

Toxic Faith

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It seems hard to believe that people who have answered Jesus' call to a life of freedom could so easily lose the sense of joy and relief they first felt. It's difficult to understand why Christians who have been made free and 'alive in Christ' would choose to return to a kind of spirituality that slowly imprisons the mind and poisons the soul. How does a message that speaks clearly of God's love – a life of salvation in Jesus by His grace – become perverted and distorted, becoming instead a culture of performance-driven expectations, demanded by an unfair and intolerant God?

“God didn't go to all the trouble of sending His Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.” | John 3:17, MSG

Yet for many Christians, this is exactly where they find themselves. It may be early into their Christian journey or many years later, but somewhere along the way, their perception of Christianity becomes misshapen and their sense of peace, fulfillment, and relief dissipates.

Religious life becomes exhausting; they feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained and trapped. They may begin to judge themselves or others around them by what they do, what they wear, what they say. They become consumed by rules, preoccupied with fault and blame, and heavily focused on performance – their own or others'. Something that was meant to empower them and set them free has rendered them powerless – they are stuck, with no way forward and no way out.

The simple truth of being 'saved by grace through faith alone'

has been turned on its head, becoming 'the gospel of acceptance with God through performance'. Their simple faith in Jesus as the only source of life and acceptance with God has become toxic. Or perhaps, sadly, they never had that simple faith to begin with.

Toxic Faith

Toxic faith is a destructive and dangerous relationship with a religious system, not with God, that allows this system to control a person's life in the name of God. It is a system where another gospel is preached – not one of freedom and liberty and acceptance through grace, but one, in reality, of enslavement to rituals and rules.

Seeking God's approval on the basis of your own religious behaviour is toxic faith. Anything that adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching. A true and meaningful relationship with God can never be sustained on this basis.

This deconstruction of faith is not just a problem that modern Christians struggle with. The first-century church at Galatia also dealt with this issue and the damage caused by this 'false gospel' is catalogued throughout the letter written by Paul to the Galatians.

The tone of Paul's opening words is one of incredulity at the situation in which the Galatians find themselves.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all." | Galatians 1:6, NIV

The Greek word used here for 'desert' means 'to defect'; and it's a defection, not from a denomination or doctrine, but from 'Him who called you by grace'. It's a severing of the

real and personal relationship a Christian has with God. And it's a distortion of the gospel Paul first preached to them, Christ's gospel, of forgiveness of sins by grace – by Jesus' performance – and not by their own. In fact, Paul says, it's really no gospel at all.

Paul takes the issue the Galatians are dealing with very seriously. When a spiritual life of grace and rest is replaced with a life of imposed works, it's a hugely serious issue.

But what was happening in Galatia for Paul to be so up-in-arms? What induced him to tackle the situation with such passion, to the point of stating the following words, not once but twice?:

*“Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a **gospel other than the one we preached to you**, let them be **under God's curse!** As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a **gospel other than what you accepted**, let them be **under God's curse!**” | Galatians 1: 8-9, NIV*

Law Versus Grace

Paul had been converted from a life steeped in [religious tradition](#) and law, a life that gave him privilege, prestige, and power. He had used that power to persecute the church of God, systematically destroying it, until one day He was confronted by the risen Jesus, and a message that was radically different to everything he thought he knew.

Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a personal saviour offering life and freedom through the saving work of Jesus. Paul discovered that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and, in fact, was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God's promises.

Paul learned of the **true gospel** – that of being ‘saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, lest any man should boast’ (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This is the gospel that He originally preached to the Galatians and which they had gladly received. Yet, it is with dismay that he hears that religious leaders of the old school had come into the church, reintroducing old ways, law-keeping, and an abundance of religious rules and regulations. One of these religious rules was the rite of circumcision, which they were insisting Christians should undertake. Circumcision, in that time, was the ultimate act of external religious performance, and was being promoted as added ‘proof of spirituality’.

*‘Yes’, they would have said ‘faith in Jesus is important and you absolutely must have it. But it’s **not enough**. In order to find positive standing with God, you must also be circumcised’.*

In other words, there was a group in Galatia propounding the idea that right standing with God depends on what Jesus did **plus** additional ‘spiritual acts’ that are undertaken. This is completely in opposition to the message of the cross, that salvation comes through Jesus’ performance, not our own:

“For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” | 1 Corinthians 1:17-18, ESV

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” | 1 Peter 2:24, NIV

This ‘different gospel’ was a serious perversion of God’s gift

of grace and a not-so-subtle manipulation of the relationship between the individual and God. No wonder Paul was furious.

“Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God’s grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily.” | Galatians 2:21, MSG

The Collision Of Grace And Spiritual Performance

The word of God is living and active, and, like a powerful sword, it cuts right through [to the heart](#), judging the thoughts and purposes contained therein. It can be used as an instrument of grace, by reminding us of God’s love and showing us how to bring order and purpose to our lives.

In the wrong hands, however, or wrongfully used, the word of God can be used in ungraceful ways, as a means of shaming others into performing someone else’s agenda, in the name of God. In the hands of performance-based people, it can be used as a weapon in order to pressure people into acting differently or to get rid of them if they do not. It can be used to lay burdens on men ‘too difficult to bear’.

“Woe to you experts in religious law as well! You load people down with burdens difficult to bear, yet you yourselves refuse to touch the burdens with even one of your fingers!” | Jesus, Luke 11:46, NET Bible

The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between grace and spiritual performance. The conflicts the Pharisees initiated with Jesus were usually over minor issues such as fasting (Mark 2:18), sabbath keeping (Mark 2:24), eating with ‘unclean’ people (Mark 9:11), or

attitudes towards civic duties, like paying taxes (Matthew 9:11) – all performance-driven markers of supposed spirituality.

The Pharisees ‘majored on minors’ because precise details of religious life were their passion, but in doing so, they were actually inverting spiritual values. They made uncompromising stands on matters of no particular spiritual importance, while issues of greatest significance were minimised.

Jesus called them out on their hypocrisy in the gospel of Matthew, where he says:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” | Matthew 23:24, NIV

Jesus, in contrast, set out the essential way that a person finds [right standing with God](#):

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” | John 14:6, BSB

“I am the gate. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture.” | John 10:9, NIV

“Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies.” | John 11:25, NIV

“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be [saved](#).”

| Acts 4:12, ESV

Jesus is the only way to find right standing with God. The name of Jesus is the only means by which humanity can be saved. Jesus' performance, not our own, is what secures this extraordinary gift of grace.

Christians must not be drawn to extremes in a misguided zeal for religious purity but pay attention to the essentials that Jesus so patiently explained. We must be on guard to avoid systems that employ the use of 'formulas' and 'doctrines' to press good people of faith into conformity with a system instead of conformity to Christ. Particularly, we must be on the lookout for cultures that promote or enable power posturing, performance preoccupation, unspoken rules, and a lack of balance.

