

# Heaven + Earth: The End Of The Story

Inarguably, it's the end of any story that's the most important part.

While the beginning of a tale gives context and setting, and the middle gives the story its shape and drama, it's the ending that provides meaning and gives resolution to the narrative. It's the ending that makes sense of everything, that allows all the intersecting threads of drama, intrigue, risk, loss, joy, and homecoming to find their place and purpose within the story and, particularly, in its overarching conclusion.

Humanity's story; an ongoing tale of love and war, victory and defeat, joy and tragedy, has not yet reached its conclusion, but, surprisingly, its ending *has already been written*.

While scientists and philosophers have had much to offer to the conversation about our origins and humanity's remarkable traverse through history, with all of our astonishing achievements, they have little to offer on the subject of where we might all be going or how our story finishes. When it comes to science, we are left largely in the dark about the questions that matter the most.

*What are we here for?*

*What is the purpose of life?*

*Where will we end up?*

## Life's Most Profound Questions

It's to the Bible alone that we can turn for answers to life's most profound questions. It has much to say about not just how

we supposedly got here and why, but also how humanity's story will reach its epic conclusion.

The Bible is the living, Spirit-breathed Word of God, the written revelation of what God has been doing in the past, what He is still doing right now, and what he has intended for the future of humanity.

The Word of God is like a vast tapestry, its main theme interwoven with many sub-plots and side stories that run like golden threads through an intricate design. Each of these threads complements the complete telling of God's story and confirm again and again to us the way in which God views the world, the people who inhabit it, and how important each one of us are to Him.

Far from being just black text on white pages; this book unveils the purpose, intentionality, and creative action of the Eternal One; breathed out, captured by way of quill and scroll by the faithful scribes who heard 'the voice of God', recording the Eternal's story for all to read.

What we also learn about God's story is that the master storyteller hasn't been absent or detached from His story, but fully present and, in fact, His full, enveloping presence, His close and intimate dwelling with humanity was actually the point of the story all along. What began in a garden, where God once [walked with us](#), will find its epic conclusion in a 'new creation', in a restored and regenerated earth where God at last dwells with His people.

The end of our story will actually be *our new beginning*. The conclusion of our story doesn't end with us going to be with God; but *with God coming to earth*, returning, at last, *to be with us*.

God's story has a conclusion, an ending, a moment when all the loose strings are neatly tied up and we'll sit back, with a sigh of satisfaction at a tale well told and an ending more

glorious than we could ever have imagined.

## The Purpose Of God

Much of scripture is given to expressing the heart of the Creator and what His hopes and dreams were for this place we call Earth, along with us, its inhabitants, as His intended image-bearers.

*“Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.” | Genesis 1:26, CSB “Yet as surely as I live and as surely as the whole earth is filled with the glory of the LORD.” | Number 14:28, ESV “And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all humanity together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” | Isaiah 40:5, ESV “On that day the LORD will become King over all the earth – the LORD alone and His name alone.” | Zechariah 14:9, ESV “And blessed be His glorious name forever: and let the whole earth be filled with His glory; Amen, and Amen.” | Psalm 72:19, ESV*

It was always the purpose of the Eternal to fill this good earth with His glorious presence, as deep and as expansive ‘as the waters cover the sea’. Despite human failure and many, many detours in this story, God has declared that His purpose will not be thwarted. He will accomplish what He intended for His creation, even to [His own personal cost](#), as it turns out.

*“I declare the end from the beginning and ancient times from what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and all My good pleasure I will accomplish.’” | Isaiah 46:10, ESV*

## The Kingdom Of God

This glorious and absolute rule and reign of the wise and

faithful king is what the New Testament terms the 'kingdom of God'.

[The gospel](#) is the good news that in Jesus, who is both saviour and king, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

What many people think of as 'the gospel' – being '[saved](#)' – is actually only just one aspect of a much larger story, *the full gospel* ('good news') story of God's will and purpose for the earth and how humanity is part of that.

*"To grasp the significance of the message of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus, we can also resort to statistical analysis. The term basileia (kingdom) occurs 162 times in the New Testament and 121 of those are in the Synoptic Gospels where the preaching of Jesus is recorded. The formula "kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven" occurs 104 times in the Gospels. This message is not only the inaugural message of Jesus and the focus of His great Sermon on the Mount, it is his final message. "After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). The gospel of the kingdom includes the necessity of salvation since the very message begins with the call for repentance, but it goes beyond the call to salvation and includes the demand for kingdom-focused living. It insists that we are saved for a purpose." – SBC Life*

The kingdom of God is more than social justice or personal salvation. 'The kingdom of God' is the promise of God from the beginning to fill the earth with His glory, essentially, all of Himself, and to rule justly in the hearts and lives of all of humanity. It also includes the promise of total reconciliation with humanity; only made possible in Jesus

(Ephesians 1:11-12, 1 Timothy 1:16-17, 2 Timothy 4:18, 1 Peter 4:11, Romans 11:36, Revelation 1:16).

## Heaven + Earth

God didn't just create humanity with purpose, He also created the earth with purpose. He cares deeply about what happens to this place we call home and all that He intended it to be.

A critical and essential reality of the kingdom of God includes its physicality. 'The kingdom' is not just an individual, spiritual, Christian *experience* but a literal reality that will be fully expressed and outworked *on the earth*.

Interestingly, intrinsic in the idea of 'kingdom' are the following five things: King + Rule + Realm + Law + Land. You can read more about these different aspects in the articles. '[The People Of The Kingdom](#)' and '[The Kingdom | Now, But Not Yet](#)'. However, the particular focus in this article is the reality of 'land' or physicality. This reality, when compared against many different passages in the Bible informs our understanding of what, or more specifically, where, this physical reality is intended to be.

Contrary to what many people may think, *going to heaven is not a Christian's final ending or God's promise*. Resurrection and *life* – heaven's own eternal life – on a regenerated and restored earth, is the hope for every [person of the kingdom](#).

*Earth* is the place where God's will is to be done (where His kingdom will be fully revealed) in the same way as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10), *earth* is the intended inheritance of those who have been faithful, (Psalm 37:11, Matthew 5:5), *earth* is the place where peace and safety will finally reign supreme (Isaiah 2:4, Ezekiel 34:25) and where righteousness will take up residence (2 Peter 3:13), and *earth* is where all creation will finally be set free from its bondage and brought

into the glorious freedom that God always intended for it (Romans 8:21).

*Earth* is the place where the curse of Eden will finally and completely be overthrown and God will return and take up residence amongst His people. Our long exile will be over.

*“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.” Revelation 21:3, BSB*

“As N.T Wright and other New Testament scholars have shown, it’s important to understand that kingdom terminology refers not to some faraway paradise filled with disembodied souls, but rather to the will and reign of God, unleashed into the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” (Rachel Held Evans). N T Wright puts it this way: *“Jesus’ resurrection is the beginning of God’s new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord’s Prayer is about.”*

The life of heaven – the “life and light of mankind” came to earth in the person of Jesus, shining brightly and giving hope in a damaged and disordered world. In Jesus, we can see the intention of God all along for His creation. In Jesus, all the fullness of God’s glory was displayed in human form and we can see the kind of life God has intended for us.

What God began in the resurrection of Jesus is what He intends to do for all of creation; to regenerate, to restore, and to fully dwell with His creation in all His glory.

The earth, renewed with heaven’s own life, is the epic conclusion to the story, and the final pages close with this promise: *“The angel showed me a river that was crystal clear, and its waters gave life. The river came from the throne where*

*God and the Lamb were seated. Then it flowed down the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river are trees that grow a different kind of fruit each month of the year. The fruit gives life, and the leaves are used as medicine to heal the nations.*

***God's curse will no longer be on the people of that city. He and the Lamb will be seated there on their thrones, and its people will worship God and will see Him face to face. God's name will be written on the foreheads of the people. Never again will night appear, and no one who lives there will ever need a lamp or the sun. The Lord God will be their light, and they will rule forever.*** (Revelation 22:1-5, CEV)

*"One day the veil will be lifted; earth and heaven will be one; Jesus will be personally present, and every knee will bow at his name; creation will be renewed; the dead will be raised; and God's new world will at last be in place, full of new prospects and possibilities." | N T Wright*

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**What happens after the end? Well, the short answer is *we don't know*. We're told so much in the Bible about God's purpose, His original intention for creation, and the lengths to which He has gone to get that story back on track. (Although, side-note, was it really ever truly off-track...?). We're also told how this particular story will conclude.**

**But what comes after? As it is written, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). The great Christian author, C S Lewis, puts it this way: "All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." (The Last Battle)**

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# An Argument For The Trinity

If you're an orthodox Christian, already familiar with the doctrine of the Trinity, you might like to head somewhere else right now. This article will probably be, as they say, preaching to the converted.

But if that's not you, and the idea of the Trinity is new, challenging, confronting, downright heretical, or, as far as you're concerned, completely unbiblical...just hear me out.

I grew up being told all these things about the Trinity. I can confidently say now that not only do I believe I was misinformed about what the doctrine endeavours to articulate, I was also misinformed about the historical background and context of this doctrine, what the early church taught regarding the nature of Jesus, and what scripture itself teaches.

Several things resulted in a massive shift in my perspective, understanding, and belief of this doctrine, which I'd like to share in this article and which I hope will be helpful to anyone wrestling with this topic. It's not necessarily everyone's conversation of choice, but it's come up several times with different individuals in the past few months, and so now seemed like the right time to share some thoughts on this one.



# The Context Of The Council Of Nicea

In the spring of 325AD, a council of Christian bishops convened in the city of Nicaea (now known as the town of İznik, in modern-day Turkey). They met to deliberate over a theological dispute that had arisen concerning the nature of Jesus, his origins, and his relationship to God the Father.

Known as the Arian controversy – named for the presbyter and priest (Arius) to whom the controversy is attributed – the gathering was not so much an argument about whether Jesus was *God*, but rather, a dispute over whether Jesus was *eternal*; and therefore *without beginning*, or whether he had been created *before time* and was therefore subordinate to the Father.

This is an important distinction: the Council was not arguing over whether ‘*Jesus was God*’ (God the Son), as I had always been taught. This was a dispute over whether he had always existed (and was therefore of *the same substance* as the Father) or whether he had been begotten/created (and was therefore *similar but not the same* as God the Father).

*“Arian theology holds that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who was begotten by God the Father with the difference that the Son of God did not always exist but was begotten/made before time by God the Father; therefore, Jesus was not coeternal with God the Father, but nonetheless Jesus began to exist outside time.”*

This was an ontological argument. Who was Jesus before he was Jesus, did he *always exist* before time or was he *created* before time? Was the Son *equal* with the Father or *subordinate*? Was he *the same as* or *different* from the Father?

## What Did The Early Church Teach?

The reason the Arian theology was so controversial is because it was *a change to the status quo*. The early church taught and

believed in the divinity of the Son, and that his nature was the same essence and substance as God the Father. They believed that Jesus, as the Word of God, was eternal, was from God Himself, and therefore was of the same substance as God.

*“According to its [Arianism’s] opponents, especially the bishop [St. Athanasius](#), Arius’ teaching reduced the Son to a demigod, reintroduced polytheism (since worship of the Son was not abandoned), and undermined the Christian concept of redemption, since only he who was truly God could be deemed to have reconciled humanity to the Godhead.” | [Britannica](#)*

We have not just the writings of well-known apostles like Paul and Peter and John, but also those who came after them – extra-biblical sources – who taught about Christ as the Word of God, the virgin birth, and the incarnation. Names such as Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, Polycarp, and Irenaeus, many of whom were contemporaries and disciples of the apostles, wrote and taught extensively on this subject. You can read, for example, Ignatius’ letter to the Ephesians (written some time between 107–110 CE) [here](#).

It is an egregious misrepresentation to say that the divinity of Christ was invented in the fourth century; what is actually true is that the accepted understanding of *the nature of Christ* was being challenged. The intention of the Council of Nicene was, therefore, to define, in written form, what the church *already believed and taught regarding Jesus*, binding Christendom together in unity across different traditions and practices.

The Nicene Creed used the same three-fold structure as the more simple and earlier creeds, such as the Apostles’ Creed, which had touched very little on this topic, and, because of this particular controversy, went into more depth and detail in relation to Christology – that is, the nature and origin of Jesus Christ.

## Is 'Trinity' In The Bible?

The early church fathers taught and believed in the divinity of Jesus, his existence before time, and his incarnation as the Word-Made-Flesh. But perhaps they had deviated significantly in doctrine in the first few years of the church's existence?

This is often one of the criticisms leveled at the Trinity from those who reject it, a two-fold dismissal if you like; firstly, that the word 'trinity' isn't mentioned in the Bible and, secondly, that its 'official introduction' in the fourth century (a claim shown to be a misrepresentation, at best) was 'the great apostasy' the church had been warned about (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3).

It's suggested that as early as AD98, only a generation on from the incredible outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), the church had veered wildly off-course and into heresy, even with the Holy Spirit as guide and teacher, the very recent reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the powerful witness of those who had walked with him, many of whom were still alive.

Honestly? I find that extremely unlikely.

I trust not only the teaching of the apostles themselves, who were radically transformed by their experience of the resurrection, but also the work of the Holy Spirit, active and powerful, in growing the church and supporting the new believers in their faith. It just doesn't seem credible to me that something so important, so vital, so life-changing could be corrupted and derailed so early on.

Certainly, the church began to face challenges as time went on, particularly as the apostolic age drew to a close. It experienced great periods of persecution, followed finally by a shift in fortune in the form of open favour from Rome's

pagan Emperor, Constantine, the emperor of the Nicene Creed. Yet it was during the early years of persecution and struggle that we find the orthodox doctrines being taught and written about, not formulated later under, as is sometimes asserted, pagan influences.

You can research any of the early church fathers and their teaching for yourself. Ignatius, for example, an early Christian writer and later Patriarch of Antioch, wrote many letters which serve as examples of early Christian theology. He, along with Polycarp, another apostolic father, are traditionally held to be disciples of John of the Revelation, and demonstrated their 'trinitarian' consciousness in their writings.

Just as the word 'omnipotence' isn't found in the Bible, and yet we understand the concept of God's supremacy and power to be taught throughout scripture, so, too, you won't find the word 'trinity', and yet the concept of One God, revealed to us in three distinct persons, completely unified with each other, can be found throughout the New Testament.

