

# Loving The Church

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*“You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honour.” | James 3:18, MSG*

Loving the church can be hard.. Frankly, at times, she can seem like a big, fat disappointment.

Infighting. Divisions. The failure of leaders and the apathy of congregants. The assimilation to culture. A preoccupation with prestige and power. Intolerance. Liberality.

Sometimes the church is hard to love.

*“It is clear that the church regularly breaks our hearts, disappoints, and even damages us. Both history and our current headlines reveal a church that can be a deeply flawed, sinful, and unhealthy institution, marred by acts of injustice, corruption, abuse, misogyny, and oppression. The contemporary [American] church is wrecked with bickering and division, celebrity worship and unaccountable leaders, false and shallow teaching, and a Christian industrial complex formed around greed and vanity.” | Tish Harrison, A Church Called Tov*

Negative experiences often lead people to ‘give up on church’. They decide they will ‘follow Jesus’ but reject the church. Their solution: to walk an individual and untroubled path, to become a solitary lighthouse bravely resisting the wild seas alone.

And I get it. I do.

It's an unsettling reality that many people who've left the church and moved away from Christian community have suffered real disappointment and hurt at the hands of the church. For many, their view of the church has been (justifiably) tarnished by their negative experiences within it.

People can be very wounded by the church, unfortunately, because it's made up of imperfect people who often mess up.

But here's the rub.

We are the church.

All of us, together, collectively, communally.

There's not *ourselves* and then, over there, *the church*. There's not *me*, in my own personal little faith bubble, and then, over there, the raging, incompetent screw-up of a *church* that I, personally, have no connection to (and neither do I want to).

There aren't *some Christians* who just love doing church and other Christians who, well, it's just *really not their thing*.

'An individual Christian does not a church make.'

## **We are the church**

Christianity is, by definition, collective, and communal. There is no church, without all of us.

Too often we separate out Jesus and 'the church' in our minds as if they're two different identities. We say we love Jesus but we're less enthusiastic about his people.

But the church is Jesus' body. Loving Jesus means loving the church too. It's part of him and he's part of it. He died for the church, for his people, and it's in his death and resurrection that we are brought together in community.

Jesus said that he would build his church, purchased with his own blood, and of which he is the chief cornerstone (Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:28, Ephesians 2:20). His language is organic, inclusive, and corporate. He is in the house-building business and we are each his individual stones, selected and fitted together, according to his good pleasure (1 Peter 2:5).

We therefore can't say we love Jesus but we hate his people/body... it's simply incongruous.

Loving the church isn't an optional extra to our life of faith. It's an intrinsic part of it, with all its joy, pain, and disappointment. She is us and we are her.

### **3 Reasons To Love The Church:**

#### **1. Because Jesus Asked Us To (And Because He Loves Her)**

Jesus brings real people, diverse and divided in life, into common union together, into relationship, into the messy, untidy reality that is the church, not because they are worthy, but because Jesus died for them and that is enough.

It's around the Passover table, over the first Christian communion, and right before Jesus was betrayed, sentenced to death, and then crucified, that he gives his disciples a new commandment to live by once he is gone.

*"...love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." | John 13:34-35, ESV*

By loving one another as he has loved us, all the world will know that we are his disciples. The world will see your love for each other and know, without even having to ask, that you are followers of the king.

Love isn't always easy, but it is the more excellent way. And it's the way that Jesus has asked us to take.

First, we were loved, now we love.

Sure, we will have to work at it at times (and 1 Corinthians 13 is full of pastoral advice on how to go about this) but, quite simply, loving each other – loving the church – is what Jesus has asked us to do.

He loves her and he wants us to love her too.

## **2. Because The Church Is The Hope Of The World (Despite Her Flaws)**

Around that communion table, Jesus could see the seeds of the church – his church – that was soon to be born. His small band of followers represented the expansive and diverse family that God would build through him, for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

*“You are my ambassadors”,* Jesus had told them, *“and behold, I am with you, even until the end of time.”* (Matthew 28:20).

From the dark soil of an empty tomb, the seeds of Jesus' church sprang forth, bringing new life and hope.

The church – full of saved sinners – is the place that tells of God's goodness and faithfulness, and His enduring love for humanity.

The church is the place that speaks hope, shining the light of the gospel into a dark world.

The church is the place where broken and damaged people find healing and redemption, basking in the warmth of God's radical grace.

The church is the heart of God's kingdom mission, spilling over into the world and showing that a different way is

possible: life that gives life, in abundance.

