusion about the church's responsibility and role in all this.

Perhaps embarrassed by our failures and our unchristian treatment of both believers and unbelievers in the past, we're now collectively overcompensating by saying nothing at all, reducing the church's critical witness of the name of Jesus, in many instances, to a 'cloud with no rain'.

Many times, the church actually looks no different on the inside to the way people are living on the outside, as if coming to Christ *changed nothing at all*.

The Christian Ideal

Christians are called to a life of holiness, of renewal and transformation; becoming part of the new creation found in Christ. Christians are those who have accepted the call out of the dominion of darkness, with all its pointless chaos and unfruitful works of darkness, into kingdom life; and the

acknowledgment that living God's way, according to His plan and purposes for humanity, is good for us and glorifying to Him.

"You can't read the New Testament without seeing the call to holiness in the Christian life. But that holiness is a work of God's grace as the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to live a life pleasing to God. New Testament holiness is a joyous privilege not a heavy burden and duty. New Testament holiness enhances life, it never diminishes it." | Lance Ralston

God's way is the benchmark for Christian living, the way we should aspire to, the truth we ought to affirm. It's referred to often in scripture as *walking in the light, walking with God, or walking in the way* and I talk more about this in my article '[Walking With God](#)'.

The caveat to this is, of course, that we are *not there yet*. The Christian life is a journey, not an instant transformation. *We have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. Sanctification*, the '*being saved*' part, means we are all a constant work in progress, being renewed and conformed daily into the image of Christ.

What this means, in real terms, is that we will still mess up, sometimes in big ways. These lapses in our Christian walk are stumbles off the path leading us home, deviations from the good way that God has intended for us to live.

While these failures can often be hard to move past, it's important to recognise that they don't need to define us, at least not in a negative way.

We are not that terrible decision we made five years ago, five months ago, or five days ago. We are more than simply the sum of our mistakes. I talk more about this in my article '[Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow](#)'.

The joy of Christian life is that sin no longer has the same hold over us as before. We belong to Jesus and his blood cleanses us from all sin. In him, we can find forgiveness and find it many times over.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul the Apostle wants us to comprehend the reality that we are no longer in this battle on our own. He says, *"May you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully."* (Ephesians 3:18, NLT). God is with us in this fight, empowering us daily through His Spirit and washing us clean in the blood of the lamb.

What may seem impossible to us is made possible by the love of Christ.

Objective Truth

It feels difficult to write this article without coming off as intolerant, self-righteous, or bigoted. Any time one states a definite opinion on a matter as if that position is the right one, one risks sounding dogmatic and judgmental and I acknowledge it may be no different in this case.

I think our post-modern society has further exaggerated this reality. Our 21st-century culture posits the idea that truth is not absolute and universal (as was once accepted), but rather that our truth *is* truth, even though that truth may be merely subjective and based on or influenced by our own personal feelings, tastes, or opinions.

Conversely, our neighbour's truth, based on or influenced by their personal feelings, tastes, or opinions is also just as true, irrespective of the reality that our two truths may be diametrically opposed to one another.

It's often no longer acceptable to hold to and defend certain

views as anything more than being subjectively true, particularly in religious or moral matters.

The Bible cuts through this subjective narrative and states that truth is objective, rooted in the person and character of God Himself. Whatever we hold to be true to the Christian faith has its roots in God (or should, at least), who has been revealed to us in His Word, and which is sufficient to inform our Christian way of life and ethics.

“Every scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice.” (2 Timothy 3:16, DR). This is what is meant by *sola scriptura* – that the Bible is the sole infallible source of authority for Christian faith and practice.

As Christians, we believe that biblical truth is not *our* truth and therefore merely subjective, it is God’s truth. We hold to the reality that God’s truth was demonstrated in Jesus for all humanity to see; and we acknowledge his supremacy and authority over our lives. In doing so we affirm that living God’s way is right and true and good.

The question is, what do we do, individually and collectively, when Christian life doesn’t look as it should, where there is disregard or apathy toward living God’s way, or where it seems that sin is being trivialised, tolerated, or overlooked?

What does the gospel of Matthew mean when it says ‘judge not’? Is an individual’s responsibility different from that of the collective body, the church? Is it being too judgey to talk about sin?

And how does the church protect the name of Jesus, displaying the glory of God to the nations, in practice?

Judging Or Discerning?

Discerning

I want to make the distinction between discerning and proclaiming what *God's way* is, and judging someone's eternal reality.

Long ago, God intended to use the church as an example of His incredible wealth and grace towards humanity and His intention and plan to bring everything together under Christ, for His own glory. She is imperfect and yet magnificent because the living God is the source of her existence and empowerment. As individuals and collectively, as the church, it is our mandate to preach God's good news to the world and to live as if we believe it to be true.