Here are several biblical passages which teach this concept regarding the Christology of Jesus. Take some time to read through them for yourself: John 1:1-5, John 1:1-5, John 5:17-18; John 10:33-38, Hebrews 1:1-4, Colossians 1:18-20, Colossians 2:9, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Philippians 2:6-11, John 17:5, 2 Corinthians 8:9, John 8:58.

While the word 'trinity' is not explicitly used in the New Testament letters and epistles, the *concept* of the trinity was certainly expressed by biblical authors and was the understanding of the early church, as can be seen by the extensive writings of the early church fathers. It was this understanding that the Nicene Creed attempted to articulate and document in 325AD.

# God Is 'One' So The Trinity – 'Three Gods' – Can't Be Right. Can It?

One of the huge misconceptions that non-Trinitarians hold to is the belief that the doctrine of the Trinity teaches there are three gods. In reality, the Trinitarian doctrine actually affirms biblical monotheism and rejects the heresy of 'three gods' (polytheism).

The Bible teaches that God is One, but not in the numerical sense that is often used by non-Trinitarians. God is One in the sense that there is no other. He, alone, is the singular God in all the universe.

The ancient Jewish prayer – known as the Shema – recites this truth *"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength"*.

The meaning of this famous prayer is that the people of Israel were to learn to listen and love God fully, above all else, with all their hearts. The Shema wasn't making a statement about God's essence but rather His preeminence. It wasn't intended to function as a negation of the idea of the Trinity but as a statement of allegiance to the only true God, particularly relevant for a people who had been steeped in polytheism for generations.

*"This prayer has been one of the most influential traditions in Jewish history, functioning both as the Jewish pledge of allegiance and a hymn of praise."* | The Bible Project

Interestingly, Jesus quotes the Shema on two occasions in the synoptic gospels, in Matthews 22 and Mark 12. In Matthew, he follows up immediately with questions about the origins and paternity of the Messiah, the Messiah's relationship to the great king of Israel, David, and the title given to the Messiah of 'Lord'; an interesting progression of thought from

Jesus, and one which had the effect of reducing his audience to silence.

## **Isn't The Trinity Doctrine 'Catholic'?**

If, by 'catholic', you mean 'universal', then yes. For the first fifteen hundred years of the church's history, there was only one, 'universal' church and early creeds will often refer to the church in this way. The church's official position in relation to the nature of Christ had been documented in the Nicene Creed in 325AD and it remains the official, orthodox, (accepted) doctrinal position.

However, I suspect what is actually being asked is, "*isn't the Trinity doctrine part of the Roman Catholic Church?*" (ie 'a Catholic thing') and the short answer is no. The Trinity isn't only specific to the Roman Catholic Church. All three branches of Christianity (Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism) subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Even after the Protestant Reformation swept through Europe, beginning with the nailing of Martin Luther's 95 Theses to the castle church in Wittenberg, the resultant split between the Catholic Church and its Protestant offspring largely revolved around the idea that people should be independent in their relationship with God, taking personal responsibility for their faith and referring directly to the Bible for guidance, instead of priests or popes. The Reformation rejected the doctrine of papal supremacy, among other things, and arrived at different views on ecclesiastical polity, apostolic succession, and the nature of salvation, however disagreement on the Trinity was not one of the areas of argument.

That being said, there are a few exceptions; some further religious movements arose out of the Protestant movement which rejected the doctrine of the Trinity; these branches of Christianity are known as 'Unitarian' but are [Socinian](#) rather than Arian in theology.

# What Does It Mean To Be God?

The Bible gives us many descriptions of Who and What 'God' is, endeavouring to help us understand the concept of God, as best we can, from our limited human experience.

The Bible teaches that God is the Creator of all things, the source of all life, sovereign over all, powerful, and perfect. Without beginning and without end, He is eternal, holy, clothed in light, glorious as the sun. Yet He is also tender, loving, forgiving, as compassionate as any mother to her children, and as protective as any father defending His family.

We are created in His image, bearing many of His attributes, yet because of the fall, bound by mortality and constrained by sin. The fall in Eden resulted in brokenness in our relationship with God, creating an impenetrable barrier that we couldn't cross (Exodus 33:18-23). As the popular worship song, 'Jesus, My Living Hope' laments, *"How great the chasm that lay between us, how high the mountain I could not climb."*

Until Jesus came, no one had ever seen God face to face. Yet as Timothy writes (1 Timothy 3:16), the invisible God was made visible in Jesus, *"this is, without question, the great mystery of our faith; God was revealed in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."*

If we could not come to God (and we couldn't – see below: 'God Does The Saving'), then God would come to us.

*"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish." | [John 1:14](#)*

John, writer of the fourth gospel, offers a more insightful

perspective, opening with the otherworldly prologue regarding Jesus and his origins; specifically, the identification of Jesus as the Word, who was with God and was God in the beginning.

Through Jesus, he says, all things have been brought into being; he is the light and life of humanity, who became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory – face-to-face at last – as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

God came to us, wrapped in the perishable, temporary covering [of flesh and bone](#), the full intensity and glory hidden within Jesus. We have a hint of what that glory was like in Luke 9:29-32, where the veil was lifted momentarily and his appearance was altered, an event the Bible calls ‘the transfiguration’.

Jesus himself declared that only he could reveal God fully, in his words, “no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt 11:27b) and that “the person who has seen him [Jesus] has seen the Father.” (John 14:8-9).

The gospel of John offers more: seven ‘signs’ culminating in the resurrection of Lazarus (proof of Jesus’ power over even death itself), and seven ‘I am’ discourses, culminating in the declaration by Thomas concerning Jesus as “my Lord and my God”. The first instance, in John 8:58, leaves no doubt that Jesus’ claimed to be God incarnate, because the Jews were infuriated by his reply and took up stones to kill him.

*“John’s “high Christology” depicts Jesus as divine and preexistent, defends him against Jewish claims that he was “making himself equal to God”, and talks openly about his divine role and echoing Yahweh’s “I Am that I Am” with seven “I Am” declarations of his own.” | Stephen L Harris, Understanding the Bible*



Jesus was fully God; the invisible God made visible in a way that we could draw near to, touch, walk with, and eat with. Yet Jesus didn't count his equality with God as something to be held onto, but rather something to be set down, for our sakes, and did so 'by becoming a man like other men' (Philippians 2:7-9, Weymouth NT).

## **Nothing Is Impossible With God**

Those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity often do so on the basis that it's impossible; how could God become human or how could God die? And who was 'left in heaven' if God came to earth? (yet another misunderstanding about who was sent and who was the sender: "And we have seen and testify that *the Father* has sent *His Son* to be the Savior of the world.")

Yet we also accept many other impossibilities in scripture: that life can be created from nothing, that sickness can be completely healed, that water and wind can be controlled, that time can be stopped, that water can be turned into wine, that bread and fish can be multiplied, that death itself can be overcome and vanquished.

Nothing, literally, nothing is impossible with God and if we learn anything from scripture, it's that we should be ready to entertain any possibility and expect any outcome. Though we might not always understand how something could be possible, that shouldn't stop us from believing that it could. Our cry should always be, 'Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief.'

God is Spirit. He is not limited by shape, force, boundaries or time. The same, however, cannot be said of humanity. We *are* limited; by time, by physicality, by mortality, by sin. There are things we simply cannot do.

What shifted in my perspective in this particular area was the realisation that without the doctrine of the Trinity, the concept of redemption becomes humanly impossible.

While Jesus had to be truly human – atonement was required on behalf of humanity and only a human could make this restitution (and I've [written about Jesus' humanity elsewhere](#)) – if he had been *only human*, it would have been impossible for him to have overcome sin.

Limited in the same way that we are, even with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, he couldn't have lived a perfect, sinless life and, therefore, successfully 'made atonement' for sin, or have overthrown the greatest enemy, death itself.

This was the entire point of the giving of the Old Covenant; it was intended that humanity should realise through their failure to keep the Law, despite even the best of intentions, their complete inability to atone for or redeem themselves and restore their relationship with God.

Humanity was in an awful bind, a catch-22 situation of epic proportions: atonement must be made by a human...but no human perfect enough or powerful enough existed to make such an atonement. That is the very definition of humanly impossible.

*"But behold"*, God says, *"I will make a way in the desert. I am about to do something new. Prepare the way of the Lord..."* While impossible with humanity, nothing was impossible with God.

The Word Who was in the beginning, Who called life into being, Who is the source of life and light of humanity stepped in the very creation He had made in order to save and redeem it. The Word – truly God – became human, He became the representative of us all and in his human body, the war against sin and death would be waged and won.

What was impossible for us became possible with God. Jesus Christ – truly human and truly God; the One and Only Begotten Son of the Father had come to save the world and reconcile us back to God.

# God Does The Saving

It seems to me that once you start paying attention, you realise the Bible is telling the same story over and over again, but just in different ways, and it can perhaps be summarised in one simple sentence: "God Does The Saving."

*"Praise the Lord, who carries our burdens day after day; he is the God who saves us. Our God is a God who saves; he is the Lord, our Lord, who rescues us from death." | Psalm 68:19-20*

At every turn, humanity's inability to overthrow the curse of Eden is demonstrated, as chapter after chapter of the Bible lays out the moral bankruptcy of the human race. Humans were unable to wage war against sin and win, or to overthrow death. The separation that had resulted from the fall in Eden couldn't be healed just by human power, it needed divine intervention.

It would be God, and it was always going to be God, who would do the saving.

I think this raises another significant point, and one which is worth spending some time on: the difference between a grace-framed salvation theology and a works-framed salvation theology.

Grace tells us that God saves because of Who He is, not because of who we are. We are *saved by grace through faith* – and this is not of ourselves – it is a gift of God. Human endeavour played no part in the work of saving or redeeming humanity back to God. (Ephesians 2:4-10). And this 'work of saving' took place long before we ever turned to God, even, as Romans comments, "*while we were still sinners.*"

Jesus showed us the kind of human we were intended to be, and the kind of holy life we were purposed for, an exact

representation of the divine. He didn't achieve this through grit, sheer willpower, or determined asceticism, but because he *was also truly God*. Nothing of his life should convince us that we can ever be like him, *by our own resolve, strength, or determination* or that by doing good *we are contributing to our salvation*.

Even the most steadfast, committed, faithful Christian does not add anything to the victory won by Jesus and it is only the work of *Christ-in-us* that we are able to become more like God (our works, however, *do* prove our faith is real – and I've written [more about that here](#)).

Irenaeus, an early church father, puts it like this: "*For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.*"

I think the problem with making Jesus human *and only human* is that we are making the work of salvation a human endeavour. We are in danger of seeing Jesus' life as a model for good behaviour (that will somehow make us right with God), and we are framing our Christian life as an exercise of our own determination and willpower which will enable us to overcome. Unspoken but implicit in this theology is the idea that "if you try hard enough, *you too* can overcome like Jesus".

But it is only in *Christ* that we are more than conquerors; we are graciously invited into his victory, and it is only because, in Christ, *who was divine*, God raising us up to partake in the divine nature (*theosis*) becomes possible.

## **In Conclusion (And Not To Be Considered Exhaustive!)**

If you've been wrestling with this topic, the best place to start is always, of course, with scripture. And the best way to start is by asking questions.

I would suggest you take some time to read through the New Testament letters and gospels and notice what the writers are telling you about Jesus. If the idea of 'the Trinity' is new or challenging for you, simply set that aside for now; you're not seeking to prove or disprove the doctrine, only to hear what scripture has to say. Begin the exercise with a willing mind, an open heart, and a prayer for God to reveal Himself.

Read about church history, particularly the first 300 years, for yourself, and seek out the writings of the early church fathers (pre-Nicene era). Is the language used or are the concepts described by them compatible with scripture? Or do they introduce ideas thoroughly at odds with the Bible?

Familiarise yourself with the background and context of the Council of Nicea. What was the reason they gathered? Does this reshape your understanding of the creed and provide better explanation to the language used within it? Are the conclusions of the Council (irrespective of their 'wordiness') consistent with your journey through scripture and history?

Consider the reason for Jesus' coming: why was he sent and what did he accomplish? Jesus himself told us when only just a young boy that "he must be about His Father's business" (Luke 2:49). What was "this business"? Of particular relevance to these questions is Jesus' discourse in John 8:12-58.

Don't try to arrive at a resolution or conclusion in a single moment and allow yourself the freedom to acknowledge that there are things you may not know or understand now, or ever. Our hope rests not in our complete comprehension but in our posture of trust in the One who saves.

And finally, I would respectfully encourage you to consider this: our theology – what we think about God – is 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 understanding and experiencing who God is and what He has done for us, in Jesus, not simply by giving agreement to a statement or creed of 'theological beliefs'.

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 God, in Jesus, crucified. It is in this that we see the extent to which God was prepared to go in order to rescue and redeem us.

Although deeply theological in its language, I believe the Trinity doctrine boldly endeavours to affirm and clarify this reality, underscoring the deep commitment of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit to rescuing, redeeming and restoring creation.

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# When God Moved Into The Neighbourhood

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

## Glory, All-In-All

I think our view or perspective of God and His intentions may have been shaped by many things, but the Bible seems to set the narrative straight pretty much right away, declaring His intent and purpose from the beginning. We read in Genesis 1:6

that God said *“Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”* Further, God declares in Numbers 14:21 that *“the whole earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD.”*

God’s desire has always been for us to be like Him and for Him to dwell with us, utterly and completely.

He intended us to not only be like Him but for us to also rule over His good creation on His behalf, exhibiting his justice, goodness, and truth throughout the earth. Affirming God’s sovereignty, reflected in the way we choose to live like Him, gives shape and purpose to the role for which humanity was created (and, later in scripture, why and how [the church](#) also finds her purpose).

How amazing – the King of all the earth desired to make us in His image and in His likeness so that we might reflect His glory – the weight and splendour of all that He is, and so that everywhere one might look – east, west, north or south – all that can be seen and felt is God.

God dwelt with us once, long ago, in a garden. His glory and splendour could be seen then, as humanity and God walked together in perfect harmony and everything was *very good*. Only one thing remained in order to make this eternal; the application of our free will to partner with God and undertake this rule on His terms, a display of obedience and commitment to Him.

This isn’t what the first humans choose, though, and the third chapter of Genesis starkly illustrates the terrible outcome; banishment from His presence and separation from His glory.