"God's steward, an overseer (leader) must be above reproach – not self-absorbed, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not greedy for money. Instead, he must be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it was taught, so that by sound teaching he will be able to encourage others and refute those who contradict this message. For many are rebellious and full of empty talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced." | Titus 17-10

*"Leaders are given to the church to protect the flock from legalists, who push religious performance as the means of right standing or favour with God. In Paul's letter to Titus, he says that the rebellious men **must be silenced**. Unfortunately, in many churches, not only are the leaders not protecting the flock against those who push religious performance, they are the pushers and in bondage to performance themselves." | Johnson & VanVonderen*

Jesus had no interest in setting up rigid religious and social guidelines for his followers. He chose instead to major on the significant agendas of the kingdom of God. Paul confirms Jesus' way of living in his final words to the Galatians:

"For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate. Can't you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do – submit to circumcision, reject circumcision. It is what God is doing, and He is creating something totally new, a free life! All who walk by this standard are the true Israel of God – His chosen people. Peace and mercy on them!" | Galatians 6:14-16, MSG

"Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." | John 8:32, NIV

Toxic: 'Mid 17th century: from medieval Latin toxicus 'poisoned', from Latin toxicum 'poison', from Greek toxikon (pharmakon) '(poison for) arrows', from toxon 'bow'. (Oxford Dictionary). 'Containing or being poisonous material especially when capable of causing death or serious debilitation' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). **Faith:** 'Great trust or confidence in something or someone.' (Cambridge Dictionary)

Is Church-Going Still Relevant?

Despite Christianity still being Australia's largest religion (61.1% compared with 7.3% of all other religions combined), the proportion of Australians identifying as Christian has been steadily declining over the past century. Compared to 1911, when 96% of people identified as Christian, the 2001 census recorded the figure of 68% and the latest Census, taken in 2011, recorded a drop to 61.1%.

New figures released in 2017 show that some 7 million Australians (30.1% of the population), said they did not identify with any religion at all, a figure that's up from around 4.8 million (22.3%) in 2011's Census.

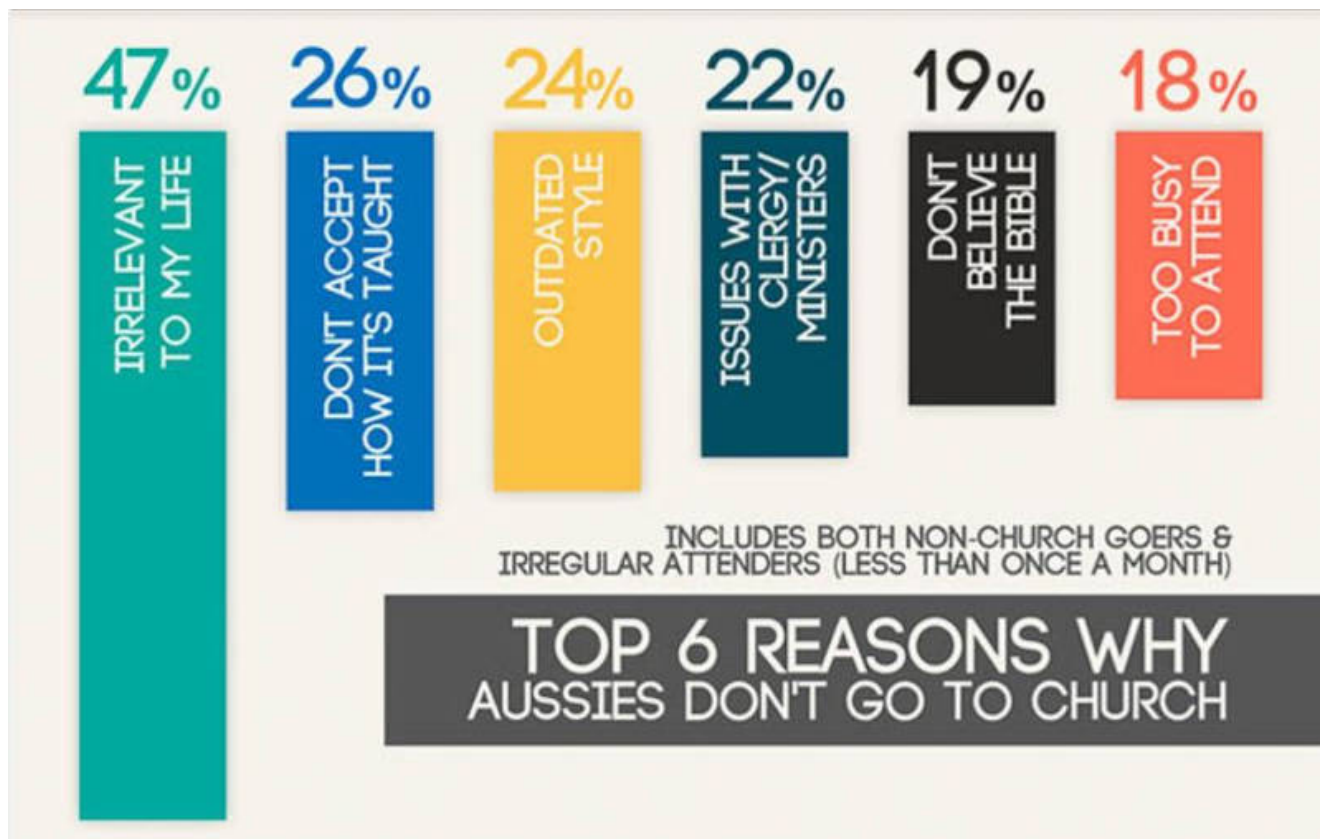
The average church attender's age has increased to 53 years and while the 70+ age group is still strongly represented, the younger generation is increasingly underrepresented. For example, 20-39 year olds make up about 34% of the national population but only 21% of church attenders.

Australia has more churches (13,000) than schools (9,500) yet church attendance has also declined. Those attending at least once per month has dropped by more than half when compared to [statistics](#) taken in 1972 (from 36% to the current attendance rate of 15%). Less than one in seven of the Australians who ticked "Christianity" on their census form regularly attend a church.

Six Top Reasons Why People Don't Go To Church

For many people (as much as 47%), church is considered to be irrelevant to their life. The following diagram shows the top six reasons why Aussies aren't going to church. This is a

survey of both non-church goers and irregular attenders but these reasons are perhaps also relevant for those once-regular attendees who have dropped off.



Is Church-Going Still Relevant In 2019?

Nearly 50% of Australians believe the answer is 'no'. It's interesting to note in the following diagram that out of a list of 13 facilities and services that people agree a community needs, a local church comes in at 13 and 9 respectively (only scrapping ahead of English classes and migrant support, in the case of the latter). Clearly, for many people, church-going is not only personally irrelevant, it's also considered practically superfluous to a community's needs.



Church-going has become less relevant for Christians and non-Christians alike. Considerations such as meaningful engagement, purposeful worship, approachable ministry or authentic beliefs are all issues for people questioning the relevance of church and church attendance in their life.