We love the church because, despite her flaws, she is the hope of the world, the place where people finally come home.

### **3. Because We Were Made For God's Community**

We were made for community and we grow and are nurtured in community. (Yes, we are wounded in community but it's also in community that we heal. *"Healing might not come from the community where the wounding took place, but community is needed for healing nonetheless."* | Rich Villodas)

It was in the very beginning that God said, 'let us make humanity in our image and after our likeness.' To be with God and to be like God, together: this is what we were made for and the purpose of human existence. This is why we all feel that deep longing to belong, why we continually search for meaning in the mundane. God has placed eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

We aren't really 'Christian' in its fullest sense unless we're doing life together within the God-community we were created for. Otherwise, we're just like a random toe or finger, disconnected from a body and essentially useless (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) (in this analogy, that is; please don't read that to be saying 'you are useless'!).

The Apostle Paul has this to say about the body of Christ: *"A body is made up of many parts, and each of them has its own use. That's how it is with us. There are many of us, but we each are part of the body of Christ, as well as part of one another."* (Romans 12:4-5, CEV)

Each one of us, brought together, makes up the body and, as Ephesians 5:29 comments, "None of us hate our own bodies. We provide for them and take good care of them, just as Christ does for the church."

This is what we were made for! Relationship with God and relationship with His people. Church people are kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that are “connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

We love the church because she is the community of God.

## **Finally...**

Sometimes the church can feel hard to love. Sometimes we rub up against people who don't exactly show Jesus as we think he ought to be seen. *Sometimes we are those people.*

But for those who have been disillusioned by the church, please know that she is full of people who really are the real deal; people who love Jesus, love his people, and are working every day in his kingdom mission with sincerity and authenticity. I know, because I've met them!

So, don't give up hope in the church, in finding your place in it, and in loving her, despite her flaws.

She is us.

We are the church.

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**This article was first published 16 November 2022**

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## **In Him Was Life**

New Testament holiness is a joyous privilege, not a heavy burden and duty.

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# Judging // Discerning

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

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

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

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

Perhaps embarrassed by our failures and our unchristian treatment of both believers and unbelievers in the past, we're

now collectively overcompensating by saying nothing at all, reducing the church's critical witness of the name of Jesus, in many instances, to a 'cloud with no rain'.

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

## The Christian Ideal

Christians are called to a life of holiness, of renewal and transformation; becoming part of the new creation found in Christ. Christians are those who have accepted the call out of the dominion of darkness, with all its pointless chaos and unfruitful works of darkness, into kingdom life; and the acknowledgment that living God's way, according to His plan and purposes for humanity, is good for us and glorifying to Him.

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

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

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



conformed daily into the image of Christ.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Objective Truth**

It feels difficult to write this article without coming off as intolerant, self-righteous, or bigoted. Any time one states a definite opinion on a matter as if that position is the right

one, one risks sounding dogmatic and judgmental and I acknowledge it may be no different in this case.

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

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

It's often no longer acceptable to hold to and defend certain views as anything more than being subjectively true, particularly in religious or moral matters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Judging Or Discerning?**

### **Discerning**

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

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

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

He goes on to give several examples of what *'being like God*

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

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

Moral truth exists, vested in the person and character of God Himself, and Christians ought to be preaching and pursuing it with all their hearts, both individually and collectively. To do otherwise is to reject the authority and supremacy of God over our lives.

## **Judging**

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

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

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

Matthew warns us about taking such a harsh position of judgment against our Christian brothers and sisters, for with

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

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

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

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

## **What Is The Church's Responsibility?**

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

Paul is horrified at such a situation and tells the church that, collectively, they ought to be in mourning in sorrow and

shame. Such things ought not to be even named among the people of God, let alone practiced (Ephesians 5:3).

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

He continues, *"In my other letter, I told you not to have anything to do with immoral people. But **I wasn't talking about the people of this world.** You would have to leave this world to get away from everyone who is immoral or greedy or who cheats or worships idols. I was talking about **your own people** who are immoral or greedy or worship idols or curse others or get drunk or cheat. **Don't even eat with them!** Why should I judge outsiders? **Aren't we supposed to judge only church members?** God judges everyone else. The Scriptures say, "Chase away any of your own people who are evil." (1 Corinthians 5:4-9)*

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

(It's important to note here that one church is not at liberty to sit in judgment of another. A local church has oversight over its own members, not over another church. The authority to remove a lampstand of Jesus or determine whether a

lampstand should be removed from its place of influence belongs to the King alone (Revelation 2:5). No person or group should dare presume such authority over Jesus' church and its local expressions.)