The book of Genesis is a means to a theological end; its purpose to illustrate in historical-mythological language God’s relationship to creation and His intention of dwelling

with us. *“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.”* (Professor C. John Collins).

*Genesis 1–11, then, is the founding story of humanity, ending in crisis. These narratives give a real and true assessment of God’s initial purposes and the human plight. Genesis 12–50 is the founding story of the nation with whom the covenant is eventually made at Sinai. The covenant establishes the relationship to Abraham and his descendants, provides the structure for living in God’s presence, and lays the foundation for God’s presence to be established on earth. – Biologos*

## **The Purpose Of Israel**

The people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, were the chosen people through whom God intended for all the world to learn of Him and be invited into a restored relationship with Him. After their epic deliverance from slavery in Egypt and a desperate flight through the Red Sea, the book of Exodus tells the story of Israel’s journey under the leadership of Moses to Mount Sinai. There, they find its summit is wrapped in thick smoke and access to its base must be limited *because the Lord had descended on it in fire.*

Through rolling thunder and lightning, God makes solemn promises to them in that place. He intends to make of them a *“holy nation, and a kingdom of priests”*, contingent on their faithfulness to His covenant. He gives them ten commandments, so they might understand His holiness and His laws, by which their lives and worship of Him were to be governed. They will be witnesses to the nations around them of the glory and sovereignty of the God, who not only rules over them but also



dwells with them.

It was also at Mount Sinai that *the tabernacle* – the *residence* or *dwelling place of God* was to be constructed. Designed to be able to be transported, it was to be a reminder that God was with them always, dwelling in their midst and travelling with them throughout all their journeys. Housed within *the holiest of holies* inside the tabernacle would be *the ark of the covenant* – a pure, gold-covered wooden chest with an elaborate lid, ornamented with two golden cherubim, called *the mercy seat*. Inside the ark would be placed the *two stone tablets of the ten commandments*.

Swathed in an impermanent, transitory wrapping of tapestry curtains covered in images of cherubim, the glory of God descended and *tabernacled* amongst them. A large cloud of light and mist settled overhead, signaling God's presence was there in their midst. They would know it was time to set out when the cloud lifted but until then, they waited and rested in the presence of the Lord.

God had moved into the neighbourhood.

## **Solomon Builds A Temple**

The tabernacle was an itinerant dwelling place, as the people of Israel would be on the move, as it turns out, for 40 years. When they finally reached the end of their wilderness wanderings and settled in the promised land, it would be many more years before a permanent structure was built to welcome God's glory.

Under the reign of King Solomon the Wise, son of the great [King David](#), a glorious temple was constructed, some 480 years after the Great Exodus. Built with exquisite craftsmanship, using masterfully quarried stone blocks, and cedar and cyprus timbers from the great forests of Lebanon, it was a magnificent building dedicated to the God of Israel and

intended as the place in which He would dwell with His people in a more permanent way.

Solomon's words at the dedication of the temple are beautifully moving to read:

*"I have built this Temple to honor the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. And I have prepared a place there for the Ark, which contains the covenant that the LORD made with our ancestors when he brought them out of Egypt. Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the entire community of Israel. He lifted his hands toward heaven, and he prayed, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in all of heaven above or on the earth below. You keep your covenant and show unfailing love to all who walk before you in wholehearted devotion. You have kept your promise to your servant David, my father. You made that promise with your own mouth, and with your own hands you have fulfilled it today. And now, O LORD, God of Israel, carry out the additional promise you made to your servant David, my father. For you said to him, 'If your descendants guard their behavior and faithfully follow me as you have done, one of them will always sit on the throne of Israel.' Now, O God of Israel, fulfill this promise to your servant David, my father. But will God really dwell on earth? Why, even the highest heavens cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"*  
| 1 Kings 8:20-27, NLT

Solomon asks an important question. Will God really dwell on the earth, with us?

The answer is yes, but as humanity would come to understand, the living God desires to dwell not in temples made of wood and stone but in a living temple, in a structure softer and more pliable than stone, more ancient and beautiful than Solomon's temple or the wilderness tabernacle before that.

He longs to dwell *with us, in us*, utterly and completely.

The people of Israel, however, struggled with their unique and privileged identity. They would worship and serve God for a season and then, when things were going well, they would become complacent and selfish, turning aside to worship gods made of wood and stone, like the nations around them. They abandoned their covenant with God, over and over again.

They paid little heed to the warnings from prophets like Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and Ezekiel about the impending doom that would come upon Jerusalem, should they remain feckless and unfaithful.

Finally, Ezekiel is given a sobering vision of the end; of the moment that God's glory will leave the presence of His covenant people.

*“Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the house, when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court. And the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD. And the sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks. Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.” | Ezekiel 10:4-5, 18-19, 11:22-23*

# The God Who Dwells With Us

The nation of Israel had forgotten that God is not tethered to a building and His desire is not to dwell in a place, *but in a people*.

The final pages of the Old Testament come to a close with the prophetic words of Malachi, written around 460-430 BC. We find the people of Israel have now returned from nearly 130 years of exile and are back in the land of their ancestors. Yet the nation is vastly diminished. The temple has been restored under the leadership of Nehemiah but it is a much smaller building than the previous, gloriously constructed temple of King Solomon's days. Despite Ezekiel's later vision which seemed to offer the promise of God's presence (Ezekiel 43:2), the glory of the Lord has not returned to this temple.

Yet there is still hope to be found. Isaiah speaks these comforting words to Israel around the time of their return from exile in Babylon:

*"Comfort, comfort my people", says your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." | Isaiah 40:1-5, ESV*

John the Baptist deliberately echos these words, over 700 years later, to announce the arrival of Jesus Christ (found in John 1:1-18).

The gospel of John (the Apostle, not Baptist) opens with an

otherworldly prologue regarding Jesus and his origins; specifically, the identification of Jesus as the Word, who was with God and was God in the beginning, through whom all things have been brought into being, who is the light and life of humanity, and who *became flesh and dwelt among us*.

He concludes his origin account with a brief explanation as to his role. "I am", he simply says "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord".

As author and theologian, Eugene H Peterson puts it (and where the title of this article is taken from), God had moved into the neighbourhood (Zechariah 2:10, John 1:14).

*"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish." | John 1:14*

## **God's Temple Is A Person**

The glory of the Lord had returned to dwell among His people. But this time it was wrapped in a perishable, temporary covering [of flesh and bone](#). This was the true temple of the living God, the house of God in which there are many rooms, and which, though it would be destroyed, would be rebuilt again in just three days, an eternal life-giving spirit for all who would enter in (John 2:19-21, John 14:2).

A temple with just a single door, larger on the inside than on the outside, where worshippers as numerous as the stars of heaven would find sacred space.

A place where people could fully enter instead of only just drawing near. A place where the dividing wall would be broken down and peace would be found instead of hostility. A place where there once had stood a wall, but now there would be a way; many brought near by the blood of Christ himself.

A place where people and God could meet, at last, face to face and be reunited.

A place where there once had been two, but now there would be one; humanity reborn in this holiest of places with God dwelling utterly and completely in and with His people.

All the narratives of the Old Testament had been simply shadows and markers, one-dimensional illustrations intended to point the world to the real story God had been writing all along, to the reality that God had intended from the beginning. God would dwell, as He has always intended, among people, *in people*; in a kingdom of priests ransomed to Him by the precious blood of the lamb slain before the foundation of the world.

The glory of God dwelt among us, *tabernacled with us* in the person of Jesus Christ, God-With-Us, and it's in the truest of all temples – Jesus – that all things become possible.

He was all things; the presence of God dwelling fully with us, the glory of God in our midst, the way, the gate, the faithful shepherd, the life, the resurrection and victorious conqueror of death itself, our priest, our peace, the bright and morning star, and the true temple of the living God into whom we can fully enter, through the power of the blood of the cross (Colossians 1:20).

*“Therefore, brethren, we have boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus.” | Hebrews 10:19, Weymouth*

*For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built*

*together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” |  
Ephesians 2:18-22, ESV*

## **Worthy To Enter Into Glory**

It's strange – the more I read the Bible, the more complex it seems, and yet the simpler it becomes. Sure, it's full of strange visions and obscure prophecies, lamentations and poetry, passages offering wisdom for life, and chapters delving into deep theological insights about God and humanity.

Reading the vivid and apocalyptic language of Revelation, for example, stirs our blood while immersing ourselves in the trials and tribulations of faithful Job pulls at our hearts.

The Bible is a completely magnificent book, the traverse of which is the journey of a lifetime.

But there really is only one take-home point in all of it. God wants to  *dwell with us* , all-in-all, utterly and completely, in glory.

It's what we were created for, yet humanity, left to ourselves, is unable to echo God's holiness, His perfection, His righteousness, and His supreme goodness. The nation of Israel, first specifically chosen to be God's people, showed the truth of this. Their faithless, inconsistent example and half-hearted desire for God are a reflection of all humanity.

We could never enter into God's temple, into the very presence of His glory without help. And Jesus was sent to be that help, to make a way, to break down the wall, to bring us back to God. Holy, innocent, unstained and exalted above the heavens, he is the guarantor of a superior covenant; both the presence, the pardon, and the promise of God.

*Jesus makes everything possible.*

All of scripture, in a million different ways, is simply

telling us the truth of this; that in Jesus, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

And *that* is a story worth telling.

*“Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” | Hebrews 10:19-25, ESV*

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**The Pauline epistles are just brimming with thoughts on this subject, too numerous to comment on here. I’m conscious I’ve only just scratched the surface and hope I have managed to do it some small justice. If you’re looking to soak a little longer in these thoughts, I’d recommend heading on over to the book of Hebrews and starting there with a read-through of chapters 1-10...**

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# The Holy Spirit | This Same Power

*“If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” | Romans 8:11, ESV*

*“...This is my [Paul’s] prayer. That God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ and the all-glorious Father, will give you spiritual wisdom and the insight to know more of Him: that you may receive that **inner illumination of the Spirit** which will make you realise how great is the hope to which He is calling you—the magnificence and splendour of the inheritance promised to Christians—and how **tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God**. That power is **the same divine power which was demonstrated in Christ when He raised him from the dead** and gave him the place of supreme honour in Heaven—a place that is infinitely superior to any conceivable command, authority, power or control, and which carries with it a name far beyond any name that could ever be used in this world or the world to come.” | Ephesians 1:18-21, JB Phillips*

The Spirit has been intricately linked with humanity’s story, from the very beginning. It was God’s Spirit that brought the world into being (Genesis 1:2). It was God’s Spirit that empowered men and women in both the Old and New Testament times to prophesy, decipher dreams, possess extraordinary talent and knowledge, and undertake great feats of courage and action (Genesis 40:8, 41:38, Exodus 31:1-6, Judges 3:10, Judges 6:34, Luke 2:25-26, Luke 2:36-38). It was God’s Spirit that sparked conception in Mary’s womb, bringing about the birth of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:30-37). Jesus’ veracity as God’s Son and the revelation that he was sent ‘to take away the sin

of the world' were both affirmed by the Spirit (John 1:29-34). And it was the Spirit of God that [raised Jesus from the dead](#) (Mark 16:9, Romans 8:11).

This same Spirit, the Apostle Paul assures us, dwells in all those who have [surrendered to Jesus](#) as their King and Saviour, empowering and transforming their lives too (Romans 8:11, Ephesians 1:18-21).

Our story, when we choose to become Christian believers, echos the incredible story of creation and the work of the Holy Spirit in the very beginning. The story of creation is our first glimpse into a story that is retold throughout the Bible; that of bringing life and light out of darkness, through the action of God's Spirit, and often connected with the medium of water.

## The Creation Of The World

*"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." | Genesis 1:1-2, NIV*

The heavens and the earth lay empty. We're not told how they came to be this way. We're only given a description of complete nothing-ness – a wasteland of darkness. The Hebrew words used in these verses convey the idea of desolation (*tō·hū*), an undistinguishable ruin (*wā·bō·hū*). Yet, where we would see hopelessness, God sees possibility. Out of chaos, disorder, and darkness, He brings order, light, and life.

It's into this dark chaos that the Spirit of God breaths. Hovering over the waters like a bird brooding over her young ones, the Spirit of God moves over the face of the deep, poised to begin His creative work.

The Hebrew word for 'spirit' (*wə·rū·ah*) can refer to a number

of different things. We may tend to think of it as simply breath or wind and sometimes it does mean that. But it's also used to convey more. Energy, vitality, strength, breath (as in, animating power), mind, or even life can all be meant by the word *wə·rū·aḥ*. The Biblical authors also used this word to describe God's personal Presence. Just as wind or breath is invisible, so God's Spirit is invisible; just as wind has power, God's Spirit is powerful; just as we're kept alive by breath, all things are sustained by God's Spirit (Micah 3:8-10, Ecclesiastes 11:5, Acts 2:1-5, Job 34:14-16).

The use of the word *hovering* or *brooding* in Genesis (also translated as '*fluttering lovingly*') gives us a clue as to the more complex nature of God's Spirit. God's Spirit is not just energy, like some kind of electrical current, but is His divine personal Presence, the sum of all His will, His consciousness, His emotion, His character, and His power. His Spirit is of Him and *is* Him. He is everywhere by His Spirit. As the Psalmist poetically exclaims, there is nowhere we can go where God's Spirit is not. This is a concept not easily understood by our human minds.

*"Where can I flee from your Spirit? Or where will I run from your presence? If I rise to heaven, there you are! If I lay down with the dead, there you are! If I take wings with the dawn and settle down on the western horizon, your hand will guide me there too, while your right hand keeps a firm grip on me. If I say, "darkness will surely conceal me, and the light around me will become night," even darkness isn't dark to you, darkness and light are the same to you." | Psalm 139: 7-12, ISV*

God personally inhabits the creative work that takes place in Genesis. It is His Spirit that empowers life, light, knowledge, beauty, creativity, joy, goodness, fruitfulness, and blessings (Genesis 1:31). It was His Spirit that brought life and order out of chaos and darkness. Everything seen and

unseen is called into being by His Spirit and continues to exist by being connected to His Spirit (Job 34:14-16).

*“By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; their starry host by the breath of His mouth.” | Psalm 33:6, NIV*

## **‘Whereby The World That Then Was Being Overflowed With Water Perished’**

This good world that God breathed into life did not remain that way for long. Genesis 6 paints a grim picture of a world that had fallen once more into chaos, disarray, and spiritual darkness.