Does Church-Going Make Me A Better Person?

It depends.

Similar to the colloquial, often humorous question “how long

is a piece of string?”, the answer is; it depends. *It depends on how you measure it.*

Church-going, in and of itself, doesn't make a someone a better person (or Christian, for that matter). No-one would suggest that hanging out in the local soccer club means you'll become a better soccer player. Or that spending time every week in a car sales yard will make you a better driver. Attendance at church, in itself, really means nothing at all.

And, in fact, it could be argued that if you are attending because of the wrong motivations, then church-going could actually be detrimental for you. Going to church, just to keep your spouse or family happy, because you feel guilty if you don't, or because you feel a sense of religious obligation, are never meaningful reasons to attend. Religious obligation – a 'works-based' mindset – is often one of the major causes of [church burnout](#).

But when the *purpose* of church and church-going are both considered, we can measure the outcomes in a different way and get quite a different answer.

Church Is About People

The Greek word *ekklesia*, which has been translated as 'church' in our English Bibles, is found 114 times in the New Testament (the original word is actually translated *assembly* three times, *church* 74 times, *churches* 35 times, and *congregation* twice). The original definition is of *an assembly of people convened at a public place*, often for the purpose of deliberating.

The root meaning of *church* is not that of a building, but of people and it was used by the New Testament writers to describe the community of believers gathering together. These believers would meet in various places, such as homes (Romans 16:5) or the temple (Acts 2:42). It wouldn't be incorrect to

express their meetings in this way; that the early believers 'churched together' (or assembled together).

The word *church*, in time, also came to be used to describe the building in which Christian believers would meet and so 'church' is now understood to be either the people, the building or both.

Yet the biblical definition of 'church' is actually about the people – those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation ([John 3:16](#); [1 Corinthians 12:13](#)). These people are the community of believers who gather together and the Apostle Paul describes it like the human body, a living thing – made up of real people ([1 Corinthians 12:12](#)). In fact, he devoted a whole chapter in the book of Corinthians (in the New Testament) to the principles and purpose of 'church' and how each 'member' is to be valued for the diversity and contribution they bring to 'the body'. In essence, church is about *relationship*.

“Church is not an event you go to. It’s a family you belong to.” – Rick Warren

What Is The Purpose Of Church?

The purpose of church (believers getting together) can be briefly summarised as follows:

- To honour God and His Son – 'worship'
- To grow community – 'fellowship'
- To develop personally – 'discipleship'
- To provide service to others – 'ministry'
- To share the [Good News](#) – 'evangelism'

These purposes are all outworked in the context of *relationship* – with God, His son and with each other. Church-going is about 'giving' and 'getting'. Church life is designed to enrich our lives, ease our burdens, and provide supportive

relationships for hard times. It develops character growth and maturity so that we can support others, when needed. Service within a church should be something that fills a person with joy and deep personal fulfillment – the natural outworking of a life based on being a certain kind of person, not doing certain kinds of things. Church life – life with Jesus – is for those who are weary and burdened – because in Jesus we find rest.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls....” – Jesus, Matthew 11:28-29

Church-going provides opportunity to undertake all the purposes that a community of believers consider to be important aspects of their Christian life.

So if we ask the question again – does church-going make me a better person? – the answer is *yes – depending on how you measure it.*

If going to church makes you feel like you have a place to belong, gives you support and encouragement, fosters a sense of individual growth and development ‘in Christ’, without judgment, and provides opportunity for you to extend God’s love to others, then yes, church-going can help you be a ‘better person’.

In this context, church-going is definitely still relevant and, it could be argued, essential for healthy, well functioning communities. Church – true church – helps people grow in the ways that matter most – in their relationship with God and Jesus and their relationship with others. This is the Bible’s definition of true happiness and a flourishing life.

“In the biblical sense, true human flourishing [happiness] and well-being can only be found in relationship with God and

through alignment with His coming kingdom..it is important to see that this flourishing can never occur fully apart from a proper relationship with the creator God. All of the Bible's vision of human flourishing both now and in the age to come either assumes or explicitly states this fact.” – Jonathan Pennington, PhD, [A Biblical Theology Of Human Flourishing](#)

Overcoming Negative Experiences Of Church

For many people, however, church is not the experience they hoped or thought it would be. Rigid expectations, subtle (or not so subtle) spiritual manipulation, a performance-driven culture or unhealthy theology all combine to ensure the experience of 'church' is one of failure, disconnect, disappointment and isolation, from both community and God. This is a sad but nonetheless true fact and the experience of many people.

God's gift of freedom, found in His [gospel of grace](#), is easily perverted and often squandered by men or women placing religious burdens and [rituals](#) on their fellow man. Jesus condemned the religious leaders of his day for exactly this, commenting that *“they tie up heavy, burdensome loads and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them...”* ([Matthew 23:4](#)).

God – and by extension, church – should not be an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways. God is a deeply real and loving Father who invites us into a personal relationship with Him and whose love and acceptance should be manifested by those who 'church together' in His name.

So, Is Church-Going Still Relevant?

“Christians need relationships to grow. We don't grow in isolation; we develop in the context of fellowship” – Rick

Warren

Communities also need relationships to flourish and grow, to provide stability and support, and to offer compassion and encouragement. Church can play an important part in people's lives, both Christian or non-Christian, to facilitate these endeavours. Not only that, with the weight of life's pressures and the uncertainty of life's big questions bearing down on people, church is often the place people will turn to '[find God](#)'.

Church is (or should be) the place where the Good News of God's salvation is joyfully lived and unconditionally offered – a place of support and fellowship for those who believe and a place of [welcome and hope](#) for those who don't. Discovering that God has a plan and purpose for you – if you want it – is the most empowering, life-changing realisation in the world!

“God's way is not a matter of mere talk; it's an empowered life.” -1 Corinthians 4:20

God's love is demonstrated to the world through a Christian's application of it to others (John 13:35), and this love in operation becomes concrete evidence of [the power of God's message](#), as given through Jesus, to transform lives. 'Church' (a community of believers gathering together) provides a powerful opportunity to do that, and benefits believers and non-believers alike.

“If it isn't good news, it isn't the Gospel. The Gospel is about what God has done for us and what we can become in Christ; it's about Christ being the answer to our deepest needs. The Good News offers lost people what they are frantically searching for: forgiveness, freedom, security, purpose, love, acceptance and strength. It settles our past, assures our future, and gives meaning to today. It is the best news in the world.” – Rick Warren, A Purpose Driven

If your experience of church or church-going has been one of hurt, you are not alone. Many people have experienced the disillusionment and distress of discovering that church is not perfect. Church is made up of humans; damaged and sinful by their very nature. In fact, it would be surprising to *not* find hurt within a church, given this fact. Not every church hurts people, but most churches have hurt someone at some point, simply because churches are made up of imperfect people. This reality can leave people reluctant to re-engage, afraid of being hurt again, wanting to protect themselves, and questioning the place of church or even God in their lives.

