

Emotionally Spirituality

Healthy

“It’s impossible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.” | Peter Scazzero, Emotional Healthy Spirituality

Emotions Make Us Human

Do you have emotionally healthy spirituality? Are you emotionally mature? Or are you, perhaps, deeply uncomfortable being intimate with your emotions? Did you realise that emotional maturity and spiritual health are intrinsically linked? Our emotions are at the core of what it is to be human and the journey of genuine transformation to emotionally healthy spirituality begins with a commitment to allow yourself to feel.

Are You Emotionally Mature?

Are you as emotionally mature as you’d like to think you are? Ask yourself the following questions and you may be surprised and somewhat perturbed with the answers:

- You find it difficult or impossible to be transparent about your life struggles or how you *really* are. If someone asks, you reply “I’m fine”, “all good”, or “great week – yours?”.
- You take any suggestion as a personal attack or rejection, rather than seeing it as an opportunity to improve or grow.
- You are intolerant of different views to your own and often tend to speak in very black and white terms about differences ie “right” or “wrong”.
- You may be outwardly helpful, friendly, or giving to

others but in private, you're actually a lousy spouse, parent, or family member.

- Others may describe you as unteachable, proud, insecure, or defensive.
- You may deal with conflict or turmoil with others by using methods that emotionally distance you from the very person you need resolution with. You often choose to talk with someone other than the person you are in conflict with. You avoid face-to-face conversations or simply pretend a situation doesn't exist.

You might be feeling somewhat dismayed to find yourself in one or more of the above scenarios. The good news is you're definitely not alone. Many (or most of us, if we're honest) find ourselves somewhere in the middle of thinking we're emotionally mature and discovering that, in reality, we're not. But what does our emotional maturity have to do with our spirituality?

Humanity – Made In The Image And Likeness Of God

Humans are incredibly complex creatures. yet we can divide all these complexities into five general parts or components that, put together, make us a "whole" or "complete" human:

Intellectual – Humans are created superior to animals; we're able to reason and make decisions for our own lives. The pursuit of knowledge is inbuilt in humans and the acquisition of knowledge is considered to be highly valuable and profitable.

Spiritual – Humans are also able to comprehend and make decisions based on more than just logical conclusions, knowledge or experience. We have the ability, if we choose, to base our reasoning on spiritual values with moral considerations. We're able to comprehend "higher ideals". [Vines Expository Bible Dictionary](#) defines "spirituality" as

“things that have their origin with God and therefore are in harmony with His character”. The ability to comprehend spiritual things makes us uniquely different to animals.

Physical – Humans aren't insubstantial, rather, our very essence, our consciousness, the thing that makes us, US, is contained within a literal, physical body. We *feel* things physically; touch, cold, heat, hunger, thirst, tiredness, and our physical state can be nurtured or abused (by ourselves or others). Our bodies are incredibly designed and are, as [the Psalmist](#) so aptly described them, “fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14).

Social – Humans have a natural desire to belong, to be loved, to be “part of something”. We're generally extremely social creatures. We tend to develop our circle or tribe and cultivate that to our benefit because we enjoy company and friendship. We hate loneliness or the feeling of being unwanted or not needed. Social rejection or disconnection is actually one of the major causes of depression in humans.

Emotional – Finally, humans are emotional and our emotions are actually connected to all the other parts of us. Our emotions are the very core, the heart, of what it is to be human. We *feel* elation when we *learn* something new (intellectual). We *feel* pain when our bodies experience *hurt* (physical) and we *feel* acceptance and love when we *belong* (social). It should make sense to us that our spirituality and our emotions are deeply connected. But, somehow, we struggle to recognise this connection and, in fact, we often actively seek to disconnect the two. Yet, our spirituality and our emotions are inseparable.

“The call of emotionally healthy spirituality is a call to a radical, countercultural life. It is a call to intentionality, rhythm, and expectation of a life transformed by the risen Christ, with the power to see through the illusions and pretense of our world.” | Peter Scazzero

Emotions are data and this data gives us important

information, enabling us to make values-based decisions. The problem with ignoring the connection between our emotions and our spirituality is that we then ignore important information about ourselves, how and why we're feeling certain things, and the need to deal with those feelings.