Some 1600 years after creation, the world had become so evil that God regretted He had ever made humans (Genesis 6:6). In fact, it broke His heart. His Spirit, everything that is good and right, was sustaining a creation that was ‘rotten to the core’ (Genesis 6:5) and which was actively striving against God’s Spirit (Genesis 6:3). The Hebrew meaning behind Genesis 6:5 is that it was not only the imagination of humans that had been corrupted but their purposes and desires too. They had brought darkness and ruin into the world to the point where God’s Spirit, which sustained all things, including humanity, would no longer choose to sustain such evil.

Genesis 6-8 provides the narrative of the catastrophe that came upon humanity. The ‘world that then was’ was completely erased by water and all in whom the ‘spirit of life’ resided perished (Genesis 7:22).

*“And every living thing on the face of the earth was destroyed – man and livestock, crawling creatures and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth, and only Noah remained, and those with him in the ark.” | Genesis 7:23, BSB*

*“...that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished.”  
| 2 Peter 3:5-6, AKJV*

Only Noah, who had [‘walked with God’](#) and his family were saved (Genesis 9:6). The phrase ‘walked with God’ recalls, perhaps, the original unity of the relationship between humanity and God, where God had ‘walked in the cool of Eden’s garden’ alongside humans (Genesis 3:8). This unity was disrupted when Adam and Eve, grasping at equality with God, acted in opposition to God’s will, resulting in them being banished from the garden and God’s Presence. ‘Walking with God’ is often used throughout the Bible as an expression of returning to a unified relationship with God. It’s what we were created for and what God has always intended for all of humanity.

*“For we are His creation, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them.” | Ephesians 2:10, NIV*

## **Born Again Of Water And Spirit**

It is over this vast emptiness of water that we once again see a bird hovering, signaling God’s Presence (Genesis 8:8-17). ‘The world that then was’ had been born again of water and spirit, washed clean and ready for hope and the regeneration of life.

*“Then he [Noah] sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was **a freshly plucked olive***

*leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.” | Genesis 8: 8-12, NIV*

Centuries pass. The Spirit of God moves powerfully through the ebb and flow of the history of humanity. His intention for His creation will not be thwarted and He will walk with humanity again in a whole and restored relationship. The way He will accomplish this is, of course, through His Son, Jesus.

## Jesus | The New Creation

God steps personally into our drama by sending His Son. The Word, the expression of God, the sum of all His will, His consciousness, His emotion, His character, and His power was poured out and made human (John 1:14).

John, the author of the fourth gospel account in the New Testament, deliberately parallels the Genesis account when beginning his record of this pivotal moment in human history; [the arrival of Jesus, the Son of God](#). He tells us that ‘*in the beginning was the Word (logos), and the Word was **with** God, and the Word **was** God*’ (John 1:1). The use of the word *logos* here is deeply connected to who God is, to the very nature and essence of God, containing within itself the ability to intelligently and lovingly create and sustain life.

Interestingly, perhaps because of the lofty and soaring theology contained in his writings, the apostle John is often symbolised by an eagle, reminding us once again of a bird, brooding over dark waters, poised and waiting to create.

That ‘Word’, and all that is contained by the expression, became a human and ‘dwelt among us’. He was ‘*God-With-Us*’ – and anyone who saw him saw all the radiance of God’s glory; the exact representation of His being (Hebrews 1:3, John 14:10-11). In him, was life and the light of men (John 1:4).

He is the Light that shines in the darkest places of the human heart, bringing peace to the chaos and order and beauty again. That human, of course, was Jesus.

*“For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” | 2 Corinthians 4:6, KJV*

Jesus was human like us. And yet, there was something different about him too. [He was a man, but not merely a man.](#) In him, ‘the entire fullness (completeness) of God dwelt in bodily form’ (Colossians 2:9). [Jesus was a new kind of creation,](#) a new kind of human and he came to show us how we can be a new kind of human too.

*“The first man was named Adam, and the Scriptures tell us that he was a living person. But Jesus, who may be called the last Adam, is a life-giving Spirit.” | 1 Corinthians 15:45, NIV*

Jesus came preaching the good news of salvation, of reconciliation with God, of being able to walk with God in complete harmony again. Jesus enters the tablet of human history like a blazing fire, burning away all that is false and bringing to light that which is true (Malachi 3:2-3).

There is a new reality, he affirms, one where God rules completely in the hearts of humanity and this reality, he proclaims, is right now! The kingdom of God had arrived and this new kind of living would ignite like fire in people’s hearts (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:15)

It is early in his ministry that Jesus demonstrates how this new kind of living begins. He comes to Jordan, where John the Baptist was preaching the baptism of repentance. John’s baptism was first intended to bring people to an

acknowledgment and repentance of sin.

But John also tells the crowds that a little water would mean nothing if they weren't prepared to change their lives. Baptism needed to ignite the kingdom life within a believer, renewing men and women from the inside out. They needed to be 'born again', of [water and of spirit](#).

Jesus showed exactly what this looked like. Although He didn't need baptism for the forgiveness of sin – he never committed any, he still participated in the baptism of repentance, to 'fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). He demonstrated clearly what would be required of all humanity (the act of [belief and baptism](#)) to be able to participate in this new kingdom life.

Upon rising from the water, the Spirit of God came to rest upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaiming '*this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*' (Matthew 3:16). This was a public demonstration of not just the validity of Jesus as God's son but also how all believers who participate in this new creative work would experience rebirth by God's Spirit.

Not long after his baptism, Jesus confirms the significance and importance of being 'born again of water and spirit'. He speaks with Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee and leader of the Jews. Nicodemus believed Jesus to truly be a teacher who had come from God and Jesus takes the opportunity to reaffirm that being reborn of water and spirit is an essential part of becoming a new creation, and 'entering the kingdom of God' (John 3:5).

The baptism of Jesus is another beautiful echo of the story first told to us in Genesis, where God's Spirit hovered like a bird over the waters, before beginning His incredible creative work. It also recalls the story of the washing and regeneration of the world in Noah's day and the new life that



was signaled by the flight of a dove above the waters.

## **New Life By The Spirit**

The truth is, what really needs washing clean is the human heart. The innermost part of humanity, where God wants to be completely at one with us, was separated from God by Adam and Eve's choices. The human heart lies in darkness and chaos and only God's Spirit can bring life and light to this disordered place (Jeremiah 17:9, Mark 7:21-22).

As it was *in the beginning*, the chaos and darkness that is in our lives can be washed clean and reordered. Regeneration, to be born anew, is the termination of people of the old creation with all their deeds and the germination of them in the new creation with the divine life. We take all of the darkness, failure, chaos, and ruin of our life and surrender it to God, who erases it in the water of baptism (Matthew 3:15, Matthew 10:28, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Colossians 2:12, Mark 16:16, Matthew 28:19-20, Ephesians 4:4-6).

Light enters the darkness. That light is Jesus and he brings the knowledge of God into our hearts.

*“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” | 2 Corinthians 4:6-7, ESV*

New life is ignited in us and the new human is reborn. Yet this new life does not come without the promise of help (Ephesians 1:13-14). Jesus tells his disciples that God will send them a comforter to teach and guide them in this new kingdom life. They will be empowered and sustained by nothing less than the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit; the same power that raised Jesus from the dead!

*“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and **He will give you another Helper to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.** The world cannot receive Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you do know Him, for He abides with you and will be in you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” | John 14:15-16, 26, ESV*

*“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.** This promise belongs to you and your children and to all who are far off – to all whom the Lord our God will call to Himself. With many other words he testified, and he urged them, “Be saved from this corrupt generation.” Those who embraced his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to the believers that day” | Acts 2:38-41, BSB*

*“He redeemed us in order that the blessing promised to Abraham would come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive **the promise of the Spirit.**” | Galatians 3:14, BSB*

When Jesus commissioned his disciples to take the good news to the world, making disciples of all nations, he gave them the following instruction:

*“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in **the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” | Matthew 28:19-20, NIV*

## Holy Spirit | This Same Power

The mechanism by which we are renewed, as Christians, is no different from that in the past. It is God's Spirit, which has been *with* God and *is* God since the beginning, and by which everything seen and unseen was created.

Having surrendered our own self-will, we are instructed to ask, as little children would from a parent, for the gift of God's Spirit to come and 'make His home with us' (Luke 11:13, John 14:23). In our new kingdom life, we are directed by God's Spirit in the face of evil and doubt and are strengthened by the teachings of His written Word, the Bible (John 14:16-17, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We are filled with faith and hope, because of the love of God which has been shed in our hearts by His Spirit (Romans 5:5). We rejoice in the Lord, and in the strength of His might, acknowledging that even in this renewing and regeneration, the work is not ours but His (Philippians 2:13, Ephesians 2:10, 2 Corinthians 4:6-7). We are comforted, despite our Saviour's absence (John 14:18-25), walking in the path of light by God's Spirit (Romans 8:14, 1 John 1:7).

Our bodies become temples of the living God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), where His Spirit is pleased to dwell (Romans 8:9) and we wait, with patience in this life, for the final redemption of our mortal bodies by that same Spirit at Jesus' return (Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 15:53, Romans 2:7, 2 Corinthians 5:4).

*"None of us has anything which he did not receive. To begin with, God gives to all life and breath, and in Him we live and move and have our being. Then, fallen creatures as we now are, God gives the blessing of His Son to open out the way of life; and He gives His Word to tell of His purpose which culminates in that Son. To follow that, He promises all needful help from above to answer the needs of His servants and strengthen them*

*on the way of pilgrimage to the Kingdom of His glory. The apostle [Paul] bids disciples offer their bodies a living sacrifice to God that, by His power and blessing, they may be both strengthened to do them and as the essential road to their own salvation, that they may be “transformed by the renewing of their mind, that they may prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God”, who through Christ their Lord, “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.” | Alfred Norris, The Holy Spirit and the Believer Today*

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# **Stop Promoting Gendered Hierarchy!**

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

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 13:22)

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One of the more detrimental teachings that I believe has

defined the church throughout her history and which continues to exert influence today is the idea that God established some kind of hierarchy of men over women at creation. Hierarchy, it's claimed, was, one; either part of God's *original plan for humanity*, established *from the beginning* or, two; God's *prescriptive punishment* (primarily upon the woman), *because of sin*.

This hierarchy, if it *was* part of God's original plan, also then flows through into a church or spiritual context; God's arrangement for not just the first creation, but also the second (new) creation. While this 'divine order' or hierarchical structure might (seemingly) have been largely abandoned, particularly in our 21st-century, secular, western culture (it hasn't really), it should nevertheless continue to be taught and implemented (and in many places, still is) in the life and function of the church, and should inform our basic understanding of the relationship that exists between men and women.

## **Off To A Bad Start**

Most people would perhaps claim that they don't believe women are *lesser than men* in their *basic humanness* (although the history of female infanticide, particularly in countries such as China, India, and Pakistan would argue otherwise). Many people, particularly from a Judeo-Christian worldview, might affirm that men and women are *equal in worth and dignity* as fellow humans (all of us, individually, are still more important (if we're grading) than *animals*).

Nevertheless, in Christian circles, many would still point to the reality *that God made Adam first*.

Eve was created second, *as a helper* for Adam, and this fact – *the order of creation*, together with *the purpose for which each was created* proves some kind of divinely established hierarchy.

The bottom line: men were *made first, to image God*, and women were created *second to help men*.

It's somewhat painful to hear it explained, in vaguely apologetic tones, that Eve was perhaps not much more than an afterthought, created to assist with the collecting of firewood, the gathering of berries, and other mundane pre-history tasks that would prove to be all too much for Adam on his own. (God had hoped one of the animals might do the trick but, alas, no joy there...).

It's even more disappointing to see this perspective outworked in the church, resulting, in practical terms, in women being prevented in many places from contributing in any kind of meaningful ways, as they are gifted. Some hesitate at limiting a woman's contribution entirely (*soft complementarian*; we'll get to that term in a moment) and agree that women can bring their gifts and abilities *in a limited capacity* and as long as it's *under the leadership of men*. However, hard complementarians are, in reality, hardly complementary in practice, allowing little to no contribution from women in the church.

## **Firstly, What Is Meant By 'Hierarchy'?**

### ***hierarchy***

***/'hɪərəʊki/***

*noun*

- 1. a system in which people or things are arranged according to their importance:*
- 2. the people in the upper levels of an organisation who control it*
- 3. a system in which the people within a company or organisation are organised into levels according to the authority they have:*

*"Hierarchy describes a system that organises or ranks things,*

often according to **power or importance**. At school, the principal is at the top of the staff hierarchy, while the seniors rule the student hierarchy. Also known as a **pecking order** or **power structure**, a hierarchy is a formalised or simply implied understanding of **who's on top or what's most important**. 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 color, size, and expiration date, you might want to consider visiting a therapist." | [Vocabulary.com](https://www.vocabulary.com) (emphasis mine)

Implicit in hierarchy are elements of *power, importance, or authority* (watch for these words later), none of which are necessarily wrong, in and of themselves, of course. For example, in a company or organisation, it may be appropriate and wise to confer more power or authority on someone with greater experience or a higher level of qualification.

Items that are rare, antique, or highly sought after (gold!) are deemed to be more valuable or important than more common or mass-produced items.

And, interestingly, our basic human needs are often laid out by way of a hierarchial pyramid classification system, with our psychological needs at the bottom and our social and relational needs sitting nearer the top.

However, two historical systems of hierarchy that we would perhaps be familiar with whose negative influences can still be felt today are *patriarchy* and *colonialism*. It can be argued that the conferral of power and authority to certain persons or classes of persons within these systems was often disproportionate and unjustified.

While hierarchy, in some instances, makes sense as a means of classification, does scripture teach that such a hierarchy exists between the genders? Does a disproportionate ranking of

power and importance really exist between men and women? Is this God-ordained and God-sanctioned?

Does scripture teach that men are *more important, more powerful*, or have *more authority* simply because they are men? Is this really what God designed for humanity *from the beginning*?

## **Hierarchy + Complementarian || Egalitarian**

There are two Christian views put forward that endeavour to describe the nature of the relationship between men and women. These views are described as being either *Complementarian* or *Egalitarian*.

Christian Complementarianism is the ***view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, and religious life, particularly in areas deemed as 'leadership'***.

Christian Egalitarians ***"believe that the Bible mandates gender equality, which implies equal authority and responsibility for the family and the ability for women to exercise spiritual authority as clergy."***

Both these views clearly offer biblical truths.