However, it's important to separate human failure from the love and freedom that God offers. Take time to recover from your negative experience. Let yourself heal. And then find a church where you are able to live freely, with a light heart in response to the [freedom and forgiveness given by God](#).

Be mindful though; if you are looking for another church because you don't feel you can really be "spiritual" without it, or you believe attending church makes God love you more, you really need to examine what true spirituality is and (re)acquaint yourself with what the [grace of God](#) means. If, however, you long for warm, accepting fellowship, spiritual encouragement and growth, and the opportunity to serve others in love, then you're on the right track.

While this approach should not minimise your experience or negate your feelings of hurt or pain, it does enable you to move past the burden of bitterness, which, in the end, will destroy peace, joy, freedom and life itself.

Grasping Hold Of Grace: Repentance

Imagine a man lost the middle of the Atlantic ocean. He doesn't remember how he got there or where he's going, all he knows is this endless swimming in circles. No ships in sight, he's been treading water for hours and now he's beginning to tire. There's a very real danger that he will actually drown – that's if the hypothermia doesn't get to him first. He doesn't realise this, however. He thinks he'll be fine, that there's nothing precarious about his situation. He'll make it to shore.

Suddenly, almost miraculously, a ship appears on the horizon. The man gazes at it in interest. It could be useful to him – the water is becoming colder and he feels very tired. The ship slowly draws closer and the captain appears, signalling from the bow.

“You poor creature! You look like you could do with saving! Luckily for you, I've got everything you need right here on board; food, water, dry clothes, first aid... the only thing you need to do is grasp hold of the life buoy I'm going to throw to you.”

He leans over the side and throws the buoy into the water, where it lands near the man's head.

The man's expression changes and he looks at the buoy disdainfully. “Conditions for rescue? I've never heard of such a thing. I shouldn't have to do anything, I've been swimming for hours. In fact, I was doing fine before you arrived. I really don't need your help. If you want me to get in the boat, you'll have to come down here and get me.”

“Believe me”, the captain replies. “I've thought of everything and this is the only way for you to be saved. I promise the buoy is large and easy to grasp and not heavy at all. You won't have any trouble, you just need need to reach out and

take hold of it.”

The man shakes his head. “Nope. I’m not happy with those conditions. It doesn’t seem fair to me. I don’t see why I should have to do anything. And look, if we’re being honest, I was doing pretty fine on mine own anyway. You can keep going, thanks.”

“Well, look, you really don’t have to do anything, apart from take hold of the buoy”, the captain replied. “I’ve done everything else for you. I’ll pull you in...just grab hold.”

The man shakes his head again, angry now. “I really resent you saying you’ll save me and making me do all the work. I’m supposedly the rescuee – I shouldn’t have to do anything! Nope, I don’t like that at all. And in fact, I don’t need saving anyway. You can take your buoy and get lost.”

The captain shakes his head sadly. “I know you need the buoy. I’m not going anywhere – I’m hoping you’ll see sense and change your mind”. The man turned his back on the buoy and continued treading water...

Needless to say, the man drowned several hours later.

Although this is a somewhat absurd and unlikely story, it’s an apt illustration of how humans often choose to view God’s saving grace.

Grasping Hold Of Grace

God’s [saving grace](#) is a remarkable subject, permeating every aspect of [the Gospel](#), giving it weight and power. The saving acts of God, due to the work of Jesus on the cross and Jesus’ resurrection from the dead bring reconciliation (“atonement”) between people and God. This is why the Gospel is described as a message of hope for the whole world ([Luke 14:15-24](#)).

We see God’s love for humanity demonstrated in His grace – His undeserved favour and kindness, bestowed on the human race. God’s grace was shown in action – in [sending His son](#), to save the world through him. This important work was planned and has

been done, on our behalf, long before we even existed. We had no part in this, nothing we did or didn't do has influenced God's decision or His plan to save humanity, or how He would achieve this. God loves because of **who God is**, not because of who we are.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16, NIV

"He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." – Titus 3:5, NIV

There are no disqualifying factors to who is eligible – it's not offered on the basis of race, gender, age or moral character – God's saving grace is offered to everyone. In spite of racial and ethnic prejudices, Christians in the first century came to understand that no one was to be denied hearing and obeying the message of good news.

"...God shows no partiality. Indeed, whoever fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him in any nation." – Acts 10:34-35, ISV

God wants to save us, He chose to save the world because of **who He is**. His love outweighed our desperate sin and He went to extraordinary lengths to save us.

"The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." – 2 Peter 3:9, NIV

And yet, there is a catch to grace – a condition, if you like. Saving grace exists in the same way that the life buoy floats

on the ocean. Available, accessible, obtainable. We exist in the same way as a man treading water in an endless sea. Hopeless, helpless, dying. God calls to us – *I can save you, I can offer you hope and life – just grab hold.*

Like the drowning man, in the middle of the frigid ocean, we must grab hold of the life buoy if we want to be saved. There is a condition. We must do **something**. The condition to receiving grace is **receiving grace**.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23, ESV

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Ephesians 2:8, NIV

Receiving Grace: Repentance

The Bible calls receiving God’s grace *repentance*. Literally, repentance means to turn back, to change one’s mind. However, the Bible tells us that true repentance is not only a change of mind but is also a change in actions.

*“...but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, **performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.**” – Act 26:20, ESV*

The Acts of the Apostles focuses heavily on the aspect of repentance relating to salvation. It wasn’t a new theme – John himself had preached the baptism of repentance, but now the apostles really seek to impress on believers and non-believers alike the connection between repentance and receiving God’s grace – His saving work through Jesus:

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in

the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” – Acts 2:38, NIV

“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.” – Acts 3:19, ESV

“When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.” – Acts 11:18, NIV

Acknowledging our need for God’s grace – changing how we think about sin – and then acting in accordance with that change of mind is the true definition of biblical repentance. It is looking away from our hopeless, ungodly self and looking to God’s grace. It is **believing that we need saving and reaching out to receive it.**

We choose to end one kind of life and begin another and the way of demonstrating that choice is to be baptised ‘for the repentance of our sins’. The Bible compares baptism to burial, dying to our past course of life and beginning a new one as a Christian, dedicated to God and saved through Jesus.

“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” – Romans 6:1-4, NIV

“Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” – Colossians 2:12, NIV

Baptism and the steps that lead up to it are God's arrangement for a person to gain a clean conscience based on his faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

"This water symbolises baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." – 1 Peter 3:21, NIV

Preaching the [good news](#) of salvation was the great commission given to the apostles by Jesus and baptism formed an essential part of accepting the gospel and receiving God's saving grace.

"And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." – Mark 16:15-16, KJ2000

The truth is, we are all adrift at sea – drowning in our sins. The only way of being saved is to accept that fact and believe that we need saving. Accepting Jesus as the saviour provided by God for the sins of the world and being baptised as an acknowledgement of our belief is true repentance. It is the way home to a [relationship restored](#).