Without acknowledging our emotions and using that information, our values-based decisions, those "*higher ideals*" or "*things that have their origin in God*", can't be acted upon in a deeply connected and meaningful way.

We become one-dimensional creatures, stagnant and immovable, rather than multi-faceted and growing towards being "*thoroughly equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:17), and we certainly don't have an emotionally healthy spirituality.

"There is no greater disaster in spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality. In fact, the true spiritual life is not an escape from reality but an absolute commitment to it."

| Peter Sczerro

The Iceberg – What's Really Going On Beneath The Surface

Unresolved or ignored emotions don't just go away. They grow, unchecked, beneath the surface of our life. What people see really is only "the tip of the iceberg." Above the waterline, we may appear to be doing fine, we will often say we *are* fine, but beneath the surface rage, all the unacknowledged and unresolved emotional feelings that we pretend don't exist. We're not being true to ourselves or others and we're not living authentic, meaningful lives. Here's what happens when we ignore our emotions:

- We become fearful
- We become intolerant
- We become critical

- We become ignorant
- We become disconnected
- We become discontented
- We become disillusioned

Still Not Sure About Being Emotionally Connected? Jesus Was Emotional!

We're told that Jesus was like us, in all aspects of his humanity (Hebrews 4:15). He felt every human need and experienced the broad spectrum of human emotion. However, his emotions were always deeply connected to his spirituality. He felt sadness (Luke 19:41), joy (Luke 10:21), anger and distress (Mark 3:5), sorrow (Matthew 26:37), compassion (Luke 7:13), astonishment (Luke 7:9), stress and anxiety (Luke 12:50), and desperation and emotional vulnerability (Mark 14:32-36).

The challenge to shed our "old false" self in order to live authentically in our "new true" self strikes at the very core of true spirituality. Paul the Apostle, expressed this as, "to put off your old self...and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22, 24)." | Peter Scazzero

Emotional courage is listening to what your heart is telling you, ensuring you are emotionally connected with your spirituality and therefore able to make important, values-based decisions. Knowing yourself completely is critical to knowing God. Ignoring your emotions is ignoring the very way in which you draw closer to and become more like God.

Sometime, discomfort may be the price of admission to a meaningful life. Emotionally healthy spirituality is about reality, not denial or illusion and it's an essential part of being human.

Further Recommended Resources: [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, Peter Scazzero](#). [The Gift and Power of Emotional Courage, Susan David, TEDWomen2017](#)

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What Is A Disciple?

The word disciple occurs frequently throughout the Bible and [‘discipleship’](#) is something that the Bible references often. But what does the word *disciple* actually mean? And what does it mean to be a *disciple of Jesus*?

What Is A Disciple?

Our English language Bibles were translated from manuscripts written primarily in two languages; Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament). The translative history of the Bible is a fascinating journey, from an academic and historical perspective, and is well worth exploring. You can [read more about the translation process here](#).

In the original language of the New Testament, the word *disciple* is translated from a Greek word, *mathētēs* (μαθητής), from *manthano*, meaning “to learn”. *Mathētēs* therefore means (unsurprisingly) *a learner, a pupil or a scholar*. More accurately though, it means to be a learner *in the style of an apprentice*, that is, someone who not only accepts the views of their teacher but is also practising the same so as to eventually become like their teacher (Matthew 10:24, Luke 6:40).

It's a word that would have been in common use during ancient times and its meaning was applicable beyond a Christian or religious setting (ie as a disciple of Plato or Socrates). Although the word has several applications, in the widest sense it refers to those who accept the teachings of anyone, not only in belief but also in life and practice.

Who Is A Disciple Of Jesus?

When we come to the Bible, we see the word *disciple* used most often in the context of a follower of Jesus and sometimes of John the Baptist (Matthew 27:57, Luke 14:27, Matthew 11:1, John 3:25). Throughout the gospels, it's the only name used for those who followed Jesus, and even those who had only been baptised with the baptism of John the Baptist (and hadn't received the Holy Spirit) were called disciples (Acts 19:1-4).