Men and women are different in many ways. These differences include both biological phenotypes and psychological traits. Some of these differences are influenced by environmental factors, yet there are also fundamental differences between the sexes that are rooted in biology.

The differences between the genders are unique and distinctive, designed to be this way by God. ([Titus 2:1-5](#), [1 Peter 3:7](#)) ([1 Timothy 3:1 – 4:16](#)). 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 and purpose for His family. His definition of marriage ([Genesis 2:24](#)) and the procreation of the species ([Genesis 1:28](#)) is the natural outcome of the union of male and female and clearly supports the biological truth embedded in our DNA.

Yet men and women are also the same. Equal in value, dignity, responsibility, and relationship to one another (as we'll see later in this article).

We are the same. And we are different. We are both equal *and* complementary. It was God's intention that these differences exist, complementing one another, and the human race is better for the diversity between the two genders.

Both these factors are incredibly important in our relationship with one another, within marriage, and within our wider communities, and are critical to embrace in a church context.

## **Complementarian Is Not Complimentary**

The problem with complementarianism is that it's not truly *complementary in practice*. Rather, true complementarianism functions as a (sometimes softly packaged but) essentially male-dominated hierarchy. I say *true complementarianism* because many married Christian couples who identify as 'complementarian' actually function as equal partners – egalitarian in practice. Many churches that identify as *complementarian* actually function as mostly *egalitarian in practice*, often restricting only the role of elder or senior pastor to men.

And the reality is that many *true complementarian* leaders teach that male authority and female submission extend beyond marriage and the church into the rest of society. They believe

that God really did instigate a male-dominated hierarchy at creation, that it was His original design for humanity, and that it extends into all spheres of life, including and not limited to the church.

For some, “the theology of complementarianism has become so deeply entrenched in evangelical belief that they have come to see it as an essential doctrine of the faith. That is to say, that it is a primary issue of salvation. For some evangelicals, complementarianism has become the benchmark of theological faithfulness, right alongside belief in God and acceptance of Jesus. 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 exists in Genesis will impact the way we read the rest of scripture and, by implication, *the kind of gospel* we teach.

I personally believe this issue directly impacts the way in which we teach this gospel narrative and that it shapes the way we then see church life, our own identity in Christ, relationships between men and women, relationships in marriage, who we raise our sons and daughters to be, and how these different relationships function in healthy and holistic ways.

The framework of Genesis is deeply connected to the gospel story we tell, to our theology and reading of scripture, and our view of what God intends for all humanity, in the end.

Before we even reach the New Testament (and encounter the few verses that seem to support gendered hierarchy), *the way* we have read and interpreted Genesis will have *already determined* through which lens we then view other (NT) passages.

In that sense, it's of primary importance that we start from the correct foundations when building our theological house.

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

To try to prove that hierarchy is taught and embedded in the record of the creation of humanity and therefore also flows through into the church or a spiritual context, it's actually necessary to jump pretty quickly away from the record of Genesis and proponents of complementarism will often start in 1 Corinthians 11:3. This verse "*the head of the woman is the man*" (1 Corinthians 11:3) is often referenced as inarguable proof that hierarchy (authority over women by men) exists, and indeed, was part of the original order of creation.

One of the epistles to Timothy is also referenced (1 Timothy 2:11-15), together with a few verses about husbands and wives from Ephesians (Ephesians 5:22-24) and it's case closed. No qualifiers, no context, just a few proof-texts strung together and read back into the creation narrative.

1 Corinthians is an epistle written to **challenge believers to examine every area of life through the lens of the Gospel**. Paul specifically addresses issues such as divisions, food requirements, sexual integrity, worship gatherings, and the resurrection. 1 Timothy is another letter written by Paul, **to encourage and guide the new believers in the development of good leadership within the church**, not ego-driven or self-centered but governed by mutual submission to Christ ([Ephesians 5:21-22](#)). (Chapter 11 of Corinthians is actually considered to be one of the most obscure and difficult passages of scripture, and I talk more about this and the other 'tricky verses' [here](#).)

Certainly, the New Testament has some thoughts to offer in relation to the creation narrative, the relationship between men and women, and the relationship that exists between

spouses.

But before heading to the New Testament, I believe it's important to set some framework around our interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. We must read the New Testament through the lens of Genesis, not the other way around. And I think it's safe to say *that what existed before the fall was how God always intended things to be.*

As Genesis points out, everything that goes wrong occurs *after the fall*. Sin enters the world (not good news), death hard on the heels of sin (even worse news), and a disrupted relationship between God and humanity from that point onwards.

Additionally, the purpose of the book of Genesis is to illustrate God's relationship to creation and His intention of dwelling with us. ***"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 it seems logical to assert that whatever was instituted before the fall was *God's original design for humanity*, was intended to be *normative and lifegiving* for the flourishing of humanity, and (because of the effects of the fall) is *restored and reinstated* through the redeeming work of Jesus (and we'd therefore expect to see this reflected in the life and activity of the new creation (the church)).

Genesis 1-3 clearly constitute foundational theology regarding God's redemptive and restorative work in our world.

## What Genesis Says

**1. No Hierarchy In Our Humanity:** The crowning glory of God's creation was humanity, and Eve, the final masterstroke, the

finishing touch of the Creator's hand ([Genesis 2:22-24](#), [1 Corinthians 11:7](#)). Created from Adam's side, her status was, like him, one *made in the image of God*, with all the promise and capability of reflecting God's glory (Genesis 1:27).

*"Then God said, "Let us make **mankind** (Hebrew word Adam) in our image, in our likeness, so that **they** may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. 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 (NIV)*

The words used of Eve at her creation are the Hebrew words *ezer kanegdo*, translated rather unhappily as 'helper' and 'meet for' in English. Our understanding of *helper* falls far short of the original sense of the word, which is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe God as a helper to His people or of a king to his subjects. The primary idea of the word lies in 'girding', 'surrounding, hence defending', to 'protect or aid'.

A better translation of the word *kanegdo* is the word 'worthy' or 'suitable for'. The counterpart to the man, therefore, is "a woman of valour, equal to the man in capacity and ability whose worth is incalculable" ([Proverbs 31:10](#)). She is neither above man, nor beneath him, but stands confidently at his side, in protection and aid, as he does for her.

(The created order of man first, woman second, or the difference between the way each was created (man from the ground, woman from the side or part of the man), is often brought up in discussions about a supposed gendered hierarchy. Apart from the creation story in [Genesis 2](#), however, the created order is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus does not mention it, but it is mentioned in two passages in Paul's letters, as referred to above.

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:** God blessed the man and woman and gave them the commission to 'be fruitful and multiply', both having rule and dominion over the earth and the animal kingdom ([Genesis 1:28](#)). Clearly, neither could undertake such a commission of fruitfulness or multiplying without the other.

They also share responsibility for the care of the inhabitants of this world and the stewardship of the earth and its resources. In fact, this is the first place that we see [God's sovereignty](#) enacted by His image-bearers and we later see this commission echoed in the new creation, where both men and women disciples are entrusted with the responsibility and privilege of 'going into all the world and making disciples' ([Matthew 28:19](#), [2 Corinthians 5:19-20](#), [2 Corinthians 3:6](#)).

This stewardship and responsibility were given to humanity, men and women equally, without distinction. Men and women are both created as equals in their purpose and capacity to fill the earth and rule wisely over it on God's behalf and were both given the authority to do so from God Himself.

**3. No Hierarchy In Our Conjuality:** It's stating the obvious here, but not only were Adam and Eve the first man and woman of the human race, they were also the first married couple. Their status as equals is shown in not just their relationship to one another as fellow humans (as discussed above), but also in their relationship *with* each other as spouses.

The early chapters of Genesis (prior to the fall) initially seem to offer very little by way of commentary on the nature of marriage apart from this comment in Genesis 2:23-24 (added long after the events of Genesis 2 actually took place):

*“The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Genesis 2:23-24 (NIV)*

However, in taking a closer look, Genesis 2 actually offers quite a lot.

The divine view of marriage (and the Bible’s definition is that marriage is between a man and a woman), although only touched on very briefly in Genesis 2, is quite clear. It’s a relationship defined by a commitment of two individuals (already demonstrated to be of equal worth and capability) to one another, which becomes preeminent to all other familial relationships. Two individuals choose to leave their family of origin and form a new family with one another, united together as one in a full and cooperative partnership.

Taken from Adam’s side, *Eve is made of the same stuff* as Adam. She shares a unique connection with Adam that the rest of the animal kingdom does not, having been created from his own body, *bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh*. There is a unique kinship that exists between them.

Why *did* God create Eve in this particular way, when He could have just created her from the ground, as He did Adam? Why did God create Adam first and Eve second? And why does Adam name Eve rather than God naming her?

These are really good questions to ask and it’s important to understand what we are being told by this narrative (keeping in mind the foundational truth that the purpose of the book of Genesis is to illustrate God’s relationship to creation and His intention of dwelling with us.)

## Jesus + The Church

There are beautiful theological overtones hidden within this creation story in relation to marriage, which point to the redeeming work of Jesus and the [creation of the church](#), styled 'his bride' ([John 19:34](#), [Ephesians 5:25-27](#), [1 Corinthians 12:27](#)). Paul the Apostle actually tells us in Ephesians that the church wasn't modeled on the institution of marriage but rather, it was the other way around. "*The church came first, marriage second*", he comments.

This seems odd initially, given the church didn't exist until many thousands of years after the creation narrative, but it makes complete sense when we realise the Genesis narrative serves as a description of the blueprint for all that God has intended for humanity; God, in complete partnership with His people, to reflect His glory and purpose throughout the earth. The redemption and restoration of humanity, through the sending of Jesus, was never the backup plan, *it was always the plan*.

The story of Adam and Eve's creation serves as a representation of *the real story* that would play out throughout humanity's history; the good news that in Jesus, who is both saviour and king, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

The church *only exists* because of the sacrificial death of Jesus, prefigured by the deep sleep that came upon Adam. Her entire identity is shaped by her *source*, in Eve's case, Adam, and in the church's case, Jesus. She, the church, *is made of the same stuff as him*.

We are to think of the church – this community of believers – as a woman, a woman whose very life and existence were framed by the death and resurrection of a man. Through this man's death and sacrifice, she is created and at his resurrection,



she becomes a living creature.

Jesus says of the church (responding to Peter's affirmation in Matthew 16:18 that he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God), "upon *this rock*, I will build my church; and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Jesus identifies and names his bride, the *ekklesia*, who will be called out from among the nations, brought into existence from his own death and sacrifice, and part of his very essence as the [temple of the living God](#).

Additionally, we know of Jesus that "he is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn of all creation*. For by him *all things were created*, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created *through him and for him*. He is *before all things*, and in him, all things hold together. He is the *head (source) of the body, the church*; He is the beginning and firstborn from among the dead, so that in all things He may have the preeminence." (Colossians 1:15-18)

God did it this way (in the order and way He chose to create Adam and Eve) precisely to shape our understanding of the more significant reality at work. The Genesis narrative teaches foundational theology about the church and her relationship to Jesus (and God's ultimate redemption of humanity), long before she ever exists. (I talk more about the organic reality of the church as a woman of valour [here](#)).

Marriage, as depicted in Genesis 2, is a relationship defined by sacrifice, support, defence, commitment, and faithfulness; exactly the qualities we see at work in the relationship between Christ and his church.

## **Hierarchy: Things Go South**

The purpose of the first few chapters of Genesis is to set the ideal human community; how things should have been before

everything goes wrong. In essence, it describes *perfect kingdom living* and *perfect human existence*; what we hope to see completely restored at the end of all things (Revelation 21:1-4).

But things do go wrong. The first humans disobey God, sin enters the world, and *punishment* and *consequences* are set out.

Adam is told by God, “because of what you have done, *I will curse the ground* (punishment) *and through painful toil, you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until **you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return***” (consequence) (Genesis 3:17-19). The consequence of Adam’s disobedience, ultimately, is connected to the ground from which he was taken, death, and how that relates to all humanity.

Eve is told by God “*I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children* (punishment), *your desire will be for (towards) your husband*, *and he will rule over you*” (consequence) (Genesis 3:16). The consequence of Eve’s disobedience, ultimately, is connected to the man from which she was taken, life, and how that relates to all humanity.

And this – the punishment and consequence – is where a final argument for the existence of a gendered hierarchy is made, but unfortunately, I believe, holds little weight.

It’s important to recognise the context in which the statements of Genesis 3:16 exist: *they occur after the fall*. As such, *they cannot be considered God’s original intention for humanity, at the very least*.

So is it merely *descriptive* or *prescriptive*? Is God simply confirming the dynamic of the relationship between men and

women that will now exist, because of sin? Or has God had a change of heart regarding women's previous status and position (demonstrated to be equal) and is now prescribing a hierarchy of all men, over all women, for all time?

I think, reading scripture as a whole, that we're given a picture of redemption, renewal, and restoration. The new heavens and the new earth spoken of in Revelation show that God intends to restore all things, in short, to return creation to the state of *very good* as it first was in Eden. If this is biblical teaching, then we will see this reflected in the new creation, in the life of the early church.

And this is exactly what we do see. When looking through the lens of Genesis, we see the radical readjustment required and the challenges faced by the early Christians; where issues of race, class, social status, financial status, and gendered hierarchy are realigned and brought under the scope of what God had designed all along in Genesis. I explore this in more detail in my article *Women In Ministry*, which you can read [here](#).

When considering the life and function of the early church, which included women fully participating in ministry, there is a marked reversal or divergence from the culturally and historically established norms and that this new reality is God-endorsed. I would contend that if a gendered hierarchy exists, it is a terrible consequence of the fall and not as a God-given prescriptive for what is healthy and good for humanity, or, specifically in light of this article, for the church.

## **Where Have All The Good Men Gone?**

Some may think that, in any event, this is not a primary issue, as relates to the gospel. I agree...and I disagree.

I agree, firstly, that it's a secondary issue in that I would

still affirm those who hold to either view (*complementarian* or *egalitarian*) as Christians, fellow believers of the gospel of Christ. I don't think that believing either one perspective or the other determines *whether you are Christian or not*.

But I disagree it's not a primary issue. Where you land on this subject *directly impacts* the gospel narrative and shapes the way you will see church life, your own identity in Christ, your interpersonal relationships, marriage, and how these different relationships function in healthy and holistic ways.