Paul the Apostle puts it this way: *"Live no longer as the Gentiles do...for they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against Him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasures and eagerly practice every kind of impurity...Put on your new nature, created to be like God-truly righteous and holy."* (Ephesians 4:17-24, NLT)

He goes on to give several examples of what *'being like God looks like'*: no longer lying, no longer using foul language, no longer stealing, no longer engaging in sexual immorality, or being selfish or greedy (amongst other things). He states, *'with the Lord's authority'* (v17), that those things are not of God, are not life-giving, and ought not to be pursued by a person professing to be a Christian.

Discerning God's way of living (*'carefully determining what pleases the Lord'* (Ephesians 5:10)), which is intended to be lifegiving and good for humanity, is a vitally important element of our Christian discipleship, and, collectively, as a witness to the watching world.

Moral truth exists, vested in the person and character of God Himself, and Christians ought to be preaching and pursuing it

with all their hearts, both individually and collectively. To do otherwise is to reject the authority and supremacy of God over our lives.

Judging

Yet, we don't get it right a lot of the time. Sin no longer has the same hold over us as before, but we still give it plenty of opportunities to gain a foothold in our life.

And too often, we, as individuals, look sideways at our Christian family and privately (or publicly) make bold pronouncements about their *eternal salvation* based on past failures or current struggles. We judge them harshly and with finality in the secret recesses of our hearts, by standards that we would buckle under ourselves.

We say to ourselves, 'they *may* have found forgiveness with God (though we highly doubt it) but they will never find forgiveness with us or in our church, no matter their repentant heart or confession of failure'.

Matthew warns us about taking such a harsh position of judgment against our Christian brothers and sisters, for with the same inflexible judgment we exact we risk being judged ourselves. If we truly believe and accept the grace God has shown to us, this same grace needed to be demonstrated by a life oriented towards forgiveness to others. I talk more about the implementation of grace in my article '[The White Flag Of Grace](#)' and the necessity of forgiveness in my article '[Forgiveness Is A Tough Gig](#)'.

We need to hold in careful tension the critical reality of the eternal consequences of not living God's way, of choosing a way that is not life-giving, resolutely naming sin and the need for repentance, alongside the reality that Christians still mess up and that forgiveness is always possible with God and should be practiced between individuals and within the church.

(In saying that, there are often consequences that flow from our actions which may negatively impact our life moving forward, particularly in relation to our ministry or relationships in the church. These consequences are often complex, requiring wise pastoral care and support to work through.)

We are not to judge one another's *eternal salvation* based on past or present struggles but neither are we to overlook our calling to holiness and the orienting of our lives toward God.

What Is The Church's Responsibility?

The Apostle Paul dealt with some real doozy situations in his letters. Take, for example, the situation in the church in Corinth; a case of sexual immorality not even heard of among 'pagans' (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). A believer in the church was boldly and proudly 'living in sin' with his stepmother, or, as some translations have it, his father's wife.

Paul is horrified at such a situation and tells the church that, collectively, they ought to be in mourning in sorrow and shame. Such things ought not to be even named among the people of God, let alone practiced (Ephesians 5:3).

The letter to the Corinthians is a very confronting letter, in many respects. Paul leaves no room for doubt as to what he thinks about the situation and what the church must do. He (shockingly) tells them that they must remove the man from their fellowship. *"You must call a meeting of the church. I will be present with you in spirit, and so will the power of our Lord Jesus. Then you must throw this man out and hand him over to Satan so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns."*

He continues, *"In my other letter, I told you not to have anything to do with immoral people. But **I wasn't talking about the people of this world.** You would have to leave this world*

to get away from everyone who is immoral or greedy or who cheats or worships idols. I was talking about **your own people** who are immoral or greedy or worship idols or curse others or get drunk or cheat. **Don't even eat with them!** Why should I judge outsiders? **Aren't we supposed to judge only church members?** God judges everyone else. The Scriptures say, "Chase away any of your own people who are evil." (1 Corinthians 5:4-9)

It's very clear, the church is not to sit in judgment of the world, that's God's prerogative. But we are to collectively judge the conduct and witness of the church to which we belong (essentially, the whole body is responsible for judging the whole body) and leave no space for evil to grow, unchecked. For those Christians who are unrepentant and proudly indulging in sin, the church isn't even to eat with such people (1 Corinthians 5:11).

(It's important to note here that one church is not at liberty to sit in judgment of another. A local church has oversight over its own members, not over another church. The authority to remove a lampstand of Jesus or determine whether a lampstand should be removed from its place of influence belongs to the King alone (Revelation 2:5). No person or group should dare presume such authority over Jesus' church and its local expressions.)

Yet the church can sometimes be too hasty in pronouncing judgment. Paul clearly differentiates in other places in scripture between those Christians who are *indulging in sin* (1 Corinthians 5:9) and those who find themselves *caught in transgression* (Galatians 6:1). His pastoral advice regarding the response to each is different, despite both being issues of 'sin'. An important element of church discipline is to sensitively and accurately establish the nature of a situation, before deciding how the church ought to proceed.