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

## **Restoring**

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

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

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

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

We love them, we accept their struggle with sin as something common to us all, and yet we encourage them not to shrink back

from Christ in shame but rather to turn to him anew in humble confession and repentance.

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

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

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

## **Protecting**

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

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



protects the name of Jesus.

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

*“But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good – crucified. Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” | Galatians 5:22-25 MSG*

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# What The Church Is (And What She Isn't)

I really love talking about church.

Not, as in, *my church* or *your church*.

Not, as in, *what flavour of church*, in a denominational sort of way.

And not, as in, *which kind of church*; *mega church*, *home church*, *missional church*, or *cell-group church* (and, oh boy, I wish whoever had come up with that last descriptor had really given it a bit more thought...).

I love talking about church, as in, *The Church*. The bride of the lamb, the woman of valour formed from the saviour's side, the universal, time-transcending, death-defying reality, made up of many individual and diverse parts but united together as one organic, institutional identity.

There is nothing quite like her in all the world.

She is more powerful than the world's greatest empires, having outlasted and outlived them all. While earthly rulers have come and gone, long departed into dust, she remains still.

She is more transformational than alchemy, the almost-magical science of transmutation; changing one substance or organism into something else entirely. For it's within her very body that weak and decaying humans, desperately indentured to sin, are rescued, released, and restored to become children of God who will themselves transcend even death itself.

She is *not of this world*, for there is no rational, natural explanation for her existence. She is the tangible and visible evidence of an untouchable and invisible God who is Sovereign over all, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is His

Spirit that gave her birth, His Spirit that sustains her, His Spirit that saves, seals, and sanctifies her.

She is both a witness and an invitation, a light piercing through the darkness of this cosmos showing who God is, what He's done, and what He's doing still. She is God's hands and feet, His eyes and His heart, His sacrificial love, and His call to radical repentance and salvation to those around her. She is the community of His people, the kingdom *now-but-not-yet*, an unfulfilled but certain promise of everything that is yet to come.

She is magnificent and yet flawed, a constant work-in-progress as she is shaped into the complete image of the Christ, the one who was God-With-Us. She will be, at the end of days, the light that the nations of the world will walk in, the place where the kings of the earth will bring their splendour; adorned with the glory of God and shimmering like the rarest, most precious jewel ever seen.

This is who she is: a gospel-shaped, gospel-saturated, and gospel-sending living and breathing organic reality.

## **She Isn't Perfect**

What the church isn't is a community made up of people who have everything sorted and who are no longer troubled by sin, disease, death, or disaster. In reality, Jesus brings real people, deeply flawed and very different from one another in life together, into relationship, into the messy, untidy reality that is the church, *not because they are worthy, but because Jesus died for them and that is enough.*

It's Jesus who is building his church and he builds it through imperfect people who are being made perfect in *his* righteousness and through *his* strength. Regular, average humans like you and I are made more than conquerors, because of Jesus.

We still struggle with the impact of sin in our world, and in our own lives. We are acutely aware of God's original intention for His creation and how far from that this world really is. We long, with all of creation, to see humanity released from the grip of disease and death, to see creation restored, to see the peoples of the world living in peace and harmony with one another.

And yet, despite the flaws in ourselves and the failures all around us, the imperfect church is the hope of the world. She is the living reality that God has been and is still working to make all things new.

Long ago, God intended to use the church as an example of His incredible wealth and grace towards humanity and His intention and plan to bring everything together under Christ, for His own glory. She is imperfect and yet magnificent because the living God is the source of her existence and empowerment.

Sometimes it's hard to know how to hold these two realities in tension; that beautiful and incredible collective that Jesus is building, alongside the dark reality that the church has often been a deeply flawed, sinful, and unhealthy institution.

But one thing we know for sure, she belongs to Jesus, He has loved her and redeemed her, and will make her perfect and all glorious at the end of time.

## **She Is Diverse And Yet United**

The Church is made up of those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans makes this clear. *"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

This reality cuts across cultural, economic, gender, and racial divides and it caused no small stir in the early years of the church, as it continues to do today.

Initially planted in the soil of Jerusalem, the gospel message soon spread rapidly beyond Israel; throughout Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the Mediterranean world. In as little as just over 10 years after Jesus' resurrection, Christianity had already reached as far as Rome itself. As Jesus had promised, his followers were to be his witnesses, even to the ends of the earth. Yet the gospel call often demanded radical upheaval in the lives of those who accepted it.