As we move into the next generation of men and women, the story we tell our sons and daughters matters.

There are many good men who would possibly describe themselves as complementarian (essentially, proponents of a gendered hierarchy) but who also treat women with dignity and respect. While they may *\*believe\** (or say they believe) that leadership and authority are restricted to men in marriage and within the church, they arrive at this perspective with a genuine belief that this is what scripture teaches and they endeavor to outwork this with humility and gentleness. However, in reality, particularly in marriage, and often in the church, these kinds of good men rarely function as true complementarians. They are far more egalitarian in thought and practice.

And then there are other men, those who would also describe themselves as *complementarian*, who are *not good men*. They are abusive, controlling, authoritative, demeaning, violent, and entitled.

Sometimes this behaviour is only seen and experienced behind closed doors while a pristine public image is presented to others.

Other times, this behaviour is the same whether at home or in public, with the perpetrators using scriptural teachings on the sanctity of marriage, forgiveness, the submission of

women, and male headship to justify their behaviour. Complementarian men are compared, and often compare themselves, to *Christ*, while women play the role of the church who *obeys and serves Christ*.

However, as author Rachel Held Evans comments, **“complementarianism doesn’t work—in marriages and in church leadership— because it’s not actually complementarianism; it’s patriarchy. And patriarchy doesn’t work because God created both men and women to reflect God’s character and God’s sovereignty over creation, as equal partners with equal value.”**

One of the most significant challenges Christian women face today is recognising and dealing with the abuse they experience, which is often carefully cloaked and ‘legitimised’ in biblical language – *obedience, submission, responsibility, leadership, authority, roles*.

However, recognising abuse is one thing. Preventing it is another.

A horrifying statistic is that women inside the church are significantly more likely to have experienced abuse than those in the broader population. A [report](#) from the Anglican church found that despite some recent efforts and the fact that evidence of this has been reported on for years, many clergy remain in denial about it.

Many women do, in fact, recognise that they are the victims of abuse, that scripture is being weaponised and used against them to control and manipulate them, and yet are powerless to prevent it, change it, or speak out about it.

Scot McKnight, New Testament scholar, historian of early Christianity, theologian, and author has this to say:

*“Complementarians teach biblical hierarchicalism and patriarchy and that men and women are equal, not in a*

*substantive but spiritual sense. Their “role” language quickly morphs into power language. Hence, this hierarchy leads to entitlement and power and the requisite submission of the woman. There is a correlation between hierarchy and patriarchy and abuse by men of women. All abusive males are entitled, lash out in anger, seek control and demand submission. All abusive males think women are inferior.” | [Complementarianism And The Abusive Male](#)*

There is no possible way that violence or abusive, controlling behaviours are justifiable from the text of the Bible. Perhaps this is most especially true of the few passages that so many abusers craftily and deceitfully employ.

*“Males feeling entitled is a cultural product and complementarianism is such a culture that leads to such a product. Males who seize that culture’s control are more likely to abuse.*

***Two action steps: change the culture, change the males.”*** (Scot McKnight)

## **In Conclusion**

The gospel is the story *in all the Bible*. It’s not just a message about our *own* personal salvation from sin but the story of what God has intended *for all His creation*. Its massive scope stretches from the first pages of Genesis through to the last book of the Bible, Revelation, and includes lofty themes such as the glory and sovereignty of God, the creation and capacity of humanity to image God’s glory, the fall and redemption of humanity, the purpose and kingship of Jesus, the new creation of a resurrected community of image-bearers and, finally, the arrival of ‘the new heavens and new earth’, when God will be all-in-all and the gospel story will have reached its resolution.

God’s original design for humanity was not built on a gendered

hierarchy. Instead, it was built on equality, cooperation, respect, commitment, and support, with each gender bringing unique and valued differences to the partnership. This mutuality, this joint responsibility, warped and damaged because of the fall, is restored and championed in the new creation; by those who call themselves Christians and who belong to the organic reality called the Church.

We need to keep God's original intention for humanity (seen clearly in the first two chapters of Genesis) squarely in our sights when traversing the rest of scripture, particularly in light of *which gospel narrative we tell*.

Not only do I believe that gendered hierarchy doesn't fit the biblical gospel narrative, I believe it to be theologically unsound. I don't believe it's what Scripture teaches at all in relation to the relationship between men and women, either naturally or spiritually.

Further, I believe that communities that engage in and promote the unequal distribution of power and authority between men and women – hallmarks of the complementarianism seen in many churches and Christian relationships – often result in cultures where abuses – emotional, spiritual, physical, sexual, psychological, and financial – can thrive and flourish beneath the surface. Not only is this obviously harmful to individuals, but it's also deeply damaging to the organic, corporate reality of the church and far from the abundant, flourishing life that God intended for all of humanity.

**Stop promoting gendered hierarchy.**

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**There is so much to read, watch, or listen to on this subject (including all the arguments presented for either a complementarian or egalitarian view). If you would like to**

read more on this subject by other authors, I'd recommend the following: *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* (Frank Viola), *Reimagining Church* (Frank Viola), and [this article](#) by Marg Mowckzo (mainly egalitarian writers).

I'd also recommend listening to the Kingdom Roots Podcast by Scot McKnight (there are over 200 episodes and he covers many topics, including the question of gender equality, so I've linked one specifically [here](#) to get you started.)

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## Religion // Cruciformity

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

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

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



related to the *individual* rather than the *collective*.

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

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

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

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

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

What we may have experienced or grown up with and what we would describe as *religion* is probably; adherence to a distinct set of beliefs, doctrines, or practices (some of

which find their roots in scripture, some which don't).

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

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

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

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

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

*'Part of the genius of genuine Christianity is that each generation has to think it through afresh. Precisely because God wants every single Christian to grow up in understanding as well as trust, the Christian faith has never been something that one generation can sort out in such a way as to leave*

*their successors with no work to do.'* (N T Wright)

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

## **Counterfeit Religion**

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

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

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

Patterns of thought, actions, or behaviours, which are deemed 'godly' 'spiritual' or 'biblical' can often become the outward markers of people who are perceived to be *religious* but may,

in reality, mask a heart far from allegiance to Christ.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Journey To Cruciformity**

Choosing Jesus, truly choosing him above all else, means rethinking everything you thought you knew about your faith and what – or who – your life is bound to. It means learning that your identity must rest on the rock of Christ, not in

others' opinions of you or in the set of beliefs to which they subscribe, even if those beliefs are ones which you would agree with. It means making decisions others can and will criticise and judge you for. It means being much less certain in your own abilities and more certain in the reality of God's grace in your life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"A person who lives by the indwelling life of Christ through the Holy Spirit is a person who is under Law. But it is not the Law of Moses. Nor is it a Law that some preacher created from his own personal standards. No, the Law I'm referring to is 'the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:3). This Law is like the law of gravity; it's a constant force or power. You and I have an indwelling Lord. The Law of God has been written on our hearts because Jesus Christ lives within us by his Spirit. This is the promise of the new covenant. Spiritual people (religious people)(italics, ours) are those who live by the Lord's life that indwells them. They know by instinct what the will of God is (1 John 2:27). Where the Spirit leads them, they yield to it (for the most part) – no matter what the cost. And life and peace are the results (Romans 8:6). The external Law, then, is no longer an outward thing full of dead letters and cold commands. It has been transferred into the indwelling life of Christ. To live by Christ is our highest calling as people of the insurgence." | Frank Viola, Insurgence*

*"Christ carried the burden of our sins. He was nailed to the*

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

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

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

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

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

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

**To know God is to know Jesus, whom He sent (John 17:3) and,**



therefore, the true starting point of our *theology* as Christians is looking to Jesus and, fundamentally, to Jesus crucified. Our *theology* begins with *cruciformity*; a life first and foremost surrendered to the crucified Christ in faith.

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

This article was first published 10 February 2021

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## Jesus, The Hope Of The World

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

*“Behold, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Emmanuel” (which means, “God with us”)* | Matthew 1:23, BRB

Scripture tells of a crowded family home in a bustling ancestral town, set at the southern end of the Judean hills. Filled to the brim already, perhaps with relatives from both near and far, there was [no room in the guest quarters](#) for the additional arrival of a heavily pregnant Mary, accompanied by her fiancée Joseph.

Exhausted from the arduous travel to Bethlehem, necessitated by the tax decree from Cæsar Augustus (Luke 2:1), Mary and Joseph found space in the ground floor family room with Joseph’s extended family; a comfortable, homely room filled with hollows of straw, and where the animals also slept and fed.

Surrounded by family, and labouring in a crowded, warm, Israeli home like many other women before her, Mary gave birth to her first child, a son. His name was to be 'Jesus' (meaning 'Yahweh will save') and he was born to 'save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21).

*"A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn..." | O Holy Night*

## **The Necessity Of Jesus' Humanity**

It was an important and necessary reality that Jesus [shared in our humanity](#); a connection which he derived from his mother, Mary.

Jesus' redemptive work on behalf of humanity was deeply connected to his own humanity. His ability to sympathise with us and to reconcile on our behalf springs from a complete understanding of what it is like to be human; with all our doubts, fears, temptations, and failures. He understood humans *because he was human*.

The story of his birth impresses upon us just how similar he was to us in every way, even to the unremarkable ordinariness of his birth.

Like countless babies before him, he was born surrounded by noise and bustle, sweat, blood, and tears. Relatives would have crowded around to proudly admire (what was assumed to be) Joseph's firstborn son. Mary would have comforted the newborn's hungry cries by pressing him closely to her breast. His arrival was, on one hand, a thoroughly human affair, recognisable the world over.

*"There are three creation stories of the creation of humanity in the Bible. The first is that humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. The second is that a human is formed from the dust of the earth and the woman is taken from man:*

*she is flesh of his flesh. The third is that humanity is reborn through a saviour; who is born of a woman, and he is flesh of her flesh...Jesus is made of her, not just in her. He is made from her and not just through her. How else could Jesus be connected to the line of David [King of Israel] through Mary unless the baby was truly hers, albeit born of the Spirit. This physical connection to Mary is the basis of the story of salvation, the proof that our own flesh, our souls and bodies, can be redeemed and cleansed and resurrected.” | Lucy Peppiatt*

Yet, despite the seemingly unremarkable circumstances of his birth, God was, in fact, doing something completely remarkable and unique in and through this child. This newborn babe was the Word-Made-Flesh, God-With-Us, and his birth was an event that would change the course of human history forever.

## **The Darkness Of The Human Heart**

When God originally created this world and the humans that inhabit it, He did so with purpose and intentionality. He wanted humanity to choose to '[walk with Him](#)', to want to be like Him, and to partner with Him in His glorious mission to fill the earth with His glory.

Yet much of the Bible is a repetitive narrative of human failure, telling over and over again of the inability of humans to live as the perfect image-bearers that God had intended.

Disobedience of God's directive in the very beginning and the first act of sin in the world brought about its awful consequence for humanity; a sentence of death, and being sent from God's presence in shame and disappointment. Instead of beauty, the first humans received a crown of ashes and instead of joy, they experienced loss and mourning.

Not only this, the spiritual heart of humanity became darkened

and sick, in desperate need of healing and regeneration. Humanity died that day – not physically or immediately, but spiritually. Our union with God was severed and we became separated from God’s presence. Seeking our own will at the expense of God’s glory, we were incapable of living the glorious life He had intended for us. And, just as we have inherited physical life from our parents, so too we have inherited spiritual death.

*“Made for spirituality, we wallow in introspection. Made for joy, we settle for pleasure. Made for justice, we clamour for vengeance. Made for relationship, we insist on our own way. Made for beauty, we are satisfied with sentiment.” | N T Wright*

Every human who is born comes into the world physically alive but spiritually dead. Without our spiritual connection with God, we are nothing more than ‘dead men walking’, living in darkness and far from the eternal life God intended for us.

*“And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t.”  
Romans 7:18, NLT*

*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? Jeremiah 17:9, ESV*

*“This is an evil in everything that is done under the sun: There is one fate for everyone. Furthermore, the hearts of men are full of evil and madness while they are alive, and afterward they join the dead.” Ecclesiastes 9:3, BSB*

*“For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” Galatian 5:17, ESV*

# The Necessity Of Jesus' Divinity

But God, in His infinite love, did not leave anything to chance in His plan of saving and redeeming humanity.

Despite human failure and many, many detours [in this story](#), God has declared that His purpose will not be thwarted. He will accomplish what He intended for His creation, even to His own personal cost, as it turns out.

*"I declare the end from the beginning and ancient times from what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and all My good pleasure I will accomplish.'" | Isaiah 46:10, ESV*

Jesus was born to 'save his people from their sins'; to break the power of death and to reconcile all of humanity back to God. Yet no 'ordinary human' could possibly have achieved this remarkable feat.

The child of both a human father and a human mother would have resulted in the kind of human we see around us every day and indeed within our own selves – a person who is subject to the ravaging effects of sin and governed by a heart that is, in its deepest recesses, at enmity with God. This kind of human couldn't possibly have overcome sin or lived, without fault, as God's perfect image-bearer. Nor could this kind of human have defeated the power of death by virtue of living a sinless life, perfectly obeying God's moral law.

Jesus was human, born of a human mother. However, prophecies that spoke of the coming saviour made it clear that he was to be born of a virgin, with no human father involved in his conception (Isaiah 7:14). Instead, the Holy Spirit moved and, in the same way that creation sprang into being at God's command (Genesis 1), so too it was the animating force for the conception of God's Son. "God said" and it was so!

*"The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the*

*weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent His own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body, God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving His Son as a sacrifice for our sins." | Romans 8:3, NLT*

*"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil." | Hebrews 2:14, NIV*

*"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" | John 1:14 NIV*

John, the author of the fourth gospel account in the New Testament, deliberately parallels the Genesis account when beginning his record of this pivotal and distinctly unique moment in human history; the arrival of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

He tells us that 'in the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). The use of the Greek word *logos* here is frustratingly difficult to adequately convey in English by a single word. Literally meaning "I say", it's not used for 'a word' in the grammatical sense; the term *lexis* (λέξις, *léxis*) would have been used in that instance. However, both *logos* and *lexis* derive from the same verb *légō* (λέγω), meaning "(I) count, tell, say, speak".

That 'Word', and all that is contained by the expression, became flesh and 'dwelt among us'. He was 'God-With-Us'; anyone who saw him saw all the radiance of God's glory; the exact representation of His being and the imprint of His nature (Hebrews 1:3, John 14:10-11).