Restoring

First and foremost, we are ambassadors of the great ministry of reconciliation; of pointing to the work of Christ, and our great need for forgiveness and reconciliation to God.

We are part of God's great mission of restoration and redemption and this reality should be at the forefront of any response to sin in the church.

The church has a responsibility to make sure that we are accurately representing Jesus to the world; preaching the necessary call to holiness of the Christian life whilst acknowledging we are not yet made perfect and we still mess up.

We ought to seek first, on every occasion and at every opportunity, to restore a person who has *wandered away from truth*. We pray for them and with them, we remind them of the realities of the gospel, of the forgiveness found in Jesus, and of the healing warmth of God's light.

We love them, we accept their struggle with sin as something common to us all, and yet we encourage them not to shrink back from Christ in shame but rather to turn to him anew in humble confession and repentance.

One of the most powerful and eternally significant things a church can do is to rescue one who has fallen into sin. *"My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back, you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back from wandering will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins."* (James 5:19-20)

Discipleship within the local church means that each member acknowledges they are part of the body, a body that collectively has the authority to declare who belongs to Jesus and the responsibility of teaching, caring for, correcting,

loving, and disciplining its members.

The church, therefore, *affirms a person's profession of faith in Jesus and gives oversight to that individual's discipleship*, and, in turn, the individual *submits his or her discipleship to the care and oversight of the church and commits themselves in service to the building up of the church*. It's a symbiotic-esque relationship referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 as '*one another-ing*'.

Protecting

Unfortunately, as the case in the church at Corinth demonstrates, there will be some who are completely unrepentant, who '*make a practice of sinning*' (1 John 5:18), and who reject the pursuit of holiness that Christians are called to. These people "*are ungodly men and women, saying that God's marvellous grace allows us to live immoral lives. The condemnation of such people was recorded long ago, for they deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*" (Jude 1:4)

An individual Christian is not responsible for overseeing another Christian's membership in the body of Christ, but the church, made up of all its members is. It's how the church protects the name of Jesus.

"Church discipline, then, is fundamentally about love. The Lord disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:6). The same is true for his church. Love in the Bible is holy. It makes demands. It yields obedience. It doesn't delight in evil but rejoices in the truth." (1 Corinthians 13:6) | Jonathan Leeman

"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. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good – crucified. 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

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

***“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*.

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Forgiveness Is A Tough Gig

“He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass.” | George Herbert

They say, ‘write about what you know’. Well, here’s what I know: forgiveness is hard.

Like, really hard.

Forgiveness coexists in the same universe as injustice, loss, and the pain of deep physical, emotional or spiritual wounds. The need for forgiveness only exists because of the destructive impact sin has in our world and all the terrible ways in which humans hurt one another. The collective weight of this sin, against one another and, ultimately, against God, was borne by our saviour, in whose righteousness our pardon was secured.

Jesus tells a parable, recounted for us in chapter 18 of Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 18:21-35), of an unforgiving steward who, despite being forgiven a large debt by his king, refuses to forgive a debt he was owed by a fellow servant. The

ungrateful steward is then thrown into prison until he was able to repay the original debt he owed in full to the king. Jesus concludes the telling by clearly giving the meaning to his listeners, *"this is how my Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

These words are both sobering and challenging. It seems that the recognition of our own forgiveness, in the light of a debt simply too great to repay, is intended to convict us towards demonstrating a similar attitude of grace and forgiveness to one another.

This idea is reinforced further in the prayer of our Lord, in which he teaches his disciples to pray in this manner, *"...forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors"* (Matthew 6:9-13).

It seems clear. Our own forgiveness is directly connected to our forgiveness of others, some of whom will deeply wound us and deal unjustly with us.

But *how* do we forgive? Forgiveness is hard. Like, really hard.

Forgiveness Is A Boat

We struggle with the mechanics of forgiveness. To forgive feels like we're saying what happened to us doesn't matter. That what happened to us was insignificant and not worth acknowledgment.

We hold onto the pain and injustice and betrayal because we're afraid that if we let it go, it will somehow be forgotten. We worry we'll still feel the pain of the phantom limb but be unable to recall the cause of the amputation. Perhaps we fear we'll never be the same person again, and so we hold onto the damaged and broken version of ourselves that is, at least, some reminder of who we used to be.

But there's not a single hair on our heads that hasn't been counted by our God, not a single tear that's fallen that He hasn't seen and which has grieved His heart. We have a God who breathed life out of chaos, who knew the way out of a darkened tomb, a God who can mend every broken piece of us.

He knows us intimately and we need to believe that He is a God of mercy and justice, He is sovereign over all, and that He loves us with all the love of a good, good Father. Our life, with all its joy and pain, is carefully held within His hands.

Some time ago, a beautiful Christian friend counselled me, *"forgiveness is a boat and you have to decide whether you want to get on."* (Thank you, Carolyn, for your wisdom and insight.)

