

Believer's Baptism

"And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised, and wash your sins away, calling on his name." – Acts 22

Before Jesus came preaching 'the good news' and proclaiming that the kingdom was near, the gospels [of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John] record that his coming was announced by a messenger, one John the Baptist. *"Prepare the way of the Lord"*, he proclaimed, *"Clear the road for him."* (Matthew 3:3)

John was a rustic wilderness figure, a wild man clothed in garments made from camel's hair who ate locusts and wild honey. His message was singular and direct: *repent and be baptised; for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.*

People flocked from all over to see this enigmatic figure and to hear what he had to say. Those who were stirred in their hearts by his message confessed their sins and were baptised. Their baptism signified the rejection of their former way of living and repentance of their sinfulness.

Many Pharisees and Sadducees* also joined the procession of people coming from Jerusalem, Judea, and all over the Jordan Valley, keen to participate in "the baptism of John the Baptist". Yet they viewed baptism as merely a hip life experience rather than a complete lifestyle change.

John castigated these leaders of the people for their lack of true repentance. *"Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins."*, he proclaimed, without apology.

John the Baptist made it clear when addressing the crowds that a little water meant nothing if they weren't prepared to change their lives. Baptism needed to ignite the kingdom life within a believer, changing a person from the inside out. If anyone wanted to be part of the Kingdom of God that was soon to arrive—that was indeed at their very doorstep—they would

need to be truly born again, dying to their old life and being reborn as a new kind of human.

His words would be echoed years later by James, the brother of Jesus (also called James the Just). He was a leader in the early Christian church in Jerusalem and he would write specifically to Jewish believers on the topic of true, saving faith (of which repentance is a key ingredient). Faith without deeds, James would comment, is dead, and nothing more than a corpse.

Deeds do not save you: the work of salvation was accomplished fully and completely by Jesus on the cross and ratified by his resurrection from the dead. But your trust (faith) in that work is proven by your life of action.

We are made right with God by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless it's demonstrated by an active, loving response to God's grace (James 2:17-24).

Repentance—true repentance—involves both a state of the heart and the action of the individual: faith, that is, *trust in God*, worked out in real and tangible ways in every detail of our lives.

Get Up, Be Baptised, And Wash Away Your Sins...

The Book of Acts, which recounts the early days of the first-century church, tells the story of how the great commission of Matthew 28 was outworked, first in Jerusalem, then throughout Judea, in Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. Jesus had told his disciples, "*Go and make disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*"

The same good news that Jesus preached—that through him, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and

reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose—was taken and preached by Jesus' disciples to all who would listen. This message was then followed by the directive: "*Repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins.*"

A 'baptism' without the repentance that precedes such an act would be a contradiction—in the words of John the Baptist, a little water means nothing if you aren't prepared to change your life. But 'repentance'—turning to God in faith—without the action that demonstrates that faith is, in the word of James, counterfeit faith, in reality dead and completely useless.

The full meaning of '*believe*' in scripture includes action. The first *act of faith* by a person believing the good news about Jesus is to *be baptised*—a public declaration of a personal conviction.

The Bible knows nothing of baptism without repentance and it also knows nothing of repentance without baptism. They go together and are intrinsically linked. To separate them from each other is to destroy the power and significance of either.

Baptism: Faith Expressed in action

Obedience to Jesus' commands—not just in verbal assent but in practical application—is proof your reorientation is genuine. The first step of obedience, the first *action of faith*, is the decision to be baptised. While the act of baptism doesn't contribute to God's saving work in Jesus, it does prove that your faith in that work is real. The kind of faith that makes us right with God does not remain alone but bears fruit.

Countless references are given throughout Acts and in the pastoral letters and epistles of the New Testament to this life-changing Christian ordinance which became one of the key practices of the early church.