Paul the Apostle tells us that Jesus, who was in the very nature of God, emptied himself and took the form of a servant, made in the likeness of humans that sin (Philippians 2:6-7). He became the representative of us all and in his human body, the war against sin and death would be waged and won.

## **A New Creation In Jesus**

All of human history had been leading up to this moment, when creation would be reconciled and redeemed back to God and to the purpose for which it had been created. Through his human descent, Jesus was connected to us all, right back to the garden of Eden; and what was done by one man (Adam) to the detriment of us all, would be reversed in another, 'the second Adam', who was to be a life-giving Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45).

Other places in scripture, particularly the writings of Paul the Apostle, affirm that the revelation of God's original plan of creation, the redeeming, recreating, and re-ordering of all things, together with the reconciliation of creation to its Creator, all find their true and most meaningful significance in Jesus Christ, the Word-Made-Flesh (Ephesians 1:3-10; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-3; Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 8:6). The invisible God was now revealing Himself visibly through His Word-Made-Flesh, in whose hands the world and all that is therein, has been placed. (John 3:35; Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20).

In Jesus Christ, we find the reasons for truth and life. In him, we find the source of life and the light of humanity, the light that shines in the darkest places of the human heart, bringing peace to the chaos and creating order and beauty again (John 1:4, 2 Corinthians 4:6).

In the unique person of Jesus, God was doing a completely new thing; bringing about a new creation and restoring again the hearts of humanity to a whole relationship with Him (Isaiah

43:19, 2 Corinthians 5:17).

*“For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” | 2 Corinthians 4:6, NKJV*

## Focusing On The Miracle

Jesus was both the son of a human mother and the son of a divine Father; the human and the divine embodied within the one individual. He was born specifically and uniquely, after centuries of human failure, that, in him, the Creator might redeem His creation. He was the “Word-Made-Flesh” – the ‘one and only of his kind’, a man, *but not merely a man* and in him, ‘the entire fullness (completeness) of God’s nature dwells bodily’ (Colossians 2:9).

Theologians have deliberated about this seemingly impossible reality for centuries. As early as 300 hundred years after Jesus’ birth, a council of Christian bishops convened in the city of Nicaea (now known as the town of İznik, in modern-day Turkey) to decide on the longstanding theological debate regarding the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God.

Settlement of the debate was affected by the creation of the Nicene Creed, a statement of beliefs now widely used in Christian liturgy. With the creation of the creed, a precedent was established for subsequent local and regional councils of Bishops to create statements of belief and canons of doctrinal orthodoxy. The intention was to define unity of beliefs for the whole of Christendom.

And yet, the arguments still rage today. Dialogue tends to grapple with the *how* (and the answer to this is perhaps well outside our paygrade), focusing on the need to fully explain and document *in what way* the person of Jesus was the Word-Made-Flesh. Quite often, the miraculous reality is lost in the



foray of dogmatic contention.

What is often also lost is an acknowledgment and rejoicing in the *why* – that only the Word-Made-Flesh could truly and completely redeem humanity. Only God stepping personally into the drama and chaos of humanity through the sending of His Son could solve the dilemma of sin and death that we all share in. And this miracle of redemption and rescue was achieved through God's only Son, both human and divine.

*“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. (1 John 1:1–2) and God was manifest (appeared) in the flesh.” (1 Timothy 3:16)*

*“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and His arm rules for Him;” | Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-10, ESV*

## Nature + Nurture

Who we are as individuals is derived from both genetic predisposition ('nature') and environmental factors ('nurture')

The reference to 'nature' is the idea that human behaviour can be considered to be the result of 'pre-wiring'; information or characteristics that are determined by our genes. These biological factors influence our predisposition to certain traits and behaviours and are determined at a gene level, over which we have no personal ability to control.

The reference to 'nurture' relates to the idea that the environment a person is exposed to, either prenatally or during a person's life, will influence and affect the development and psychology of an individual, and therefore their resulting behaviours and traits.

Studies conducted in the twentieth century on twins who had been separated at birth concluded that human behavioural development is affected by both nature and nurture – both an individual's natural disposition and the environment in which they are raised.

When we consider the impact of this in relation to Jesus, both son of man and son of God, at once human and divine, we understand certain passages of scripture in a new light and are amazed at the mastery of God in relation to the remarkable reality of His son.

Firstly, the genealogy of Jesus is important. It's one of the first things that the gospel of Luke makes known – that is, the genetic origins of the one who is to be called the Christ.

He is born to a young woman descended from the family of the great King David, a woman favoured of the Lord and deeply devout and spiritual in her faith (Luke 1:28, 47-55). Joseph, the man who would become his earthly adoptive father, was also

'a good man', honourable, faithful, and generous-hearted (Matthew 1:18-19). Joseph was not willing to put Mary through public disgrace, despite the initial assumption of scandal that surrounded her pregnancy.

Yet Jesus is also born in Bethlehem, an [insignificant village in Judah](#) (Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:6) to a poor family who could only offer the most inexpensive of offerings at his birth (Luke 2:24, Leviticus 12:8)

There was nothing in his circumstances that any human could boast in and he certainly wasn't born into the privilege, wealth, or status that we might normally associate with royalty.

Everything about his arrival was so counter-cultural to expectation that it's no wonder he was overlooked and discounted by even his own peers and fellow countrymen. By all accounts, he was nothing special – the son of a country carpenter – if even his actual son, as the whispers rumoured a different story – and, in this way, he represents every single one of us.

In his humanity, he felt everything that we feel, our stresses, fears, struggles, heartbreaks. He understood what it was like to be poor, rejected, and marginalised. He understood oppression and abuse of power. Yet he also understood the joy of our humanity; love, family, celebration, hope. He appeared to be completely ordinary and in his complete human ordinariness, he could not have represented us better (Isaiah 53:2).

Yet despite outward appearances, he was anything but ordinary. In nature, his heart belonged to His Father (John 6:38, John 4:34) and his mission was to do his Father's will, accomplishing the work that He had given him to do (John 6:38). In him, God was glorified and in him *'mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each*

other' (Psalm 85:10-11).

*"This Good News is about His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In his human nature, he was a descendant of David. In his spiritual holy nature, he was declared the Son of God. This was shown in a powerful way when he came back to life." | Romans 1:3-5 (GW)*

In Jesus, we see everything that God is.

Scripture could not be any clearer that the victory over sin and death was going to be God's, accomplished through the sending of His Son. Sent in the likeness of all of humanity, but in whom dwelt all the fullness of God, only the uniquely special Son of God would be able to overcome and defeat our greatest enemy.

There is a world of meaning in what it was to be "the Son of God", 'begotten not created', 'spiritual, not earthly'. Jesus was enough like us in the ways that mattered to defeat sin and overcome death on our behalf but also enough **not** like us that a victory could and would be won, and that this victory would be God's, not ours.

With the arrival of Jesus, the Word-Made-Flesh, God-With-Us, we are being invited to think about all that 'God' is in new and breathtaking ways. We are challenged to comprehend the reality that all the goodness and love and compassion and righteousness and truth and mercy that God is took up residence amongst us. Jesus confirmed that those who had 'seen him, had seen the Father' and that 'I and my Father are one'. He was everything that is God, expressed in human form. God had arrived, in the person of His Son (Isaiah 40:4, Mark 1:3).

## **Theology | Faith Seeking Understanding**

This article is obviously referencing core biblical theology in relation to salvation, redemption, the nature of Jesus, and

the truth of God and who He is. However, we should avoid the temptation to merely get 'stuck' in a particular doctrinal position or viewpoint on the subject. To do so is to ignore the reality that not everything that is true can be fully explained, and that the goal of theology is not to *acquire knowledge*, for its own sake, but to *gain understanding* that not only informs but transforms our faith.

*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 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 understanding and experiencing who God is and what He has done for us, in Jesus, not simply by 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).

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 God, in Jesus, crucified. It is in this that we see the extent to which God was prepared to go in order to rescue and redeem us and why Jesus, and Jesus alone, truly human and truly divine, was the hope of the world.

In your pursuit of knowledge, don't lose sight of this miracle.

*"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." | Colossians 1: 15, ESV*

*"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature, upholding all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." | Hebrews 1:3, ESV*

*"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness." | 2 Peter 1:3, NIV*

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## **By One Man**

**(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)**

I like the Apostle Paul.

I like his ability to 'call a spade a spade', the unrelenting pursuit of his faith, and his bold assertion to "preach nothing but the cross of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:2). No doubt he ruffled more than a few feathers at times, with his unapologetic directness and refusal to tolerate any other gospel than that of being [saved by grace through faith alone](#).

He doesn't shy away from telling it how it was; the reality that his zeal for God had been seriously misplaced early on, and that he had been a violent persecutor and destroyer of the very faith he was now thankful to call his own.

He doesn't downplay the facts of his former life; that not only had he been zealous for the traditions of his fathers, he had also been considered an 'up and coming' amongst his peers, his upward trajectory in Judaism eclipsing many of those his own age (Galatians 1:13).

Yet he also doesn't state this just for effect or from a place of pride, but rather as facts relevant to advancing the true gospel narrative he now endeavors to preach. He states that he counts all those things of his former life as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, his Lord.

He has a particularly warm and fatherly relationship with Timothy, his 'son in the faith' and he shows deep regard for several fellow workers whom he commends by name: Epaphroditus, husband-and-wife team, Priscilla and Aquila, Barnabas, Titus, Silas, Luke, Lydia, and Onesiphorus.

He demonstrates tenderness and genuine love and concern for all those of the "household of faith" and he is a passionate evangelist to those who are yet still "strangers and foreigners" to the gospel of grace. His letters to the early churches are full of pastoral advice and authoritative direction. Yet he is also unapologetically direct and is prepared to meet and name injustice or falsity head-on, as in the situation that he writes about in 2 Corinthians 7 (see

also 2 Corinthians 11, Galatians 1:6–9, Galatians 2:4; 2 Corinthians 11:26).

*“Paul’s letters reveal a remarkable human being: dedicated, compassionate, emotional, sometimes harsh and angry, clever and quick-witted, supple in argumentation, and above all possessing a soaring, passionate commitment to God, Jesus Christ, and his own mission.” | [Britannica.Com](https://www.britannica.com)*

Paul’s influence, passion, and commitment enabled the gospel of Jesus Christ to take root and flourish throughout Asia Minor, and its spread continued long after his death, reaching even to the ends of the earth.

Paul wrote several letters, one of which was the letter to the church at Rome. In chapters 5 and 6 of Romans, he covers some significant theological territory by dealing with the themes of death, life, and resurrection, which came about, he states, ‘by one man’...

## **By One: Death In Adam**

The need for our forgiveness and reconciliation with God sits at the heart of the gospel. Paul recounts in Romans 5 how humanity found itself in the dismal state of being sinning, dying creatures and why we need forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal.

He makes his first point in Romans 5:12 where he teaches that Sin came into the world *by one man* and that death followed swiftly on Sin’s heels, enslaving all of humanity in a dominion of darkness and, ultimately, separation from God.

The word he uses for ‘man’ is the Greek word ἄνθρωπος (anthrōpos) meaning *human*. We get our English word anthropology from the combining of *ánthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος, “human”) and *lógos* (λόγος, “study”). It’s therefore strictly more accurate to say that *by one human* Sin entered the world



and death spread to all.

While Adam becomes the representative of us all, the focus, I think, is not primarily on his gender (as a man) but on his humanity. In fact, scripture elsewhere confirms that Eve was complicit in sin alongside Adam (Genesis 3:6,12, 1 Timothy 2:14). Together, they were responsible for the catastrophe that unfolded.

*“The narratives of Genesis focus on conflict and resolution. God’s purpose from the beginning is to have His presence fill the earth; humans are to image God and subdue the earth, i.e., bring about order and fruitfulness in creation (Genesis 1–2). Conflict enters the story when humans rebel against God (Genesis 3). Shalom is shattered, and the earth is cursed. Further degeneration takes place (Genesis 4–6) until God brings judgment and mercy (Genesis 6–9). Humans then attempt to restore God’s presence (Genesis 11) before God launches His own initiative to re-establish His presence on Earth (the covenant). Genesis 1–11, then, is the founding story of humanity, ending in crisis. These narratives give a real and true assessment of God’s initial purposes and the human plight. Genesis 12–50 is the founding story of the nation with whom the covenant is eventually made at Sinai. The covenant establishes the relationship to Abraham and his descendants, provides the structure for living in God’s presence, and lays the foundation for God’s presence to be established on earth.” | [BioLogos](#)*

The consequence of the fall in Eden – mortality – flowed from Adam and Eve to all of humanity; a literal reality and a core theological truth embedded within the Genesis record. Dying became hard-coded in our DNA.

Not only that, Paul comments later in Romans 7, Sin is a powerful and destructive force that humans find impossible to resist. Humanity has been *sold under sin*, constantly battling

against the pull of our own self-will, which is invariably in opposition to God. Despite having the desire to do good, more often than not, we lack the ability to do what is right, so powerful is Sin's hold and influence over us. There is no one in all the world who has not fallen prey to Sin's insidious, whispering temptation\* (Ecclesiastes 7:20, Romans 3:21).

The introduction and continued presence of Sin in the world is what gives death its power over humanity. We die because we're mortal and death now reigns supreme and we remain dead because of the power that Sin gives death.

***In Adam, all die. This is Paul's first point and the incontrovertible theological teaching of Romans 5.***

## **By One: Life In Christ**

Yet, says Paul in Romans 5:21, and here he makes his second point, in Christ, there is life. There is another theological truth embedded within the Genesis record, a promise "that new life would be delivered out of death."

*"And I will put enmity (open hostility) Between you and the woman, and between your seed (offspring) and her Seed; He shall [fatally] bruise your head, And you shall [only] bruise His heel." | Genesis 3:15, AMP*

Humanity was promised that a descendant of Eve – [another human](#) – would arise to wage war against Sin and to overthrow death. Yet in waging this war, death would deal him a powerful blow, a seemingly mortal wound. But out of his death would flow life.

This promise would be affirmed countless times throughout scripture, and, particularly, by Jesus himself during his ministry, who stated the reason for his coming was that "they [humanity] may *have life*, and have it in abundance [to the full, till it overflows]" (John 10:10, Amplified Bible).