It would be accurate to say that a disciple of Jesus was someone who [believed the teachings of Jesus](#), who surrendered to his leadership, and who endeavoured to imitate his life.

When we move into the early history of the church (found in the book called the Acts of the Apostles), we see these disciples began to be called *Christians* (from the Greek word Χριστιανός (Christianos), meaning "follower of Christ") (Acts 11:26).

The Acts Of The Apostles

The book of the Acts of the Apostles provides a unique glimpse into the story of the early Christians, and to a time when these disciples of Jesus took their faith and began boldly proclaiming it to the world. In Acts, we are observing the very birth of Christianity – the movement which recognised and preached a resurrected Jesus as the promised saviour and king of the world.

The Book of Acts opens with this introductory paragraph by its

author, Luke, also one of the four Gospel writers and one of Jesus' 12 closest disciples:

“Dear Theophilus, in the first volume of this book I wrote on everything that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he said goodbye to the Apostles, the ones he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven. After his death, he presented himself alive to them in many different settings over a period of forty days. In face-to-face meetings, he talked to them about things concerning the kingdom of God.” | Acts 1:1-4, MSG

The book's narrative describes the disciples as first-hand witnesses to the resurrected Jesus; witnesses to the astonishing truth of the Gospel message, and how they took that Good News to the world, beginning first in Jerusalem, then moving throughout Judea and eventually to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8).

The interactive map below shows the power of their witness to the gospel message, demonstrating not just areas where professing Christians are the majority of the population, nor where Christianity has been declared the national religion, but also the true extent of the global spread of the gospel since the first century. It's a powerful, visual reminder of God's promise to save people “from every tribe and language and people and nation.” (Revelation 5:9)

What Was The Good News?

Peter the Apostle, when making his speech to the Jews in Jerusalem after the day of Pentecost, summarised the Good News in this way:

“Jesus the Nazarene, a man thoroughly accredited by God to you – the miracles and wonders and signs that God did through him are common knowledge – this Jesus, following [the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God](#), was betrayed by

men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. But God untied the death ropes and [raised him up](#). Death was no match for him...All Israel, then, know this: There's no longer room for doubt – God made him Master and Messiah, this Jesus whom you killed on a cross. Change your life. Turn to God and [be baptised](#), each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is targeted to you and your children, but also to all who are far away—whomever, in fact, our Master God invites.” | Acts 2:26-40, MSG

Peter is attesting to the validity of Jesus of Nazareth, as God's appointed saviour and king. He is witnessing to the truth of the resurrected Jesus and the confirmation of his true identity as Son of God. And he is urging his listeners to believe this truth, to surrender their lives to Jesus and receive God's promise of forgiveness of sins and the hope of life, even after death. In short, he is urging them to become disciples of Jesus, followers and imitators of the Christ. He is urging them to become Christians!

The number of people who heard his message and believed his words on that day was incredible! The book of Acts tells us that over 3000 people [were baptised](#). And not only that, every day their number grew as God added those who were saved. (Acts 2:47)

“That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptised and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, [the life together](#), the common meal, and the prayers.” | Acts 2:41-42, MSG

The Teachings Of Jesus: The Gospel Of

Good News

Peter was, in reality, only reconfirming the teachings of Jesus; that of the Good News of salvation for humanity and truth of the kingdom of God; God's rightful rule and sovereignty over all the earth ([Matthew 16:27](#), [Luke 21:26-27](#), [James 2:5](#), [1 Corinthians 2:9](#), [Numbers 14:21](#), [Psalm 22:27](#), [Habakkuk 2:14](#)).

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." | Mathew 4:23, NIV

"Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. "The time is fulfilled," He said, "and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the gospel!" | Mark 1:14, BSB

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed." | Isaiah 61:1, NLT

"Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." | Matthew 9:13, ESV

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." | Luke 17:20-21, NKJV

How Do I Become A Disciple?