I have thought a lot about this since then; about the implications of choosing not to get on that boat, and, in contrast, of the peace that would surely come from embarking and letting forgiveness carry me forward.

I was forced to acknowledge that if I truly believed and had accepted the grace of God shown to me, this same grace needed to be demonstrated by a life oriented towards forgiveness to others.

I began to understand that forgiveness of another person wasn't contingent on them demonstrating contrition, extending an apology, or even acknowledging the offense. In fact, forgiveness wasn't really even about them, it was about me.

I had to accept that choosing to forgive meant that the wrong against me would quite possibly never be named or that I might never receive justice in this life. Choosing to forgive didn't mean that my reputation would be restored to me, or that I wouldn't continue to carry the scars of that grievous wound for the rest of my life.

But I also began to understand that even though injustice might still remain, this would be dealt with by God, in His

way and in His good time. While forgiveness wouldn't necessarily undo the pain, or restore what had been lost, God has promised that one day all tears will be wiped away and, again, in His good time and in His perfect way, this too He will accomplish.

And I was reminded, too, of the reality that in holding up to God the list of all my grievances, there was very likely another list being held up by someone else with my name on it. I hope to receive abundant mercy and grace for my own faults; undeserved favour which is intrinsically linked to the mercy and grace I show to others.

Forgiveness Is A Process

Forgiveness is a tough gig. It's important to acknowledge this reality. In acknowledging this for myself, I began to realise that I would perhaps need to wrestle many times with forgiving someone and that forgiveness is a process, not a one-time decision. I would need to ask for help, *supernatural help*, to forgive, and to keep forgiving.

The disciple Peter had asked Jesus about the process of forgiveness, recognising that one would possibly need to offer forgiveness more than once. Peter suggested that up to seven times would perhaps be a generous concession towards the one who had sinned against him (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus's reply was no doubt shocking and unexpected, "*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.*"

There is no limit to forgiveness, it must be practiced each and every time the occasion arises.

Does Forgiveness Mean Reconciliation?

Forgiveness is choosing to relinquish our hold on the grievance and pass it over to God. It is renouncing our responsibility to exact justice and acknowledging that there

is only one truly righteous judge in all the earth. And it is trusting that God truly loves us and cares about us and will accomplish His good purpose in us, including mending our brokenness and drying our tears.

For every Christian, reconciliation should be the ultimate hope. We are, after all, ambassadors of the great ministry of reconciliation between God and humanity, implicit in which is the forgiveness secured in Jesus.

But forgiveness doesn't always result in reconciliation (although true reconciliation must always include forgiveness).

Forgiveness is given to another, irrespective of whether the other party acknowledges an offense has been committed. Forgiveness requires nothing from the person we're forgiving but requires everything from ourselves. Yet, *"to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was us"* (Lewis B Smedes). Forgiveness is the gift we give ourselves.

Forgiveness, however, doesn't require having or maintaining any relationship. Rather, this is what the process of reconciliation seeks to restore; a good relationship between two parties.

The process of reconciliation will acknowledge the brokenness of the relationship and that there is a desire by both parties to repair and restore it. It will require repentance, truth, the rebuilding of trust, and, ultimately, the grace of God to accomplish it.

There is also the reality that some offenses, while forgiven, permanently fracture the possibility of any relationship and make reconciliation impossible.

"There are powerful stories of reconciliation. This is because of the power of God to restore broken things. He can take broken relationships and mend them back together. He is

capable of healing the deepest of wounds. Thus, we shouldn't automatically conclude that God isn't interested in reconciliation. It delights God to see enemies reconciled and for peace to reign in relationships. Consider that God reconciled us to Himself through the blood of Christ. He forgave us of our sins, but He also restored us to relationship with Himself. That reconciliation required our repentance. Repentance is the key to any hopes for reconciliation in our estranged relationships today." | Jesus Ministry Today

Forgiveness Is Unfair

Choosing to forgive, in the face of denial of blame or continued hostility, is an unnatural act that defies every primal instinct. Yet this is what lies at the heart of the gospel of grace.

Grace teaches that God loves because of who God is, not because of who we are. Therefore, we choose to show that same attitude of grace in our behaviour to others. Showing grace isn't because we *should* forgive, it's because we're reminded that we *have* been forgiven.

We're called to be like God, to resemble the forgiving Father and it's this very quality, "*the peculiar, the extraordinary, the unusual*" that sets a Christian apart from others (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

Yet forgiving is brutal and messy.