"For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved." – Romans 10:10, NIV

The White Flag Of Grace

The subject of God's grace permeates every aspect of [the Gospel](#), giving it weight and power. The saving acts of God, due to the work of Jesus on the cross and Jesus' resurrection from the dead bring reconciliation ("atonement") between people and God. This is why the Gospel is described as a message of hope for the whole world (Luke 14:15-24).

The word 'grace' itself is described by one author as "the last, best word" in English, remaining unspoiled over the years in its meaning. Its many usages still retain some of the glory of the original, with words like *gratitude*, *gratuity*, *congratulations*, and *gratefulness* all carrying the idea of something that brings delight, joy, happiness, or good fortune.

The White Flag Of Grace

The word 'grace' in the Bible (*chen* in Hebrew, *charis* in Greek), literally means 'favour', with the idea of bending or stooping in kindness to another, together with graciousness in manner or action. The Old Testament use of the word includes the concept of those who "show favour" by undertaking gracious deeds, or acts of grace, such as being kind to the poor and showing generosity. Examples of God's graciousness are also seen throughout the Old Testament, as in Deuteronomy 7:8, Numbers 6:24–27, Psalm 119:29 and Psalm 27:7.

In the New Testament, the word grace has many layers of meaning, including the deepest and most transformative – God's saving grace, as defined by Ephesians 2 – the gift of eternal life, freely given through Jesus Christ. In God's language, His grace gives us what we don't deserve and cannot earn. This is why it is so frequently contrasted against the Law of Moses, which still condemned every man or woman, no matter their sincerity or good deeds.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” – Romans 6:23, ESV

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” – Ephesians 2:8, NIV

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.” – John 3:16-17, NIV

We see God’s love for humanity demonstrated in His grace – His undeserved favour and kindness, bestowed on the human race. God’s grace was shown in action – in [sending His son](#), to save the world through him.

God’s Grace Is A Gift

Paul the apostle frequently described God’s grace as a gift because he, of all people, understood how easy it was for Christians to be deceived into believing they could earn God’s love or forgiveness. Paul, previously known as Saul, had been an extremely zealous [Pharisee](#). He was strictly religious, scrupulously lawful and he actively persecuted the new Christian religion (believing them to be heretics) – consenting even in their murder, in the misguided belief that he was doing God’s will (Philippians 3:5-7).

Yet Paul was confronted on his way to Damascus in a very real way by the [risen Jesus](#), who made it clear to him that God’s grace is something that is given freely, not earned.

The truth is, we cannot “earn anything” from God and we don’t “deserve anything”, apart from the sentence passed on humanity for [Adam and Eve’s disobedience](#) in the beginning – mortality.

Yet God generously offers us something quite different, something undeserved – forgiveness and life, **as a gift**. God has, in effect, raised the white flag of grace, enabling a way for us to be reconciled back to Him.

“He has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.” – 2 Timothy 1:9, NIV

God’s call to saving grace has been echoing down the centuries, appealing to any who would listen. Isaiah 55 likens this call to the provision of thirst-quenching water, free of charge, to those who are dying of thirst.

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” Isaiah 55:1, NIV

The Spirit Of Ungrace

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.

Yet, the concept of grace flies in the face of what we perceive to be deserved or fair and offers a completely different way of seeing things – less like ourselves and more like God. Jesus taught in his now famous prayer, known as “the Lord’s prayer”, that we should ask God to forgive us **as we forgive others** (Matthew 6:9-13). Peter later tried to clarify exactly what Jesus meant by this, asking him to specify how

many times he was required to forgive (Matthew 18:21). Peter hadn't grasped the 'unreasonableness' of grace, as God sees it. We are to forgive **as God has forgiven us**. Wholeheartedly and without reservation.

Peter's question prompted Jesus to tell another story – 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. Keeping score or imposing limits of forgiveness simply do not find a place in Christian behaviour. God has already forgiven us a debt so mountainous that any person's wrongs against us shrink to anthills in comparison. How can we not forgive in the light of what we ourselves have received?

In fact, there is a direct correlation 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

Forgiveness Is An Act Of Faith

"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 avenge; I will 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 a place of forgiving his brothers, the hurt did not disappear, but the burden of being their judge fell away. Although wrong does not disappear when I forgive, it loses its grip on me and is taken over by God, who knows what to do. 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 do so because the Gospel makes 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 toward others." – [Henri Nouwen](#)

The long and short of it is this: if we cannot show even the slightest resemblance of grace in our lives to one another,

then we have totally misunderstood who God is and what exactly it is that He has done for us.

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**.

“And this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus....” Romans 3:22-24, BSB

Traditions: Good Or Bad?

One of my favourite movies is *Ever After* with Drew Barrymore and Anjelica Huston. It has all the right ingredients for a great story – humour, romance, drama and a feel-good ending. When I think of this movie, I have a few favourite scenes that top my list, but the one where Danielle's father leaves to go abroad and stops at the gate to wave often plays through my mind. Perhaps because it's such a bittersweet moment. As the audience, we know what's coming but Danielle doesn't. Perhaps because it speaks so clearly of the love of a parent for their child and the pain that separation from each other brings. And perhaps, also, for the line that Danielle quotes as she waits for what she expects her father will do:

*“Wait! It's **tradition**. He always waves at the gate.”*

What Are Traditions?

Our lives are full of traditions; from cultural and religious traditions to social and family traditions.

'Traditions' are described as inherited, established, or customary patterns of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom) or a belief or story or a body of beliefs or stories relating to the past that are commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable." They can also be "the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction", "cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions", or "characteristic manner, method, or style". – Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The word "tradition" derives from the [Latin](#) *tradere* literally meaning *to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping*. Traditions are, then, often important customs, stories or information, passed down from generation to generation as a means of safekeeping those beliefs or customs. They may have been originally passed through oral communication including methods such as storytelling and poetry, rhyme and alliteration.

Sometimes the meaning behind a tradition becomes lost but the tradition or custom remains. Sometimes a greater meaning becomes attached to a tradition than was originally intended or implied. The following is an lighthearted story highlighting how traditions or customs sometimes come about:

A woman was preparing the evening's roast dinner and divided the large piece of meat into two smaller, equal portions, placing them in separate trays in the oven. When her husband asked her why she did it that way, she replied that she actually didn't know – it was just the way her mother had

*always done it. That got her thinking and later that evening, she phoned her mother to find out the reason behind the two trays of meat. Her own mother didn't know either, it was just what **her** mother had always done. They decided to phone the woman's grandmother and, when asked what was so important about dividing the meat, she laughed and replied. "oh, nothing. I just never had an oven large enough to fit my entire portion of meat on one rack. Dividing it in two simply meant I could fit it all in my oven at the same time."*

In this situation, practical requirements had, by the third generation, become something of a tradition within the family without any actual particular significance behind the tradition.

