

Keeping The Faith

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Faith Under Fire

It's been nearly five years since the religious community I grew up in '[regretfully accepted my withdrawal from fellowship](#)'. In reality, I did no such thing, their statement was simply an awkward and disingenuous way to excommunicate me because I could no longer affirm, without reservation, particular tenets they held to be watertight and immutable.

I feel that had the Bible genuinely been our mutually agreed authority, there would have been no good cause to excommunicate me and plenty of good reasons to continue affirming me as a Christian in the Lord (as I do them).

I struggled a lot in those first few years with what I perceived to be the injustice of the situation. I have always been someone who has taken life, in general, pretty seriously (perhaps, my husband would wryly comment, a little *too seriously* at times) and my faith, in particular, quite seriously.

As a child, I had been aware of several church members who had been excommunicated through the years, with the church being told of such a decision by a public announcement issued from the front after the service. Children were always ushered out during these announcements, such things considered unsuitable for young ears, but we were not unaware of the solemn hush that would fall as we made our way outside, with the grim news eventually making its way to us regardless, through the whispers of our older, more astute peers.

It seemed to me, as a 12-year-old, that excommunication was the most awful thing that could ever happen to a person, worse

than death; an all-encompassing, church-wide determination that a person had failed to *keep the faith* and had become a heretic or, *worse*, an *apostate*.

To experience it myself, then, many years later was shocking. It implied I had not measured up to the expectation of Christian living, and this judgment sits uncomfortably with me. I had no glaring moral issue or unrepented sin that would give cause for such action. And yet, I felt like Hester Prynne, with the letter 'A' (for *apostate*, in my case) painted in bold, vivid red on my back for all to see.

The seeming dismissal of the authenticity of my faith was and still is painful and difficult to understand. I wondered silently, *had I failed to keep the faith?*

All The God Colours

For someone raised in such a black-and-white tradition of viewing both scripture and the Christian life, adjusting to life outside of this – [beyond the pale](#) – has been both liberating and confronting.

I have learned about the messy but vital reality of the local church; filled with sinning and flawed humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God, asking their questions and voicing their doubts along the way. And when I say *messy*, I don't just mean a few hymn books out of place in the proverbial church pew.

There are many things that Christians agree on – the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, that God created all things, that humanity is estranged from God and in need of forgiveness and redemption, and that Jesus will one day return, bringing with him the new heaven and the new earth.

And then there are the things that Christians don't agree on – eschatology (end times theology), the [nature and workings of the Spirit](#) today, old earth/young earth, what kind of worship

is *the right kind*, [the role of women in the church...](#)

In my former Christian community, end-time theology was extremely important. A robust understanding of the (mostly accepted) end-time view was expected. Some would even go so far as to say that holding *the correct end-time view* (which must include Russia as the 'bad-guy' protagonist), was a vitally important part of bone-fide Christianity, right up there with the virgin birth and the resurrection. (Given Jesus had very little say about Russia, or the apocalypse for that matter, I had decided to largely untrouble myself with such conversations (unless they're simply two Christians shooting the breeze – albeit somewhat left field, over a cold summer bevvie...)).

In the wider Christian world, the end-times are often hardly given a thought. Sure, Jesus is coming back, and all things will be put right in the end, but the timing and mechanics are largely a mystery when all's said and done. Jesus himself even said, "*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*"

In contrast, a lot more time is spent on the here-and-now: how are you living; are you moving closer to God, does your life show the fruit of the Spirit?

An in-depth understanding of the atonement was also required. It was not enough just to say that you believed Jesus had saved you, you also needed to be able to explain exactly how this was done. Was it his life? His death? His blood? Was he a substitute (*definitely not*) or was he a representative? And what did you know about propitiational atonement?

Propitiational atonement? You may as well be speaking double-dutch. Some Christians wouldn't have a clue what you might mean by that funny, old-fashioned word, but they sure as heck know that Christ died for their sins, and so they could have a relationship with God, and their faith is firmly placed in

this truth.