"I asked a few people if they'd ever forgiven anyone and what it felt like. They gave me answers so pious I knew they'd never done it. Forgiveness is a brutal, mathematical transaction done with fully engaged faculties. It's my pain instead of yours. I eat the debt. I absorb the misery I wanted to dish out on you, and you go scot-free." | Andree seu Peterson

Philip Yancey, in his best-selling book, 'What's So Amazing About Grace', has this to say about forgiveness: "Most ethicists would agree with the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who argued that a person should be forgiven only if he deserves it. But the very word *forgive* contains the word "give" (just as the word *pardon* contains *donum*, or *gift*). Like grace, forgiveness has about it the maddening quality of being undeserved, unmerited, unfair."

As William S. Stoddard comments, "*forgiving the unforgivable is hard. So was the cross: hard words, hard wood, hard nails.*"

The point is this, forgiving is hard, messy, painful, and ultimately *unfair* work. It requires us to take the initiative, to break the cycle of ungrace, and to defy the natural law of retribution and fairness. It requires us to lay aside our desire for justice and recompense and to absorb the pain and darkness that sin has rendered into ourselves.

Yet forgiveness is the bridge over which we must all pass. Forgiveness is the boat we must all choose to get on.

Forgiveness, not justice, is what will set us free, loosen the grip of resentment, and crush the thorny shoot of bitterness looking to take root in our hearts.

Henri Has The Last Word

"Henri Nouwen, who defines forgiveness as "*love practiced among people who love poorly*," describes the process at work: "I have often said, "I forgive you," but even as I said these words my heart remained angry or resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that tells me I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return – if only the praise for being so forgiving!

But God's forgiveness is unconditional, it comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself, a heart that is

completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged and that wants to stay in control and put a few conditions between me and the one whom I am asked to forgive.

One day I discovered this admonition from the apostle Paul tucked in among many other admonitions in Romans 12. *Hate evil, be joyful, live in harmony, do not be conceited* – the list goes on and on. Then appears this verse, “*Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to repay,’ says the Lord.*”

At last, I understood: in the final analysis, *forgiveness is an act of faith*. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God’s hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy.

When Joseph finally came to the place of forgiving his brothers, the hurt did not disappear, but the burden of being their judge fell away. Though wrong does not disappear when I forgive, it loses its grip on me and is taken over by God, who knows what to do with it. Such a decision involves risk, of course: the risk that God may not deal with the person as I would want. (The prophet Jonah, for instance, resented God for being more merciful than the Ninevites deserved.)

I never find forgiveness easy, and rarely do I find it completely satisfying. Nagging injustices remain, and the wounds still cause pain. I have to approach God again and again, yielding to Him the residue of what I thought I had committed to Him long ago. I do so because the Gospels make

clear the connection: God forgives my debts as I forgive my debtors. The reverse is also true: Only by living in the stream of God's grace will I find the strength to respond with grace towards others." | Excerpt from 'What's So Amazing About Grace' by Philip Yancey, pages 92-93

*"Now I'm standing in confidence
With the strength of your faithfulness
And I'm not who I was before
No, I don't have to fear anymore*

*So I'm thankful for the scars
'Cause without them I wouldn't know your heart
And I know they'll always tell of who you are
So forever I am thankful for the scars"*

Scars | I Am They

Scars | I Am They

If you haven't managed to read 'What's So Amazing About Grace' by Philip Yancey, I highly recommend you get your hands on a copy. Here's a link to one of my favourite online stockists: <https://www.bookdepository.com/Whats-So-Amazing-About-Grace-Philip-Yancey/9780310245650> or, if you prefer to shop in-store, your local Koorong store is more than likely to have it in stock.

The above lyrics are taken from a beautiful worship song, 'Scars', by I Am They and is particularly relevant to the themes addressed in this article. You can listen to it here: <https://open.spotify.com/track/72B10mo2kmEst4YK08v0B6?si=eaca97476fa04af1>

Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

I don't know about you but sometimes I feel bad for not *knowing then what I know now*.

Bad, as in, I wish I'd *known better*, I wish I had *known more*, I wish I had *known sooner* or *responded better* or *chosen differently*.

But here's the thing. We only wish this *because* of what we know now. Which is to say, in all the time that's passed from *then* until *now*, we've learned something, we've grown, we've become more equipped, less reactive, we can make better choices *only because* of what we've experienced in the past, both good and bad.

This is the value of life experience, it's what we often call the beauty of hindsight; those lessons from life that can be seen today *only because* they've been learned from what has been experienced in the past. In order to gain the wisdom needed for our tomorrow, we had to learn from experiences, both positive and negative, in our yesterday.

If I'm Honest...

There are things in my life that I look back on and still blush over. There are things said and unsaid in my past that still cause me regret when I recall them today. There's definitely a sense, at times, that if only I could go back and do *that thing* over, things would be different.

But do you know what? Things probably wouldn't be any different. Because that was *then* and *this is now*. I'm not the same person I was yesterday or the day before that. Life is changing me.

I may face a similar situation in the future and have learned enough from the past in order to do things differently. I perhaps wouldn't make the same choices or mistakes today as I did then, but only because those choices in the past *taught me differently* and *made me different*.