Water baptism, then and now, represents significant truths of the Christian faith, the first of which is the identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus:

1. Paul the Apostle talks about this in his letter to the Romans, where he says that being baptised joins us to Christ and, in doing so, also joins us to his death. We die and are buried, with our old sinful life 'crucified with Christ'. In doing so, we are no longer 'slaves to sin', set free from its power in our lives. And just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too rise from the waters as a 'new creation', made alive in Jesus by the glorious power of the Father. Someone who has been baptised, Paul says, should consider themselves dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus. This, alone, is one of the most transformative, joyful, and incredible aspects that water baptism symbolises – the reality that sin no longer has power over us and that we have been set free!
2. While baptism itself doesn't contribute to the saving work accomplished by Jesus, it is God's arrangement for a person to gain a clean conscience based on their faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—an outward demonstration of an inward conversion. It represents a moment of crossing over, of rescue and redemption from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God's love (Colossians 1:13). Just as the people of Israel were rescued from the darkness of slavery and bondage in Egypt, the finality of which was marked by 'baptism in the Red Sea' (1 Corinthians 10:2), so too a person's rescue by Jesus from the power of sin is marked by baptism in water.
3. Baptism demonstrates the reality of our great

adoption as true sons and daughters of God. And when we are saved by faith, we are also brought into family. Baptism is a sign of joining the family of God, the community of Christ's body. Other metaphors are given throughout scripture to describe the reality of this *belonging*, of the new identity which each person bears; we become citizens of heaven (Ephesians 2:19), we are a stone built into the holy temple of God (1 Peter 2:5), we are a branch, grafted into the great vine that is Jesus (John 15:1-7) and, collectively, we are part of what the Bible calls 'the bride of Christ', [a living, breathing woman of valour.](#)

Believer's Baptism

If repentance forms part of the equation [of baptism] and if belief must be personally affirmed (Romans 10:9), then it would seem that the practice of infant 'baptism' finds no place in the biblical narrative. While I don't personally believe it's 'wrong' or 'unbiblical' to dedicate a child, as part of a family's commitment to Jesus in some kind of ceremonial way, this is not the baptism described by the Bible and we therefore ought not to confuse the two.

Baptism also requires full immersion in water, not merely a sprinkling. The symbolism commented on in Scripture in relation to water baptism, some of which I've touched on above, is compelling. Infant sprinkling is simply not 'baptism', in biblical terms.

The argument is sometimes made that baptism replaces the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision and therefore, just as infants were circumcised, so, too, Christian families can 'baptise' their children as a sign of their covenant with God.

While there are some similarities between circumcision and the ordinance of baptism—and baptism can be seen as ‘the new circumcision’ (as referenced in Colossians 2)—there are also key differences:

Firstly, circumcision required no faith, personal conviction, or agreement by the child. Circumcision was a rite undertaken without a child’s knowledge and without their understanding. Their *belonging* to God’s covenant people was therefore understood within a completely different framework. And while only males were circumcised, both male and female Israelites (and even Gentiles who had undertaken the rite) were taken to be fully included as God’s covenant people (Exodus 12:48-49).

Secondly, baptism forms part of the new covenant, sealed in Jesus’ blood. This new covenant, unlike circumcision, is not exclusive to Jews but, as Peter the Apostle came to learn, is offered to all people. “*In every nation, God accepts those who fear him and do what is right.*” (Acts 10:41). The great commission, which included the directive to baptise those who believed, was intended to encompass “*all the nations*”. *Belonging*, as one of God’s people, would no longer be defined by the rite of circumcision but rather by faith in the saving work of Jesus, demonstrated to be genuine through baptism.

This particular issue caused some angst in the early church, with Jewish believers finding it difficult to accept circumcision was no longer required. This belief—that circumcision was still necessary—formed part of the ‘false gospel’ that Paul the Apostle tackles in Galatians 3 .

Thirdly, baptism is always linked with personal faith. The Book of Acts bears record to the necessary requirement for personal repentance, belief, and confession. There is no single occasion of someone ever undertaking baptism ‘on behalf of someone else’. When we read of ‘whole households and families’ being baptised (Acts 16:15, Acts 16:33), we should therefore infer, from what scripture teaches about baptism,

that this generalisation necessarily excludes infants or very young children. They are not able to repent or believe, a key ingredient in the ordinance of baptism.

A word of caution, though—the gospel is profound and weighty, with far-reaching and transformative implications. As we journey through the Christian life, we uncover deep theological truths worth exploring.

Yet at its heart, the good news is simple—clear enough for a child to grasp. We shouldn't assume that biblical baptism is 'only for adults'. It is for believers, and often, children with their simple, trusting faith are the clearest examples of what a genuine relationship with God looks like.