In a world of slaves and masters, the Church soon learned that God's rule of love transcended any man-made law and that in Jesus, both slave and master were equal and were to consider one another as family.

Culturally disparate groups like Jews and Gentiles learned they were not so different after all, that the same God was the source of life for them both, and that both were intended to share equally in the riches inherited as God's children. They, too, were to think of each other as family, children of the same father, equally loved and precious.

Men and women, long considered to exist within a tiered hierarchal structure learned that, in fact, they were two equal halves of an incredible whole, created and intended to work alongside each other in the mission and purpose of God. The long and complex history of patriarchy was subverted by Jesus' redemptive message and restorative ministry, particularly good news for many women.

All those united *with* Christ are also united *in* and *by* Christ, putting on this radical new identity like a new set of clothes. Their differences – and there were many – were brought under the authority of Christ. Each person found equal and common ground in Jesus, and in the reality that they all shared in one Spirit, God's guarantee of their future inheritance.

# She's Exclusive And Yet Inclusive

Here's a startling reality: the church isn't made up of *good people*, people who *do good things*, people who think Christianity is *morally helpful*, or even people who *happily affirm* the historical Jesus.

The church is made up of those *who have put their faith in Jesus for salvation and who confess that he is Lord and Christ*. Quite simply, if you aren't following Jesus the King then you aren't one of Jesus' followers.

The church exists *because of* Jesus and *for* Jesus. Each person who calls themselves a Christian acknowledges they have been saved out of the dominion of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of the Son of God's love. They have placed their lives under the authority of Jesus as Lord and King.

Church people are therefore kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that "*are literally connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity*"(Matter Of The Heart). The church is the tangible evidence of the reality of the kingdom of God.

But five Christians getting together for a BBQ, or two Christian mates out catching some waves together is not a church. Although they're all individual Christians, and, collectively, a group of Christians, they're not 'church' simply by virtue of their getting together in a social capacity.

The church *exists for a specific purpose* and the *church gathers (in local expressions) for a specific purpose*.

Christians regularly gather in groups, in all sorts of places, all around the world to affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and His kingdom. They fly the banner of Jesus, so to speak, and affirm those who are

baptised in his name, through gospel ordinances (baptism and breaking of bread) and gospel practices (disciplining, worshipping, serving, praying, and hospitality).

This is the definition of a local church, an expression of the one, universal church and, in this way, the church is unapologetically exclusive by nature. The church is only made up of Christians.

And yet she's also inclusive in character, or at least ought to be. The good news of Jesus Christ and his kingdom is offered to anyone, no matter their race, gender, status, or situation. There is no sin too great that would bar someone from accepting God's grace and there is no degree of goodness that means a person isn't in need of that same grace.

Before God, we are all in the same miserable situation, dead in our sins, and yet, through Christ, we are all offered the wonder of forgiveness and the hope of more to come; life and life in abundance.

God sent His son as saviour for all the world, not just some people. Not just the people we get along with it, the people whose company we enjoy, or the people who make us feel good. The undeserved gift of grace is offered to all, even our annoying neighbour, intolerant boss, or the shady local car mechanic.

The church hasn't always done a great job of being welcoming to the outsider, of making it comfortable for the skeptical seeker to venture through the doors, of listening to the questions, doubts, or struggles of those wrestling with their faith in belief or in practice. She has oftentimes laid on people burdens too heavy to bear with little tolerance for those of modest faith, who may need much encouragement and discipling along the way.

She has sometimes portrayed the Christian journey as something of a sprint to glory, rather than a long endurance in the same

direction with many failures along the way.

Yet her character should reflect the character of God; not willing that any should perish and desiring that all would have the opportunity to hear the message of salvation. She is the space where people can meet with God, where they can grow in faith, where they can fail and find forgiveness, often many times over, and where they can learn to love one another, despite their differences, because of the love they have received in Jesus.

The church is exclusive by nature but should be inclusive in character; diligent in preaching the desperate state of humanity and our need for Jesus, but abundant in grace and kindness, ready to welcome the repentant sinner home.

## **I Love The Church**

I love the church. I love talking about her and thinking about her, and I love being a part of her.

I love her history, in all its grandeur and with all its flaws, but I particularly marvel at her miraculous beginning. From betrayal, death, and seeming hopelessness sprang life and hope, and endless joy.