But I can't change the past, no matter how much I wish I could. I can't take today's insights into yesterday's mistakes, I can only use today's insights to grow tomorrow's wisdom.

And perhaps I shouldn't wish to change the past. Maybe I should be learning to make peace with it. Maybe I should be more thankful for yesterday's mistakes, as strange as that seems, because of the valuable lessons I learned, not just about life but also about myself.

We often look back on our past, our mistakes, or our decisions and hate ourselves for them. And while I'm not for a second suggesting we glory in sin or our mistakes (Romans 6:2), these things can nevertheless be seen from a different perspective – as powerful lessons from life – and what we learn from them can be used for good in the future. We can take the pain or regret or shame that spills over from the past and use it to empower us to do better today, to choose more wisely, and love more deeply.

We do not need to be only the sum of all our mistakes or regrets, we can be so much more than that.

Cancel Culture < Grace

I've been thinking a lot about cancel culture and how it's the antithesis of grace. The current climate seems so quick to

cancel others, on account of one mistake, one indiscretion, one ill-formed thought spoken out loud, one ugly sentence spoken out of the season. Yes, those things are disappointing when they happen, and sin is still sin. We ought not to shy away from calling out sin and calling each other to repentance, reparation, and renewal.

But in others, and, specifically in the light of this article, in ourselves, our mistakes only become who we are when we embrace and celebrate them. When we show remorse, or regret, when we apologise and repent, and commit to doing better in the future, our mistakes become valuable building blocks to a better version of ourselves. Grace towards ourselves or others becomes the fertile ground for spiritual renovation and renewal. It is in our weakness that God's power is perfected (2 Corinthians 12:9).

We cannot condemn sin or mistakes or the things in our past that we're ashamed of without also offering ourselves the much-needed balm of grace that dispenses kindness, favour, advocacy, and forgiveness. We hold both in tension; the disappointment of our (or life's) failures with thankfulness for what we learned from these experiences; the grief of sin that stains alongside the healing embrace of grace that cleanses.

I can recall some unthoughtful words I once spoke about someone, a criticism of sorts I suppose. I think about these words often, actually, and still deeply regret speaking them. While I can give all sorts of reasons as to why I said them and argue that *my* underlying feelings were justified, I still wish I hadn't said them. They weren't particularly kind or graceful and, mostly, I can look back now and see that, in that moment, I was a terrible witness for Christ. The way I spoke and acted was so detrimental as an example of discipleship to others and was deeply hurtful to another person.

Although I felt I was on the receiving end of critical words, instead of taking a beat, thinking the situation through, and responding with grace, I simply responded in kind. There were a million different ways I could have probably responded but the reality is, at that moment, I didn't. Of course I wish I could do it differently now *but I can't*. I can only apologise (and I have done so), learn from this mistake, and use it as wisdom for tomorrow.

I learned four valuable lessons from that experience, which I have endeavoured to implement today.

Words Matter

Words matter, even when said in the heat of the moment or when we believe our feelings are justified. There's a way to speak truth but do so in love, in a way that isn't harmful or wounding. Just because we're upset, or feel maligned, criticised, or challenged doesn't mean that the way we speak doesn't matter.

I think we have all been taught to avoid having difficult conversations as a way of securing some kind of false peace. What we really should have been taught is how to have civil conversations with those very different from us, in a way that communicates our feelings or opinions well, without wounding the other.

I learned that words matter. And that I needed to guard my heart for it's out of the heart that the mouth speaks (Proverbs 4:23, Luke 6:45).

The second thing I learned flowed from this:

I Belong To Jesus

I was painfully unaware of just how important other people's opinions and validation were to me. I had long considered myself to be a bit of an island, quite secure in my own company, likably sociable when necessary, and generally

unaffected by others' criticisms. But this piece of stray criticism, directed at me in a time of deep upheaval in my personal life, struck like a barb in my soul. I learned at that moment just how affected I actually was by what other people thought of me and how little security I was actually placing in Jesus's opinion of me. It came as a shock and it really rattled me.

I had to seriously rethink where I was getting my validation from. I had to reevaluate what was guarding my heart. Was my validation placed in Jesus, the rock of the ages, or did I have it resting on the unpredictable, shifting sands of popular opinion? Was I living in the freedom of Christ or stifling under the suffocating need to please people?

I needed to get more intimate with Jesus and this was an invaluable lesson to learn.

There Are Consequences

Every choice, every decision, and every failure has consequences. Sometimes we or others do or say things that have irrevocable consequences in our life. And sometimes those consequences are painful and hard to live with. Other times, those consequences prove to be God moments, times when our focus was redirected or the direction of our life shifted, for good. Sometimes, they're both.

Sometimes that regretful indiscretion spurs a greater commitment to faithfulness in our relationship. Sometimes that reduced income refocuses us on what we really need in life. Sometimes that failed leader redirects our gaze towards the One we should really be following. Sometimes that disappointing verbal exchange convicts us to do better with our words. Sometimes that closed-door signals a new beginning.