Salvation is about faith, not intellectual ability. The 'whole households' could certainly have included children, whose faith, repentance, and baptism were equally as valid as their adult counterparts.

Inward Conviction = Outward Change

The baptism that the Bible speaks about involves personal faith and conviction, a reorientation of one's life (repentance), and full immersion in water.

The word *baptism* comes from the original Greek word "**baptizō**" (**βαπτίζω**), which means "to dip, immerse, or wash." It was used in ancient times to describe submerging something in water, often a cloth being dipped in dye or ceremonial, full body washing.

As with dying cloth or washing the body, some *change* is to be expected by the act of Christian baptism. While it is deeply symbolic, it is also physically and spiritually real. The person who rises from the water isn't just *metaphorically* made new, but is *actually* changed. They are a *new person* in Christ, joined to God's family, a precious stone added to the house that God is building.

Faith that convicts and faith that commits is like the meeting of two atoms. It is the spark that ignites the kingdom fire inside a person, but not to be merely contained within but radiating outwards, shining like the brightness of heaven, leading many to righteousness (Daniel 12:3).

“And now, What Are You Waiting For?”

Are you someone who is convicted in your heart about the message of Jesus Christ? Have you decided to follow him, put your trust in God’s saving work, and reorient your life in his direction? If the answer is yes, *you should be baptised* (Acts 22:16).

Are you someone who was ‘baptised’ as an infant but now understands that faith must be personal, convicting, and demonstrated in action? If the answer is yes, *you should be baptised* (Mark 16:16, Hebrews 11:6).

Are you someone who would define yourself as ‘a Jesus follower’, whether for a little time or a long time, and yet have never been baptised? If the answer is yes, *you should be baptised* (Matthew 28:18-20).

The Call To Obedience: A Faith That Acts

Baptism is not just a symbolic ritual—it is a declaration of faith, a step of obedience, and a testimony to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Throughout Scripture, we see that true faith is not merely intellectual agreement but a conviction that moves a person to action. Repentance and baptism are inseparable in the biblical narrative, each reinforcing the reality of the other.

The act of baptism does not save, but it reflects the **faith that does**—a faith that turns from sin, trusts in Christ, and commits to walking in His ways. Just as John the Baptist warned against empty religious acts, so too must we ensure

that baptism is not simply a tradition, but an outward expression of an inward reality: a life truly surrendered to Jesus.

So, what are you waiting for? If you have placed your trust in Christ, baptism is the next step—a public witness of your decision to follow Him. Whether you have recently come to faith, were baptised as an infant without personal belief, or have been following Jesus for years but never taken this step, the command remains the same: **“Get up, be baptised, and wash your sins away, calling on His name.”** (Acts 22:16)

***The Pharisees and Sadducees were two influential religious groups in first-century Judaism, often seen in the Gospels opposing Jesus. The Pharisees were a strict, law-keeping sect that emphasised obedience to the Torah (Jewish Law) and the oral traditions of their ancestors. They believed in the resurrection of the dead, angels, and the afterlife (Acts 23:8), making them more aligned with popular Jewish beliefs. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were an elite, priestly group who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem and rejected many of the Pharisaic traditions. They denied the resurrection, angels, and the afterlife, focusing only on the written Law of Moses. Though they were often at odds with each other, both groups resisted Jesus because His teachings challenged their authority, exposed their hypocrisy, and redefined what it meant to truly follow God.**

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.

Women + The Church

There is a great deal of evidence of women's participation in the early church and the role they played in early Christianity.

In Him Was Life

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

Keeping The Faith

The question isn't "do you truly believe" but, "who do you trust"?

Lessons From The Seven

Churches

Right from the beginning the church was flawed, as Jesus always knew she would be, and she has been flawed ever since; a living, breathing contradiction.

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)

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 Conjugality: 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 exists: *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.

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.)

John Writes A Letter

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

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

Authentic Christianity

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

John’s words on this subject are blunt and straight to the point. *“You cannot be a Christian and hate other people”*. It’s incompatible and hypocritical. Not only that, it’s a blatant subversion of everything that is intrinsically bound up in a Christian’s salvation by God’s grace. We love God, because He

first loved us and, despite our complete unworthiness, He sent His son to die for us. There is no greater love than a man dying for his friends, and there could be no greater demonstration of what love looks like, to die, even for those who were your enemies.

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

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

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

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

Are We Really Born Again?