Even amongst the animal kingdom, traditions can be observed. Behavioral traditions are seen in groups of fish, birds, and mammals, such as orangutans and chimpanzees. In fact, chimpanzees will actually transfer traditional behavior from one group to another (not just within a group).

Human beings are hyper-social animals, albeit a lot smarter (most of the time!) than the animal world but even we come together through shared practices, traditions and rituals. These traditions form a social glue that binds groups within our society and often provides benefits such as increasing family bonds and forming a strong group identity. Traditions often offer a sense of belonging for individuals.

Traditions: Good Or Bad?

Traditions can sometimes be viewed in a negative light. They are also frequently used in political or religious discussions to establish the legitimacy of a particular set of values. However, it's important to remember that traditions, in themselves, are neither good or bad. Just because something is replicated or repeated, doesn't mean it **isn't** of value or

importance. Conversely, just because something is replicated or repeated doesn't mean that it **is** important or valuable.

Traditions matter when they relate to important human values, such as faith, freedom, integrity, education, personal responsibility, a strong work ethic or selflessness. They provide context for thoughtful reflection and a deeper appreciation of the things that matter in life. Traditions are a language unto themselves; with a meaning that conveys something deeper.

What Does The Bible Say About Traditions?

[Religion](#) is a place when traditions abound and they often form a rich tapestry in the life of a religious person. They are often drawn from history and have meaning and symbolism behind them. In the Old Testament, traditions and symbols actually pointed forward to a greater truth regarding Jesus, [his work as Saviour](#) and God's [relationship with humanity](#).

Jesus himself instituted the tradition commonly known as The Last Supper, a fellowship meal where his followers would eat bread and drink wine 'in remembrance of him' (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 13). This tradition is still observed today, some 2000 years later.

Many cultures have traditions at the heart of their spiritual and religious worship and Christianity is no different. The Bible never condemns traditions of themselves but Jesus' words in Mark 7:6-8 tell us clearly that traditions shouldn't ever supercede God's will.

"He (Jesus) replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." (Mark 7:6-8), NIV

Christ's words indicate that He was not condemning human tradition, but *those who place human traditions, laws, or demands before God's will* expressed in the commandments.

The letter of Paul to the believers in Colosse confirms Jesus' words:

"See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ."
– Colossians 2:8, ESV

The Old Testament dealt with this problem too, where rituals had replaced righteousness and justice:

"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." – Amos 5:21-25, ESV

Traditions or rituals shouldn't come before our relationship with God and customs should never supercede God's commandments. When a tradition forms a valuable and significant part of our worship, spiritual life and our human experience, then it's good that it's observed. But when traditions are human traditions, unrelated to our relationship with God, then their significance and priority is not always important and their observance is neither required nor expected by God in our spiritual life.

There are certain traditions, though, relating to faith and morals that Christians are commanded to keep and obey:

"I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold

fast to the traditions, just as I handed them on to you.” – 1 Corinthians 11:2, CSB

“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.” – 2 Thessalonians 2:15, ESV

We can therefore view traditions as beautiful and meaningful additions to our human life, perpetuating things that matter and ideas that are worth conveying through the generations. But these traditions should never be confused as being superior to the traditions that God is actually looking for in the life of a Christian person; the traditions of “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

“There is a real beauty to be found in tradition – a beauty that may not propel us forward in the sense of quantifiable “progress” or change, but that does propel us forward as human beings in life wisdom, understanding and even emotional intellect. Indeed, aside from the more obvious – albeit equally important – function of tradition as a way to pass on the values, morals, customs and culture of one generation to the next, tradition also teaches us something about life, where we came from and who we are as people.” – [Huffington Post](#)

True Religion

Religion is defined as “a cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, world views, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organisations, that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements.”

Yet, there is no actual consensus among scholars as to what precisely constitutes a religion.

Nearly 85% of the world’s population identifies as being religious, claiming affiliation with one of the five largest religions; [Christianity](#), [Islam](#), [Hinduism](#), [Buddhism](#) or forms of [folk religion](#). These different religions all have distinct rules, regulations and beliefs that form part of that particular religion.

Christianity is the world’s largest religion, with over 2.4 billion followers. Growing out of Judaism – its earliest converts were Jews who were followers of Jesus Christ in the first century – it quickly spread from Judea into Asia Minor and then further abroad. By the fourth century, Christianity had become the official state religion of the [Roman Empire](#). Christianity has, in fact, played a major role in the shaping of western civilisation.

What Is Religion?

When the [Latin](#) word *religio* found its way into the English language as *religion*, around the 1200s, it took the meaning of “life bound by monastic vows” or monastic orders. It eventually came to distinguish the domain of the church and the domain of civil authorities.

Yet the ancient and medieval world understood the word *religio* quite differently. For the ancients, it carried a meaning of *individual virtue of worship*, never as doctrine,

practice, or actual source of knowledge. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, there is no precise equivalent of the English word *religion*. The Greek word *threskeia*, used in the New Testament, is sometimes translated as religion, however, the term was more correctly understood as 'worship', well into the medieval period.

In the Quran, the Arabic word [*din*](#) is often translated as religion in modern translations, but up until the mid-1600s, translators expressed *din* as law.

Religion, in itself, is a modern, western concept and it was understood in quite a different way by those who lived in the ancient world. Today, religion would perhaps be explained as a system of rules or practices governed by certain beliefs. The ancient world would have viewed this concept as *law* and saw *religion* quite differently; as the idea of worship or reverence of God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things and piety, or diligence.

Religion Has A Bad Reputation

Discussion about religion is often long, complex, divisive and inconclusive. It doesn't come as any surprise that the IPSOS Global Poll released in 2017 shows that a majority of Australians (63%) believe that religion does more harm than good. Only one in four Australians say religion defines them as a person.

Religion has been much maligned – and [*perhaps with good reason*](#). Unfortunately, when men and women get their hands on religion, it is often for the purpose of control and manipulation of others. Many [*terrible acts*](#) have been committed 'in the name of religion' and supposedly with a divine blessing – yet God is often furthest from the minds of those perpetrating such acts. In reality, God is often the last priority; intolerance is the driving force behind many actions that claim permission on religious grounds.

“Christianity itself has a long history of such intolerance, including persecution of Jews, crusades against Muslims, and the Thirty Years’ War, in which religious and nationalist rivalries combined to devastate Central Europe.” | [The New York Times](#)

What Is True Religion?

The aim of this article is not to impress on any reader the ‘rightness’ of our particular beliefs or doctrines. Whether a man or woman chooses to be religious, or not, should be a deeply personal consideration, without manipulation or coercion from others.

Rather, it is intended to be an honest examination of what ‘true religion’ should be for any committed Christian, professing belief in Jesus’ saving work and God’s divine plan for the world.

If we have accepted Jesus as our saviour, our beliefs and our practices must line up and work together in harmony. We must profess and practice true religion, not merely an inadequate form, which hasn’t touched our hearts. Timothy warns against a form of godliness, which appears righteous from the outside but in reality denies the power that godliness has to radically transform us (2 Timothy 3:2-5).