(And, in fact, the community can't even come to a consensus among themselves on the mechanics of the atonement, and multiple splits have occurred and still occur on this subject alone, with neither group affirming the other as *true Christians*).

Exposed to widely varying (and, in many cases, extremely interesting) perspectives on all manner of biblical topics, I have been forced to reexamine my own position and reevaluate, in many instances, how I had been taught to read and approach scripture. What may have once appeared to be the only way of reading the text was suddenly only one of several ways, and viewing scripture in light of all its nuances often opened up new ways of understanding, both scripture and others' interpretations of it.

Suddenly I was no longer sure I was *right on every single thing* because I realised I'd never had the opportunity to genuinely consider alternative interpretations or views. Neither was I sure that *being right* was the point of the exercise.

People will try to tell you the Bible is black and white on every subject but it's not, not by half. There's plenty of grey, and bold, glorious colour too. There's space for openness and conversation and listening and learning and for seeing things from different angles.

It's a living book, this word of God, intimately speaking to each one of us as if it were written for us alone. It contains a kind of magic, a mystical power that changes our hearts and transforms our lives. And so sometimes we'll hear its song like a harmony played on different instruments. And yet holding these harmonies together is the beautiful melody, always true, always constant, always trustworthy:

For someone raised to judge the authenticity of someone's

Christianity by their degree of understanding (or perhaps more accurately, their (correct) position on a myriad of doctrinal matters), this shift in perspective has not come without its challenges.

Challenging Your Status Quo

The way we think, the habits we form, the people we become are shaped by many things. We typically develop unconscious biases as a result of the things we were taught and the observations we made throughout our childhood. These implicit and explicit biases are influenced by our backgrounds, personal experiences, societal stereotypes, and cultural contexts, and when we look at religious life, it's not so very different.

Many things that we do or think as Christians find their origins in scripture – but, conversely, a lot of things don't and, more often than not, are simply generational traditions passed down until they become commonly established practices or beliefs (without necessarily any particular biblical weight behind them).

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

I wrote more about traditions [here](#) so my intention isn't to talk about them in any further detail in this article, only simply to point out that while there's nothing implicitly

right or wrong with traditions (the Bible never condemns traditions of themselves), Jesus' words in [Mark 7:6-8](#) remind us that traditions shouldn't ever supersede God's Word.

One of the biggest shifts in my journeying beyond the pale has been to attempt to recognise when these occasions of bias arise, and learning to examine the thought patterns, past beliefs, practices, or traditions that I may have once held to be true and immutable, challenging them in the light of scripture.

I think this challenge to our preconceptions and biases should form part of our spiritual disciplines throughout our Christian life, not just in moments of crisis, deconstruction, or external challenge.

As NT Wright comments, part of the genius of genuine Christianity is that each generation has to think it through afresh; not just *receiving the faith* but also *keeping the faith*; that is, constantly evaluating our beliefs and practices to see if they reflect the original apostolic teaching, traversing the space between certainty and disbelief with skepticism and faith held in both hands.

'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)

I wasn't taught to hold this sense of healthy skepticism as a critical reality of my journey of faith. Rather, everything that I had to know and could know was supposedly imparted before my water baptism, and my Christian life thereafter – until death or Jesus returned – was simply about 'protecting the truth' and not 'leaving the truth' (*don't let the heretics in and don't become a heretic*).

Yet I have learned that *the truth* is far more simple than I first imagined and, further, is not a commodity to be owned or protected by us. It's *God's truth* and He can and has protected it throughout the ages. Our job is simply to make sure we're walking in that truth – *keeping the faith*; constantly asking ourselves if our *personal* beliefs and practices continue to line up with *the teaching of the apostles* (and being committed to adjusting, if necessary).

The Teaching Of The Apostles

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 one's binding to the person of Christ.

Religion, therefore, in the truest sense of the word, cannot be passed down. It must be personally received by each individual, for themselves.