And in every choice, in every consequence, Jesus is with us in it all. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, he is the same. He's been with us in our worst moments – yesterday's regrets, he's with

us in our current circumstances of fear, doubt, growth, and joy – today’s insights, and he’ll be with us in our greatest triumphs – tomorrow’s wisdom.

Don’t Beat Yourself Up About The Past

Choices have consequences and sometimes those consequences are negative, with reverberations that echo down through our and others’ lives. You only need to look at the life of King David to realise that one poor decision can cause ripples of pain and fracture in individuals and families for generations. Where we can, we ought to make reparation and we should, rightly, regret our part in consequences that cause pain or injury to others.

But I think we also need to draw a line in the sand. We need to learn to forgive ourselves, to afford ourselves the same kind of grace that God so willingly offers to those who repent. We are not that terrible decision we made five years ago, five months ago, or five days ago. We don’t have to stay in that place or be that person.

Jesus’ sin-covering sacrifice means that we get to start each day new, means that we are washed clean and made perfect in his righteousness and that, although we are weak and often stumble, God is committed to completing His good work in us (Philippians 1:6). Jesus died for us, not because we weren’t at fault but precisely because we were, sinners completely unable to save ourselves. God is not surprised by our weakness or our failure; it was part of the equation in the sending of His Son.

“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that

are unseen are eternal.” | 2 Corinthians 4:16, ESV

We are like clay jars in which this treasure is stored. The real power comes from God and not from us. We often suffer, but we are never crushed. Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up. In times of trouble, God is with us, and when we are knocked down, we get up again. We face death every day because of Jesus. Our bodies show what his death was like, so his life can also be seen in us. This means that death is working in us, but life is working in you.” | 2 Corinthians 4:7-8 CEB

John Writes A Letter

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

“God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day – our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life – fear of death, fear of judgment – is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love – love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first. If anyone boasts, “I love God,” and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.” – 1 John 4:17-21, MSG

Authentic Christianity

Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.

John's words on this subject are blunt and straight to the point. *"You cannot be a Christian and hate other people"*. It's incompatible and hypocritical. Not only that, it's a blatant subversion of everything that is intrinsically bound up in a Christian's salvation by God's grace. We love God, because He **first** loved us and, despite our complete unworthiness, He sent His son to die for us. There is no greater love than a man dying for his friends, and there could be no greater demonstration of what love looks like, to die, even for those who were your enemies.

"What marvellous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it – we're called children of God!" – 1 John 3:1, MSG

Of all the people on this earth, it would seem obvious that Christians would understand the implications of this. We are the recipients of a love so deep and vast and completely undeserving, it should be impossible for us to not respond to this in our relationships with others. We haven't received from God what we should have. And what we shouldn't have received, we have. Grace, freely given, has been demonstrated by a love lavished on us in abundance. This recognition of grace should empower and transform us to demonstrate the same kind of love in all our relationships, and especially to our Christian family.

Grace is, perhaps, the easiest concept to speak about in the enthusiastic language of a born-again believer ([John 3:1-21](#)) but, in reality, the hardest virtue to assimilate into our Christian lives. Legalism, not grace, is one of the first lessons we learn in life; that all things come with a price and that nothing is given for free. We can tend to persist in this mentality after our conversion, even on an unconscious

level, viewing God and each other in this light.

“The one who won’t practice righteous ways isn’t from God, neither is the one who won’t love a brother or sister.” – 1 John 3:10, MSG

Are We Really Born Again?

There’s a serious crisis amongst Christians. It seems we can talk a lot about love, but we’re actually woefully inadequate at demonstrating it. Instead of showing real, authentic love, demonstrated in graceful, multi-faceted ways, we see the opposite in many of our Christian communities. We’re often religiously wealthy but morally bankrupt; devoid of any real expression of a grace-led life. We say we’re born again but are we really? Has grace really touched our hearts?

Jesus told a story to illustrate what a life untransformed by grace looks like – that of the *ungrateful* servant ([Matthew 18: 21-35](#)). Despite having been forgiven a massive debt of some several million dollars by his master, the servant proceeded to demand repayment of a debt owed to him by a fellow servant, of only a few dollars. When the fellow servant was unable to immediately repay, he had him thrown into prison, ‘until he could repay the debt’ – which would have been practically impossible from his prison cell. The master soon heard of the ungrateful servant’s behaviour and the conclusion of the tale is sobering:

“Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” [Matthew 18:32-35, ESV](#)

The parable was designed to impress upon the listeners the importance of their attitude towards each other in response to the forgiveness they had received from God. In fact, there is a direct connection between our professed love for God and our love for our 'fellow servants'. John puts it this way:

"Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen." [1 John 4:20, NIV](#)

What Does Real Love Look Like?