Over twenty centuries ago, in the still darkness of a garden tomb, the Son of God took his first resurrection breath and, at that moment, his church was born, ignited by the Spirit and destined to last for all eternity. She is imperfect and yet magnificent, flawed and yet more beautiful as each day passes; the visible reality of an unfulfilled but certain promise of everything that is yet to come.

There is nothing quite like her in all the world.



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# Come Walk With Me

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Come walk with Me.

Imagine we are once again in Eden, walking together in the cool shade of the trees.

Listen to the sound of the great river, flowing through My garden paradise. Hear the rush of its distributaries, flowing north, east, south, and westward out from My garden. Living water springs from this place, refreshing and pure.

Close your eyes and breathe in the rich, loamy scent of this good earth. There is gold here, and precious stones too, hidden in abundance beneath the surface. Catch the sweet scent of resin floating on the crisp, clean air, the call of the mountain eagle soaring up and away from his nest, the whisper of the wind through the pasture grasses.

I am here with you. I am beside you, all around you. I go before you and I come after you; a burning torch and a defensive shield. I am closer than your very own breath. Nothing will hurt you in this place.

Catch your breath. Rest beside the quiet pools where you will find water for your thirsty soul. Rest here in the stillness. Feel My presence and be restored.

I see your weariness, your unsettled and aching heart. I know your questions and feel your pain. I see the heavy burdens that you are carrying.

Have you forgotten what a life walking with Me should be like?

Have you forgotten that I am the One who has breathed life into your dry bones, that I know the very heart of you, and that I love you?

I am your refuge, your redeemer, your restorer. Lay your burdens down.

Rest alongside Me now, beside the still water, and let Me remind you of My love.

You are made for life, an abundant, overflowing, God-shaped and God-filled life. Of everything made in the beginning, your kind alone were made in My image, made to reflect My glory. Body and soul, you are marvellously made.

You were made for belonging, with others like yourself but most of all, with Me. You were made good, so, so good.

When catastrophe fell in Eden and a great chasm arose between us, I was not defeated. When darkness fell in your world, My light shone even brighter, a shimmering beacon of hope to bring you home. I had known from the beginning that this would happen and I had already made a way.

I sent My light into your world; the glory of My presence cutting through the darkness and lighting your path back to Me. I called you to Me and you heard the sound of My voice. Like a sheep that had wandered and was lost, you have returned to Me, the great shepherd of your soul.

As you drew close to Me, I drew ever closer to you; can you not feel Me close even now? I have not left you, you are not walking alone.

You feel small and insignificant but I tell you, you are My deeply treasured child. Does your heart not stir within you, as My Spirit testifies to this truth?

You say you are weak but I tell you, My power is made perfect in your weakness. I have put eternity deep within you, like

treasure in jars of clay.

You say you feel inadequate and unworthy but I tell you that you have been made white like snow, whole and worthy in My righteousness. You say you didn't know My saving power could look like this and I tell you, this is *grace*, *My grace*, and it is sufficient for you.

I am the bedrock on which your feet find firm footing, the Alpha and Omega, encircling you in My safety and protection. I will hide you in the shadow of My feathered wings and My faithfulness will be a shield for you throughout all your days.

I have wept for you, fought for you, bled for you, died for you, and I have been made alive again, for you.

There is nothing I wouldn't do for you.

Quiet those voices in your head, clamouring to be heard, telling you that you must earn My favour, that you must do something to deserve My love. I have borne the cost of our reconciling, it is My gift to you. I have secured your passage home and I will walk that path with you.

Quiet those voices around you, telling you that simply being in Me isn't enough. I tell you, I Am leading you and renewing you and transforming you. You need only abide in Me.

The curse of sin is broken. I have broken it and you are free in Me. My life flows into yours, My Spirit breathing its refreshing wind into your heart. Walk with Me and work with Me and you'll recover your life.

Are you feeling burned out, forced into patterns that are ill-fitting and heavy? Are you tired and anxious, carrying burdens too heavy to bear? I say again, lay those burdens down.

Lift up your weary head and take heart. I am still here, I have always been here and I will never leave you nor forsake

you. The good work that I've begun in you, I promise faithfully to complete.

Come walk with Me, I'm all you need.

*“So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause. No more thistles, but giant sequoias, no more thornbushes, but stately pines—monuments to me, to God, living and lasting evidence of God.” | Isaiah 55:12-13, MSG*