The word *religion* is only used a few times in the Bible. But the concept of religion, as it was originally understood, actually permeates the entire Bible. True religion, at its core, is about the relationship between God and ourselves and how this transforms us from the inside out.

This understanding began early on in the book of Genesis, where men began to call on the name of God (Genesis 4).

“Now men began to worship God, not only in their closets and families, but in public and solemn assemblies. The

worshippers of God began to distinguish themselves: so the margin reads it. 'Then began men to be called by the name of the Lord' – or, to call themselves by it. Now Cain and those that had deserted religion had built a city, and begun to declare for irreligion, and called themselves the sons of men. Those that adhered to God began to declare for Him and His worship, and called themselves the sons of God." | Benson Commentary

Another commentary has this to say:

"The name of God signifies in general 'the whole nature of God, by which He attests His personal presence in the relation into which He has entered with man, the divine self-manifestation, or the whole of that revealed side of the divine nature, which is turned towards man'. In Genesis 4, we have an account of the commencement of that worship of God which consists in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, or in the acknowledgment and celebration of the mercy and help of God. Those of the family of Seth began, by united invocation of the name of God of grace, to found and to erect the [kingdom of God](#)." – Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament

True religion – pure religion – is the acknowledgment of our need for God's mercy, our worship of Him and what He has done for us and the application of His character in our lives, because of our thankfulness.

True religion is the seamless unity of believing *and* doing and it's demonstrated throughout the Bible by countless examples of [faithful men](#) and [women](#). (Hebrews 11:1-40). It's an **active faith**, shown by both word and deed and not just empty talk.

"Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster

before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless ('the fatherless and the widow') in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world." – James 1: 26-27, MSG

Jesus put it in another way:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" Matthew 22:37-39, NIV

And again, in Hosea:

"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." – Hosea 6:6, BSB

What True Religion Isn't

True religion isn't rules-based or rituals-based but is instead firmly rooted in faith. Faith, in response to God's action in our lives, [alters everything about us](#); our daily relationships, our perspective on life, our interactions with family, neighbours, friends and community. When God is present and completely sovereign in our lives, when we adhere to God and declare for Him and His worship, God calls us His children and part of His family. This is religion in its purest and most true form.

God's gift of freedom is easily perverted and often squandered by men or women placing religious burdens and rituals on their fellow man. Jesus condemned the religious leaders of his day for exactly this, commenting that *"they tie up heavy, burdensome loads and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them..."* (Matthew 23:4).

God is not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways. He is a deeply real and loving Father who invites us into a personal relationship with Him. It is always an invitation, never coercion or guilt-driven; we are given space and freedom to answer His invitation. [Through Jesus](#), we have been set free and are invited to participate in God's saving work with humanity.

How important it is for any sincere and genuine Christian to constantly promote this extraordinary message of God's grace and ensure we don't unwittingly return to a life of rule-keeping, which God finds no pleasure in.

What people need to see and experience from us is **true religion** – active, transformative and inspiring. The kind of religion that Jesus demonstrated every day.

*“Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, **then Christ died unnecessarily.**” | Galatians 2:21, MSG*

The modern concept of the meaning behind the word religion is an abstraction that involves distinct sets of beliefs or doctrines. Its usage, in this way, began with texts from the 17th century, resulting from events such as the splitting of Christendom during the Protestant Reformation and globalisation in the age of exploration.

However, the word religion, from the Latin *religio*, 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 *creed*.

You may be interested to read more in the article: [From Religion To Cruciformity](#).

Building Resilience

Resilience can sometimes be mistaken for indifference, unaccountability or emotional disconnection but in reality, resilience is the complete opposite of these things. It is the ability to truly face reality, to be responsible for our actions and to be emotionally vulnerable, if necessary. It is the inner strength that enables us to bounce back after facing unexpected challenges or setbacks. Resilience can be equated to mental fortitude and it lives in the small moments, as well as the large ones.

Resilience Isn't Endurance

It can be easy to think that resilience and endurance are alike but they're not really the same thing. While they both require mental or physical fortitude in moments of crisis or challenge, endurance simply hunkers down and waits for the worst to pass. Endurance is employed somewhat momentarily – once the crisis or challenge is over, things return to normal. Resilience, however, says, "I will get through this and come out the other side stronger, perhaps wiser and having gained something of value. Things will have changed, because of this experience." Resilience sees the challenge or crisis is an opportunity for growth and moves confidently towards it.

We don't get to decide if we will deal with life's challenges; they arrive whether we want them or not. But we do get to decide how well we'll get through them and what lessons we'll learn from them. Learning to be resilient means learning to be open, resourceful and accepting of those challenges or changes

as they come.

It would be very easy to endure all kinds of trouble and yet learn nothing from it or remain unchanged by the experience. Resilience is what develops from these experiences, if we allow it. We all have the capacity for great resilience yet, like every acquired skill, it needs to be practiced and challenged in order to grow and develop.

The idea of growing resilience is commented on by James, the brother of Jesus, when writing his letter to the believers in his time.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” – James 1:2-4, NIV

James confirms that challenges are not meant to be just endured; they are meant to change us. We’re being developed into [our authentic selves](#) in Christ and these challenges form part of that process.

Resilience Is The Enemy Of Fear

Learning to be resilient actually means learning to be unafraid of things like failure, rejection, embarrassment or abandonment. At the core of resilience is the ability to be realistic about the potential for things to go wrong, coupled with positive optimism that things will go right. It’s being grounded firmly in the here and now, in reality, but hopeful of better things. It’s learning to deal with all the challenges we encounter with a growth mindset, not a fixed mindset. Resilience is the difference between “I can’t do this”, and “I can’t do this yet”. Resilient people don’t just endure challenges, they’re proactive about moving through them and coming out stronger. Where resilience lives, fear cannot

flourish.

Resilience And Faith Are Friends

Hebrews 11 is known as the great chapter on faith. Yet it's also a list of a great number of individuals who, in essence, had developed resilience in their life and, because of that resilience, were able to undertake great things.

“And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.” – Hebrews 11:32-34, NIV

We realise from reading Hebrews 11 that resilience and faith are intrinsically linked. When we choose to believe in God's existence and His plan for us, we choose to put our faith in something greater than ourselves. This faith forms a large part of accepting God and embracing what He is doing for us. It also gives us a great of comfort that we are not alone and that God is working in our lives to bring about our good. Perhaps one of the best ways to start growing resilience, or at least begin our pursuit of it, is to acknowledge that we have worth to God and that He has a purpose for our lives. Continually reinforcing to ourselves how much God really loves us and that our lives are infinitely precious lays down a positive foundation for beginning to build resilience.