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." – 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, ESV

These are all attributes of a life that is lived walking with God; [led by the Spirit](#). The implications of a Spirit-led life find their way into every aspect of our lives: affection for others, understanding and compassion for their failings, forgiveness of their mistakes (and our own!), confidence in God's love and kindness, a commitment to cultivate close and loving relationships built on mutual respect and sacrifice.

These are attributes of a person who has fully grasped the weight and implications of saving grace and whose life is being transformed, day by day, following the example of the One who went before – Jesus Christ. They are choosing every day to put aside the unfruitful works of darkness and to walk in the Spirit, producing the fruit that comes from living God's way (Galatians 5). The bright light of Christ makes their way plain.

Hate Will Destroy Us

The opposite of love is hate. And let's get real. Hate, in all its forms, whether displayed passively or aggressively, is like a poison that destroys our soul. It will ruin our life – and not just ours. It causes havoc in our families, our relationships, our churches and, critically, to our witness of the Gospel. We may think that we have never been guilty of 'hating our brother or sister', but when we harbour bitterness in our heart, when we gossip about them to others, when we withhold doing good on the basis of preference, when we are angry at them, when we don't treat them with dignity and honour, 'esteeming all better than ourselves', we are hating them.

So heinous is the position of hate before God that John says that a person who hates is said to be walking in darkness and not the light ([1 John 2:9](#), [11](#)). It's entirely possible for a person to continue professing religion but remain at enmity with their Christian brother or sister. The Bible states unapologetically that such a person is a liar ([1 John 4:20](#)).

They may fool everyone else but they cannot fool God.

Hate Is An Issue Of The Heart

We need to be on our guard in our Christian communities that we are not unwittingly or, worse, complicit in allowing lives to be ruled by hate, in all its insidious forms. While we may be vocal on what are perceived to be more serious sins (such as murder or immorality), we tend to overlook or excuse things like slander, gossip, envy, enmity, strife, jealousy, bitter disagreements, divisions or backbiting. Do we speak against these things and model a better way? We are all capable of such things and we are all responsible for preventing the spiritual disease that results from overlooking these things in our Christian communities.

We are warned over and over in the Bible of how hatred and bitterness can destroy us. We are encouraged to love one another, keep short records of wrongs, and forgive others, not harbouring bitterness or anger in our hearts.

We know that all these issues find their source in the darkness of the human heart.

“For from within the hearts of people come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery.” – Mark 7:21, ESV

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. – Ephesians 4:31, ESV

When we struggle with issues like gossip, slander, bitterness, anger or envy, the problem lies inside us, deep in the recesses of our heart. The issue is not with the person at whom our hate is directed but with us. And if it were not a problem that all Christians face, the many writers of the epistles, especially John, wouldn't have taken the time to warn us of it.

If we can't love our Christian brother or sister, then, quite simply, we don't [understand grace](#).

How Can We Change The Narrative?

The imperative first step for anyone struggling with these issues is to spend some time considering God's grace and work of salvation in their life. Make it personal. Consider what it meant for God to give His Son for you, that you might live. Consider the weight of your guilt and inability to fully satisfy God's righteousness, and comprehend the fact that, in Jesus, you are forgiven and set free, fully reconciled and made right with God.

Perhaps you don't truly believe this to be true for yourself

and this is the root cause of your fear and judgment of others. Make it a priority to [find peace and true reconciliation](#) with the God who is for you and not against you. Allow the dark places of your heart to be flooded with the light of Jesus. Ask for God to soften your heart, for Him to remove the bitterness, envy and hate. Confess to Him how ashamed you are of allowing that root of bitterness to grow and ask Him to help you prune it from your life.

And, as Christian communities, we must all love enthusiastically, hating sin but loving the sinner, remembering that we were all at one time enemies of God. We must not tolerate those things that allow hate or division to flourish but show our faith by cultivating [works of the Spirit](#), against which there is no law! (Galatians 5:22-24).

“So don’t lose a minute in building on what you’ve been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. With these qualities active and growing in your lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus.”
– 2 Peter 1:5-9, MSG

“Anyone who claims to be intimate with God, ought to live the kind of life that Jesus lived.” | 1 John 2:6, MSG

A Powerful Witness To The Truth Of Jesus Christ

Jesus tells his disciples in John 13:35, that 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.” Real faith shows up in our life – particularly in the way that we love the King’s people.

‘Sometimes called “the Proverbs of the New Testament”, the book of James practically and faithfully reminds Christians exactly how to live so as to be compelling witnesses for the name of Jesus Christ. From perseverance to true faith to controlling one’s tongue, submitting to God’s will, and having patience, this book aids readers in living authentically and wisely for Christ.

Many have claimed that James and the Apostle Paul differed on the question of faith versus works, but in reality, the spiritual fruit that James talks about simply demonstrates the true faith of which Paul wrote.’ (taken from the introduction to James, ESV 2000). *If you claim to be a Christian*, James says, ***prove it by your actions***.

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

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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