There’s a serious crisis amongst Christians. It seems we can

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

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

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

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

"Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not

seen.” [1 John 4:20, NIV](#)

What Does Real Love Look Like?

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

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

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

Hate Will Destroy Us

The opposite of love is hate. And let’s get real. Hate, in all its forms, whether displayed passively or aggressively, is like a poison that destroys our soul. It will ruin our life – and not just ours. It causes havoc in our families, our relationships, our churches and, critically, to our witness of the Gospel. We may think that we have never been guilty of

'hating our brother or sister', but when we harbour bitterness in our heart, when we gossip about them to others, when we withhold doing good on the basis of preference, when we are angry at them, when we don't treat them with dignity and honour, 'esteeming all better than ourselves', we are hating them.

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

They may fool everyone else but they cannot fool God.

Hate Is An Issue Of The Heart

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

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

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

"For from within the hearts of people come evil thoughts,

sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery.” – Mark 7:21, ESV

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

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

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

How Can We Change The Narrative?

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

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

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

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

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

A Powerful Witness To The Truth Of Jesus Christ

Jesus tells his disciples in John 13:35, that by loving one another as he has loved them, all the world will know that they are his disciples. *The world will see your love for each other and know, without even having to ask, that you are followers of the King.* How we love, as Christians, therefore, is either a powerful witness to the truth and reality of the risen King and our allegiance to him; or a public denial of our belief in the King and his ability to truly transform our hearts. By not loving as the King loves, we demonstrate for all to see that the *ruler of this world* still controls us; that we are allowing this rule to flourish in our lives and govern our actions towards others.

Real faith in the King is more than the words we say, the

emotions we feel, ideas we debate or a truth we believe. Real faith is something we do; expressed in visible ways, deeply rooted in and flowing from this focused centre; that “one man died for everyone.” Real faith shows up in our life – particularly in the way that we love the King’s people.

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

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

The kind of faith that is real, saving faith is shown to be vital, living and demonstrable in action. Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we ‘earn God’s favour’ but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our ‘loving union with God’ doesn’t result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as [1 John 4:7-21](#) says

so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn't real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a corpse.

This article was first published 10 February 2020

The Faith | Works 'Conundrum'

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Acceptance By Grace Through Faith Alone

The simple truth that we find acceptance with God by grace through faith alone is the Bible's most beautiful theme. Grace began long ago when God set in motion the means for humanity to find their way back to Him, to find their way home. He promised Adam and Eve that [a redeemer](#) would come who would save humanity from the [consequences of their sin](#). That redeemer would be His very own Son, born for the specific purpose of reconciling the world back to God (John 3:17). The earth waited, enduring times of difficulty and futility, restless and expectant for the promised Prince of Peace to appear.

With the arrival of Emmanuel, 'God-With-Us', the reality of a whole and healed relationship with God for every person was realised. Brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death was finally overthrown in the person and ministry of God's Son, whose death on the cross struck the final blow to mortality.

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the

government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.” – Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV

Salvation Isn't Earned

This work of salvation, in its entirety, was set in motion and completed by God. Humanity had no contribution in any of this. The Bible is very clear that salvation is given freely, as a gift, and is never attained by works.

*“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.”
– Romans 5:1-2, NIV*

Paul the Apostle was a champion for the need for a grace-led, faith-full life. He had been converted from a life steeped in religious tradition and law, a life in which a man could become 'more righteous' before God than his fellow man, simply by achieving greater adherence to law. Yet Paul learned that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and in fact was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God's promises. Paul learned of the true gospel and He speaks of it often throughout his letters in the New Testament – that of being 'saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, least any man should boast' (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Paul is very adamant that justification – that is, “right standing with God” – is by faith alone. What are we to make then of the words of Paul's contemporary, James, who writes “As you can see, a man is justified by his deeds and **not by faith alone.**” (James 2:24). It seems, at least initially, that these two men are in contradiction with each other.

Justified By Deeds And Not By Faith Alone

In reality, James and Paul are actually in complete harmony and a closer look at James' letter not only gives us a better understanding of what *faith really is*, but also warns us of the sobering reality that *information doesn't always equal transformation*.

Paul wrote his [letter to the Galatians](#) addressing the growing idea 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**". This is performance-based Christianity and Paul reaffirmed 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.