The Book of Acts, which recounts the early days of the first-century church, records what this looked like. The recurring theme throughout the book is a threefold message of salvation, repentance, and abiding, which every person who would call themselves a believer wholeheartedly adopted and received:

salvation + repentance + abiding

First, a message of *salvation* was preached; the desperate natural state of humanity and how God set out to rescue humanity, through Jesus, whom He raised from the dead. The [scope of God's story](#) is, of course, much larger than our own personal salvation, but the primary message of *evangelism* is that we are estranged from God but that He has made a way home.

Then, a message of *repentance* was taught; the need to reject one's former way of living and take hold of God's provision of living water by being [born again of water and spirit](#). This is the primary message of *discipleship*, a decision to become a follower of Jesus, who is both Lord and Christ. It is, as Eugene Peterson puts it, a long obedience in the same direction.

Finally, a commitment to *abiding in Jesus – keeping the faith* – was communicated; which includes the necessary reality of being part of the community of believers. By becoming a follower of Jesus, we are no longer just an individual Christian, but part of a collective body, the body of Jesus Christ. We are part of [the church](#): a gospel-shaped, gospel-saturated, and gospel-sending living and breathing organic reality.

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

We are connected right back to those at the epicentre of the most explosive and world-changing event: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are connected by the precious blood of the lamb and nothing can separate us from the love of God, apart from us choosing to leave the light and walk again in darkness ([Romans 8:31-39](#)).

Written about 300 years after the birth of Christ, [the Apostles' Creed](#) summarises the foundational Christian beliefs taught by the early church and is an invaluable touchstone for us as we constantly examine whether we are *keeping the faith*.

“Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you;

*if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith." 2
Corinthians 13:5*

Keeping The Faith

Keeping the faith is the practice of constant personal evaluation; examining the state of our heart, being truthful about the orientation of our life, and showing evidence of the Spirit being present, through the adding to our faith of virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love (which are all outworked in community).

Repentance is not a one-time act but a constant reorienting of our hearts towards God every single day of our Christian journey, a daily decision to walk in the light and not in the darkness. Do we remind ourselves of the place in which we used to be, the dominion of darkness, dead in our transgressions and sins, and ensure that we have not, like Lot's wife, looked back, turning the direction of our life towards those former things which have passed away?

Believing (from the Greek word *pisteōs* (πίστεως), meaning *to entrust*) is firstly a posture of the heart. Are we continuing to place our trust, [like faithful Abraham](#), in the provision of living water that comes from God? Are we reminding ourselves each day that we are *saved by grace, through faith*, and not by our own efforts, it is the gift of God? Are we resting in that promise? Or have we, [like the foolish Galatians](#), begun adding additional spiritual acts to the formula of salvation, convincing ourselves that our performance somehow contributes to God's work of grace (in our life or others)?

And are we *abiding in Jesus*, outworking our life of faith in the community of his people? Do we remain connected to the vine, bearing much fruit as Christ works in us and through us? Are we remaining in Christ's love, keeping his commandments by loving our fellow Christians in the same way that Jesus has

loved us? For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and, likewise, we cannot be fruitful unless we remain in Jesus.

Whether you find yourself in a season of drought, part of a flourishing faith community, at the edges of everything you've ever known, or out beyond the pale, I would encourage you to remember this: the Christian life is not an academic exercise. The strength of our faith is not judged by the intensity of our emotions; faith is trust and it's only as good as the object of our trust.

The question, then, isn't "*do you truly believe*" but, "*who do you trust*"? Are you pointing to Jesus, are you resting in his grace, and are you demonstrating his love?

Are you keeping the faith?

Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.

"But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and await the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God's love. And you must show mercy to those whose faith is wavering. Rescue others by snatching them from the flames of judgment. Show mercy to still others, but do so with great caution, hating the sins that contaminate their lives.

Now all glory to God, who is able to keep you from falling away and will bring you with great joy into His glorious presence without a single fault. All glory to Him who alone is God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord. All glory, majesty, power, and authority are His before all time, and in the present, and beyond all time! Amen." | Jude 1:20-25, NLT