Unable to wage the war for themselves, God's promise and gift to the world would go into battle on humanity's behalf. He would wage war for all those who were weak, utterly helpless, and hopelessly enslaved to Sin. Those who were living in darkness, far from the eternal life God had intended for them. Those whose greatest enemy was death itself.

In fact, this hero's [redemptive work](#) on behalf of humanity would be deeply connected to *his own humanity*. He had to be human, like us, in order to make atonement for the sin of humanity (Isaiah 53:6, Hebrews 2:17)

As a human, he would still feel keenly the pull of Sin's seductive promise, the desire and temptation, as *the first Adam* had, to undertake this battle on his own terms. He would wrestle with the terrifying but necessary reality of confronting death up close; not just any kind of death but the painful and humiliating death of a traitor.

He would face the world's great enemy alone, rejected by all, even by those who were closest to him, in the moment of his greatest need. Defenseless, *like a lamb led to slaughter*, he would cling to the words of the Psalmist that, though he walked through the valley of the shadow of death, God would be with him still. He would choose to suffer according to God's will, committing his soul to a faithful Creator.

This war would be brutal and bloody and seemingly fatal for our hero.

And yet, there would be an extraordinary twist...

Where *the first Adam* had been a living being; *the last Adam* would be a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45). This hero would be human *but not merely a human*. He would be the "Word-Made-Flesh" – the 'one and only of his kind' and in him would dwell 'the entire fullness (completeness) of God's nature (Colossians 2:9).

Written into the very fabric of our reality was a powerful promise that Sin *could be* defeated by the willing sacrifice of one who had committed no sin and who had lived a perfect, moral life according to God's will. The sacrificial death of such an individual, on behalf of all of humanity, would heal the division between God and humanity, reopening the way to the eternal life God had always intended for His creation.

Scripture could not be any clearer that the victory over Sin and death was going to be God's, accomplished through the sending of His Son, the Word-Made-Flesh. Sent in the likeness of all of humanity, but in whom dwelt all the fullness of God, only the Son of God would be able to overcome and defeat our greatest enemy.

Not only that, in meeting death head-on, he would deal it a fatal blow, overturning and destroying its claim on him. Sin's power to command death would be vanquished. Jesus himself would now hold the keys of death and the grave. On the third day, at the break of dawn, he would rise from the silence, *Life* himself having swallowed up death in victory (Acts 2:24, Romans 6:9, 1 Corinthians 15:54).

One act of righteousness, Paul says, led to justification and life for all humanity. By one man's obedience, many would be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19).

*"As sin has exercised kingly sway in inflicting death, so grace, too, may exercise kingly sway in bestowing a righteousness which results in the Life of the Ages through Jesus Christ our Lord." | Romans 5:21, Weymouth New Testament*

## **Deeper Magic**

I love how C S Lewis writes about this epic moment in his fictional work, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*:

*At that moment they heard from behind them a loud noise—a*

great cracking, deafening noise as if a giant had broken a giant's plate...The Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan. "Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?" "Yes!" said a great voice from behind their backs. "It is more magic." They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself. "Oh, Aslan!" cried both the children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad... "But what does it all mean?" asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer. "It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward." | C S Lewis

This "deeper magic" is an immutable law of consequence, as certain as the law of gravity or the rising of the sun. Jesus has brought life and all those *in him* will live. This gift of grace has been given, the work has been finished and the end has been written. "While we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, and, further, now that we are reconciled, we will also be saved by his life."

**In Christ, all will live. This is Paul's second point and the incontrovertible theological teaching of Romans 5.**

## **The Resurrection: Proof + Promise**

One of the great theological truths of the Christian faith, as taught by Paul and, indeed, written into the earliest Christian creeds is the necessary and factual reality of [the](#)

[resurrection](#), particularly, the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, Paul asserts that resurrection underpins the entire gospel narrative, without which all of Christian life is rendered futile.

*“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even **Christ has been raised**. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.” | 1 Corinthians 15:17, NIV*

He actually summarised the gospel by affirming three statements, one of which is a declaration of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus:

*“Remember Jesus Christ [the anointed], raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.” | 2 Timothy 2:8 | NIV*

The Christian faith asserts and teaches that resurrection is a historical reality; Jesus Christ really did live, die, and was raised again to eternal life.

The resurrection is not only relevant to the gospel narrative, it's essential. Author Craig Blomberg comments, *“As wonderful as Jesus' life and teachings and miracles were, they were meaningless if it were not historically factual that Christ died and was raised from the dead and that this provided atonement, or forgiveness, of the sins of humanity.”* Embedded in this reality is the proof that what was begun in Jesus, God intends to do for all creation.

*“The most startling characteristic of the first Christian preaching is its emphasis on the resurrection. The first preachers were sure that Christ had risen, and sure, in consequence, that believers would in due course rise also.*

*This set them off from all the other teachers of the ancient world...Nothing is more characteristic of even the best thought of the day than its hopelessness in the face of death. Clearly, the resurrection is of the very first importance for the Christian faith" – The New Bible Dictionary 1996, p. 1010, "Resurrection".*

Jesus didn't just overcome death, his death also made reparation for all the sins of the world. Sin, in its entirety, was dealt with, once and for always\*\* (Romans 6:10). His resurrection was both proof and promise that the war against Sin had been waged and won. Death has lost its power. Those in Christ *will live*, no longer be held by death but merely passing through it. They too, like him, will be raised to life, never again to experience death.

*"I assure you: Anyone who hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life." | John 5:24*

Life, and *life abundantly* – the same life that Jesus now has [awaits them on the other side](#).

It's no wonder Paul concludes his thoughts on this subject with these inspiring words: *"In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!* (Romans 8:7-39, CEV).

This is indeed good, good news!

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\*apart from Jesus, of course.

\*\*This, of course, doesn't mean that we don't still struggle with sin – this is the challenging reality of the Christian life – but rather that the penalty that sin inflicts, death, has been absolved for those in Christ (Isaiah 53:6, 1 John 2:2, John 1:29). We eagerly wait, with all of creation, to be completely set free from the bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:22).

A large part of the inspiration for this article came from the worship song 'This My Soul' By The Gray Havens. It's truly worth a listen and captures Paul's sentiments from Romans 5 and 6 perfectly. This song is one of my personal favourites.

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# Majors And Minors | The Danger Of Extremism

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between [grace](#) and spiritual performance. Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness for all people; not on the basis of their social status, their ethnicity, or their gender, but on the basis of God's generosity and undeserved grace (Mark 16:15, Luke 14:23).

*"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*

Grace gives us what we don't deserve and cannot earn. This is



why it's so frequently contrasted against the Law of Moses (the Torah), which still resulted in condemning every man or woman, no matter their sincerity or good deeds. Righteousness could never come by law-keeping, simply because it was impossible for it to be kept perfectly in its entirety.

## **Straining Out Gnats, Swallowing Camels\***

Many of the conflicts that were initiated with Jesus came from the Pharisees, members of a Jewish religious party that flourished in Palestine from around 515 BCE–70 CE. The movement was marked by both a meticulous adherence to their interpretation of the Torah as well as their particular eschatological (end times) views.

The precise details of religious life were the Pharisees' passion and the conflicts they engaged in 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](#). They made uncompromising stands on matters of no particular spiritual importance, while issues of greatest significance were minimised or neglected.

The Pharisees 'majored in these minors', presuming that this kind of religiosity made them more spiritual and 'right with God'. In reality, they were actually inverting the spiritual values that God was really interested in, like mercy, justice, and [faithfulness](#).

They should have known better. God had already made plain to His people what He required of them. He'd already told them that He found the saccharine solemnity of their religious assemblies nauseating and the melodious noise of their songs infuriating.

*"He has told you, O human, what is good; and what does the*

*Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" | Micah 6:8, ESV*

*"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,*

Jesus called the Pharisees 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*

The Pharisees could recite the law by heart yet they couldn't have said what the heart of the law really was. They failed to see or understand Jesus had no interest in setting up rigid religious and social guidelines for his followers. His focus instead was on majoring in the majors; the gospel and the significant agendas of the kingdom of God.

## **The Danger Of Extremes**

Legalism takes different forms at different times and is often hard to pin down, manifesting itself in subtle ways.

There is much that can be said about legalism and the hypocrisy that arises from it. An emphasis on externals makes

it very easy to fake what is really going inside. Promoting or insisting on conformity to these outward markers of 'spirituality' often results in people who may look spiritual on the outside but who are, in reality, suffering from deep inner turmoil and sin.

*"I know of only two alternatives to hypocrisy: perfection or honesty. Since I have never met a person who loves the Lord our God with all their heart, mind, soul, and loves their neighbour as themselves, I do not view perfection as a realistic alternative. Our only option, then, is honesty that leads to repentance. As the Bible shows, God's grace can cover any sin, including murder, infidelity, or betrayal. Yet, by definition, grace must be received, and hypocrisy disguises our need to receive grace. When the masks fall, hypocrisy is exposed as an elaborate ruse to avoid grace." | Philip Yancey*

The focus of this article, particularly in light of the global pandemic, is another issue that I believe arises from a spirit of legalism. This is the issue of extremism; when we begin majoring in the minors instead of majoring in the majors.

Right now, the world is being sharply delineated. Nearly as quickly as the virus has spread, so too has the chatter and the differing opinions about both the cause and the cure. There is an ocean of information and propaganda, together with an overabundance of access to information, some of it accurate and some of it not.

However, the most disturbing aspect of all this is the noticeable polarisation of people into two opposing groups; *them and us. And the church is not unaffected in this.*

We, the church, are being drawn into extremes, into focusing on external markers (*whether you believe covid is real or not, whether you choose to vaccinate or not...*). We're using these markers as some kind of external test of authentic

Christianity and displaying the same misguided zeal for religious purity as the Pharisees of Jesus' day. We're gazing outward, looking for specks of sawdust in other people's eyes, instead of looking inward and paying attention to the plank in our own eye.

The dangers of this kind of religiousness – extremism – are as great a threat in the twenty-first century as they were in the first. As Philip Yancey comments, *“the spirit of law-keeping stiffens into extremism. I know of no legalism that does not seek to enlarge its domain of intolerance.”*

Our focus in this [global crisis](#) seems to have shifted away from our most basic and guiding principle: that is, to incarnate Christ in a darkened and impoverished world, and, instead, Christians are showing themselves to be intolerant, judgmental, and divisive to those who think differently to themselves.

Not only that, we're being distracted from majoring in the majors; *the gospel*, and *the significant agendas of the kingdom of God*.

I think we must be careful, particularly right now, but in any circumstance, to ensure that the hills we're choosing to die on are the ones that have a cross firmly planted at their summit.

## **Majoring In The Majors: The Gospel + Kingdom Of God**

While the global pandemic is certainly is a troubling and anxious time, I don't believe *our personal opinion* about it changes anything in relation to our right standing with God. Certainly, there are considerations around [our response to the crisis](#) which must be thought about in relation to our Christian witness, and these are convictions that each Christian must personally decide for themselves, in the light

of scripture.

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. And in Jesus, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose.

This is what the Bible describes as *the gospel* and *the kingdom of God*. These are the major agendas that Jesus focused on and these should be our focus too.

The world is changed by our example, not our opinion. Our primary purpose and responsibility as Christians and, collectively, as the church, is to point the world to Jesus. We do this, not by imposing our opinions or judging the world, but by *being salt and light*.

The significant agendas of the kingdom will be seen in lives that are surrendered to the guidance and leadership of God's designated king, Jesus. Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth, he becomes the first claimant on our affections, the motivating force in our decisions, and the final judge of our soul.

Therefore, we will also be on guard to avoid any kind of system that employs the use of 'formulas' and 'doctrines' to press good people of faith into conformity with a system instead of conformity to Christ. We will be on the lookout for cultures that promote or enable power posturing, performance preoccupation, unspoken rules, and a lack of balance.

And we will resist mindsets that seek to quantify authentic Christianity by anything other than a confession of trust in the saving name of Jesus Christ.

# What Does This Look Like In A Pandemic?

The ability to exercise critical thinking is an important reality for every person, but, in the end, opinions must be formed by each person for themselves and never coerced or compelled upon us by others.

Christians may therefore see a situation in very different ways but this doesn't make them any more or less Christian than each other. It's important to understand that *unity as Christians* is based on our commonality *in Jesus*, not our uniformity of thought or opinion about *non-essential* topics.

Whether I think covid-19 was created in a lab, whether I think covid-19 is no worse than seasonal flu, or whether I think covid-19 is some kind of elaborate ruse enabling Bill Gates to digitally track the world's population through microchip-carrying vaccines, doesn't make me *any less Christian* (although, arguably, at least one of those opinions infers I'm probably less adept in critical thinking than I should be).

How we *respond* or *behave* as Christians, however, is clearly set out for us in scripture and, in this, we should be united. The Apostle Peter, when encouraging the early church in their Christian witness in relation to the pressures they were under, had this to say:

- Keep your conduct honourable ([1 Peter 2:11-12](#))
- Respect and submit to authority ([1 Peter 2:13](#))
- Love earnestly and do good ([1 Peter 1:22](#))

What I think this looks like right now, in practical terms, is this; that Christians will be people of peace, kindness, and compassion. That we'll look for opportunities to do good and love others well. That we'll give no cause for the name of Jesus to be brought into disrepute and no opportunity for the kingdom mission of God to be thwarted.

That we'll have soft hearts and open minds, willing to listen

and understand, rather than judge and disparage. That we'll realise that this time of trouble, at its core, is no different to any other crisis or trouble that Christians have faced and that, in all things, Jesus is over everything.

That we'll choose to not let our differences divide us, but instead, we'll be reminded of what truly unites us.

And that we'll be people who choose to major in the majors, those things that the world needs most; the *gospel of good news* and the *significant agendas of the kingdom of God*.

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**\*The Jews had a law that forbade eating any flying insects that did not have jointed legs for hopping (Leviticus 11:20–23), and in this, they were strictly observant. Because water could have insects and insect larvae in it, pious Jews were careful to strain the water through a cloth before drinking it. They did not want to accidentally ingest an unclean insect and thus violate the law. Jesus mentions this practice in His proverb and then contrasts it with a hyperbolic picture of gulping down a camel. In this way, Jesus accused them of taking great pains (straining out gnats) to avoid offence in minor things of little importance, while tolerating or committing great sins (swallowing camels) such as deceit, oppression, and lust. | [Got Questions](#)**