James, when writing his letter and speaking of 'what we do' is concerned with counterfeit Christianity of another kind – the unauthenticity of a life that is 'Christian' in name only. He is tackling another dangerous distortion of the gospel of grace, the idea that believers can 'continue in sin that grace may abound'. That the new life is the same as the old life, the only difference being that a person has become 'saved'. That is to say, that nothing about the way the believer behaves or lives after being [saved](#) is necessary to change, that verbally expressing our faith in Jesus is enough and that we don't need to 'do better' because God's grace covers all our shortcomings anyway.

The truth, James says, is that *yes, we are made right with God by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless its demonstrated by an active, loving response to God's grace.* This is, as Paul agrees, "faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6), demonstrated in a Christian's life by 'what they do'.

James starts his letter by asking an important question:

“Do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup – where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense.” – James 2:17-24 MSG

He goes on to reiterate his meaning in the plainest of language, saying “Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.” (James 2:26, CSB).

Works Are Essential Evidence Our Faith Is Real

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

To illustrate his full meaning, James gives two examples from the life of [Abraham](#), whom he describes as ‘the friend of God’ (James 2:2). The first was when God promised Abraham a great line of descendants, even though at the time Abraham and his wife were both old and childless. Abraham didn’t doubt God for a second and James cites this faith (Genesis 15:6) as “reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” Abraham believed God was ‘good for His word’ and this is why, James says, he was justified.

Paul, when also commenting at length on the life of Abraham (Romans 4), does not say “Abraham *worked* for God and therefore was justified.” Neither does he say “Abraham *undertook acts of love* and, because of this, was justified.” or that “Abraham *made progress in character reformation* and therefore

was justified. He says, "Abraham **believed** God and that faith was credited to him as righteousness." He and James are both referring to the same event in Abraham's life and are both drawing the same conclusion – that Abraham was 'made right with God by his faith.

However, James goes on to reference a second event in Abraham's life, found in Genesis 22. Here, God is testing Abraham, looking for the kind of works that show Abraham's faith to be not just words but real and living – demonstrable in action. This is not the same kind of justification which gave Abraham right standing with God, but rather a test of Abraham's original profession of belief. Was it the living kind of faith which produces a genuine response or a dead faith that has no effect on life at all?

James therefore has a different meaning in mind than Paul when Paul concludes that people aren't justified by works. James is answering another question entirely: **Does the ongoing and final reckoning of our righteousness depend on works as the necessary evidence of a true and living faith?** The answer to that question is an unequivocal yes!

If you were to ask James and Paul, "How does a person obtain right standing with God and receive '[the righteousness of God](#)'?", both men would answer "As a gift of grace. Trust God, believe His promise and that faith alone will be counted as righteousness."

However, if you asked them, "Does our final right standing with God depend on works of love?", Paul will answer "No, not if by 'works', you mean deeds done to show that we somehow deserve God's blessings" (his point in Romans 4) but James will answer "Yes, if by 'works', you mean evidence of a faith that is alive and active in a believer's life". Both are in agreement with each other, based on those definitions.

Works, in the way that James defines them, prove that our

faith is real. When James says that we are not justified by faith alone, he means that the faith which justifies or makes us 'right with God' does not remain alone but bears the fruit of the new, spirit-led life. Any other kind of faith is counterfeit, in reality, dead, and completely useless.

What Does Living Faith Look Like?

"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." – 1 John 4:11

Living faith is really another name for [discipleship](#); learning to replicate the pattern and example left by Jesus in both word and action. Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians by discussing this very thing, making it clear that being called to 'freedom in Jesus' is not an excuse to do whatever we want, but rather 'freedom to serve one another in love' (Galatians 5:14). It's in the **believing** and **doing** that faith is made alive, vibrant and visible.

James agrees with Paul in this, again referencing the life of Abraham:

"Wasn't our ancestor Abraham "made right with God by works" when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn't it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are "works of faith"? The full meaning of "believe" in the Scripture sentence, "Abraham believed God and was set right with God," includes his action. It's that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named "God's friend." Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?" – James 2: 21-24, MSG

Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly

even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we 'earn God's favour' but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

"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.

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

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our 'loving union with God' doesn't result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as 1 John 4:7-21 says so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn't real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a corpse.

This article was first published on 11 June 2019