“We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.” – 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, NLT

How To Build Resilience

There are certainly many practical ways to grow resilience and learning those skills and developing inner strength doesn't happen overnight. Here's some ways to start developing your inner strength and learn to face your challenges with confidence:

Get Friendly With Failure – your ability to cultivate resilience relies on your ability to acknowledge failure, without allowing it to cripple you. We all make mistakes, we don't always get things right the first time. But learning from our mistakes and growing through them is a key aspect of developing resilience.

Use Empathy – taking the time to consider another person's life or situation can really help when dealing with difficult situations or experiences. Instead of reacting in emotional ways, we should try to see things from their point of view and work to support and encourage them. Learning to deal with these people or situations, despite the challenges, develops our own level of resilience and inner strength.

Exercise Forgiveness – forgiveness allows us to move fully beyond a setback or disappointment and leave it in the past. It doesn't mean that we forget the situation. However, instead of feeling victimised or indulging in bitterness or self-righteousness, forgiveness give us an opportunity to learn from the experience and constructively try to resolve the setback. Forgiveness is first and foremost a gift to ourselves. Coupled with learning to forgive is also learning to apologise to those we've hurt or mistreated. This is a crucial aspect of developing our own sense of accountability for the choices we make in our life.

Don't Compare – remember that we are all created as unique individuals and, despite what we may see on social media or how we perceive other's lives to be, everyone has their good

days and their bad days! Not only that, we all have different talents and skills, different personalities and different cultural backgrounds. God doesn't require us to be as good as someone else – just the best version of ourselves.

“I know how to live humbly, and I know how to abound. I am accustomed to any and every situation—to being filled and being hungry, to having plenty and having need. I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” Philippians 4:12-13, BSB

Avoiding Church Burnout

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands, whether real or perceived. Eventually, you find you literally have nothing left to give, either emotionally or physically. This state often leads to a range of issues including anxiety, depression, insomnia, anger and ill health.

Church Burnout

Burnout, particularly in relation to church life, is a subject that doesn't get as much discussion as it should. Perhaps it's because we tend to think that 'doing lots of stuff' and 'attending lots of events' is a requirement of any conscientious church member. We dutifully fill our calendars with copious church events, often to the exclusion of personal

time, family time or, most importantly, time *with* God.

We curate an 'all-or-nothing' mentality in relation to church service; and any spare time we *do* find ourselves with is spent wracked with guilt, thinking about all the things we "should be doing". Frankly, if we're not *dying* from exhaustion, we conclude that we lack any kind of serious commitment.

After all, church life is supposed to be all-encompassing, exhausting, limiting (of our 'own time') and (between you and me) somewhat boring, right?

Wrong!

A church is like the human body, a living thing – made up of real people (1 Corinthians 12:12). Real people have their limits, emotionally, spiritually and physically. Not only that, our levels of limitation will fluctuate during different stages of our lives.

We cannot be the same person once we have a partner or children as we were when we were single.

We don't have the same strength or 'spring-in-our-step' in our older years as we did when we were younger.

Our capabilities and energies ebb and flow, along with the ups and downs of our lives, and ***we can only give what we can give*** in the very moment of **right now**.

And church life should be rewarding, fulfilling, energising and motivating! Being at church should feel like being part of the family – comfortable, welcoming and with a real sense of belonging. The minute we stop seeing the value in what we're doing is the minute we need to stop and rethink the ***why*** of what we're doing!

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household" – Ephesians 2:19, NIV

A Church Is Only As Healthy As Its Members

It's important to remember a church will only be as healthy and balanced and energised as the sum of all its members – those real people who make up the congregation.

If, individually, the members are exhausted and overloaded, the church will display signs of exhaustion too. It will become unbalanced, unhealthy and stunted in growth. It's also important to remember that **we** don't grow our church – God does the growing. Sure, we all have our part to play but no single person is responsible for, or indispensable to, God's plan for the growth of a church or community.

“The key issue for churches in the twenty-first century will be church health, not church growth.” – Rick Warren

What Does Church Burnout Look Like?

Have you heard yourself saying this recently?: “I'm so exhausted”, or “I just *can't* go to another thing this week”. Maybe you've found yourself thinking, “I'm *never* at home” or “Why can't *someone else* do this for once?”. If you have, you may be suffering from church burnout.

Here's what church burnout looks like, in real life:

1. You're always busy, at everything, constantly in motion. You find yourself overcommitting and double booking.
2. You have idealistic standards about what a 'real church' should look like.
3. Your day always seems to arrive with constant low-grade stress and periodic crisis.
4. You often decline offers of help and assistance.
5. You feel a strong sense of responsibility, even when others don't.

6. You feel extremely guilty about not attending church events or activities, even if you've already attended several that week.
7. You feel a strong sense of expectation from other church members.
8. You have an inability to say no and if you do, it's with reluctance and guilt.
9. When you think about church, you feel suffocated, resentful, despondent and angry.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." – Matthew 11:28-30, NIV

Church life – life with Jesus – is for those who are weary and burdened – because in Jesus we find rest.

Church life becomes a natural extension of the peace and fulfilment that we've found in Jesus. It's designed to enrich our lives, ease our burdens, and provide supportive relationships for hard times. It develops character growth and maturity so that we can support others, when needed. And service within our church should be something that fills us with joy and deep personal fulfillment.

Church life is the natural outworking of a life based on *being* a certain kind of person, not *doing* certain kinds of things.

Tips For Preventing Church Burnout

- Emphasise grace over works in your personal life. Concentrate on who you're ***being*** rather than what you're ***doing***. Remind yourself that we don't earn God's blessings by the amount of work we do. He wants us to lead healthy, balanced lives where ministry service is a joy, where giving becomes as simple as *doing because it*

has been done for us.

- Make time for regular recreation. These are the times when you can pause, reset and renew. Without recreation, burnout is inevitable.
- Know your limits and set reasonable, achievable boundaries for the work you take on. Giving of yourself is a valuable and worthy service, but sometimes giving isn't always possible or profitable. If you need to say "no", then do so, with **no guilt attached**.
- Remember that the work is God's, not your own. Seek His guidance and help when you consider your responsibilities and commitments within your church.
- Learn to put [first things first](#). Being involved within your church community is a valuable part of a fulfilling spiritual life – but never at the expense of your time with God or your family. Set priorities and look for ways to involve your partner or family in church activities. Be willing to occasionally say no to low priority church activities when they conflict with quality family time.
- Listen to your body's warning signs, such as headaches, backaches, dizziness, insomnia, and unexplainable fatigue. Learn to slow down and be less anxious. **You can only do what you can do, right now** – nothing more.

Ultimately, you are in control of you – your decisions, your motivations, your attitude and your abilities. You, alone, can gauge whether a task or event is too great for you to take on or attend, or whether it's something that you can fit into your life.

The most important part of church life is focusing on **who you are being**, not what you are doing. Focusing on your 'being', rather than your 'doing' will bring things into perspective and make it easier to see what's important and what's not so important. When **being** becomes your focus, rather than **doing**, you will go a long way towards avoiding church burnout.