Becoming a Christian and becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ **is the same thing**; we just don't really use the word disciple much anymore. The basis for us to become Christians remains the same as for those in the first century, who were Jesus' followers. So what is it that makes us a *disciple of Jesus*? What is it that makes us a *Christian*?

We need to look no further than Peter's words to the people at Jerusalem (Acts 2:22-42):

- We must believe that Jesus was **God-sent and God-endorsed, as the appointed saviour and king of the world**. We acknowledge that Jesus came as one of us, [like us in every way](#), so that he could defeat sin and death on our behalf (1 John 4:14, Galatians 4:4, John 3:16, Hebrews 2:14-17, Romans 5:12).
- We must believe that Jesus **died for the sins of the world** and was [raised to life, never to die again](#) (1 John 2:2, John 4:42, 1 John 3:5, Acts 2:32, Acts 3:15, 1 Corinthians 6:14, Romans 8:11).
- We must be **convicted of our sin, acknowledging our need for God's forgiveness and recognising that [the name of Jesus](#) is the only name under heaven by which humanity [can be saved](#)** (Ecclesiastes 7:20, 1 John 1:9-10, Romans 3:23, James 1:15 Acts 4:12, 1 Timothy 2:5).
- We must believe in the teachings of Jesus and **surrender to his [guidance and leadership in our life](#)**, not only as an apprentice to a teacher, but as a willing subject of God's designated King. Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth, he has first claim on our affections, he is the motivating force in our decisions and the final judge of [our soul](#) (Matthew 28:18-20, Isaiah 9:6, Luke 1:33, Acts 10:36, 1 Corinthians 15:27, Colossians 1:27, Romans 8:10, Ephesians 3:16, Acts

10:42, John 5:22. 2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:21, 1 Peter 2:25).

- We must **follow [the example of Jesus and be baptised](#)**, as directed in Mark 16:16. Baptism is God's arrangement for a person to gain a clean conscience based on their faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We choose to end one kind of life and begin another and the way of demonstrating that choice is to be baptised 'for the repentance of our sins'. The Bible compares baptism to burial, 'dying' to our past course of life and beginning a new one as a Christian, dedicated to God and saved through Jesus (Matthew 3:15, Matthew 10:28, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Colossians 2:12, Mark 16:16, Matthew 28:19-20, Ephesians 4:4-6).

Written about 300 years after the birth of Christ, [the Apostles' Creed](#) summarises foundational Christian beliefs taught by the early church and is a bold declaration of our faith in Jesus Christ. It particularly affirms the teachings regarding Jesus, that of his virgin birth, his crucifixion, his death, and his subsequent resurrection; core elements of the gospel of good news. It is a primary statement of faith shared by Christians around the world, uniting them in common union with the work achieved in and through Jesus.

Not Just A Disciple Of Jesus But Family Of God

Welcome to the family! When God puts you in Jesus, He also puts you [in community](#). When you believe and are baptised, you become a disciple of Jesus – a Christian – but not only that, you also become a valued member of God's family (1 Corinthians 12:27, Galatians 4:7, Romans 8:17, Galatians 3:26, 1 John 3:1-2, Ephesians 2:18-19, Ephesians 3:14-19). Becoming a Christian means you join a great cloud of faithful witnesses to the truth of the resurrected Christ (Hebrews 12:1), as believers of the message of Good News and disciples of Christ

the King.

“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.” | [Romans 10:10, NIV](#)

<https://vimeo.com/113801439>

Toxic Faith

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

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

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

Yet for many Christians, this is exactly where they find themselves. It may be early into their Christian journey or

many years later, but somewhere along the way, their perception of Christianity becomes misshapen and their sense of peace, fulfillment, and relief dissipates.

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

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

Toxic Faith

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

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

This deconstruction of faith is not just a problem that modern Christians struggle with. The first-century church at Galatia also dealt with this issue and the damage caused by this

'false gospel' is catalogued throughout the letter written by Paul to the Galatians.

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

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

The Greek word used here for 'desert' means 'to defect'; and it's a defection, not from a denomination or doctrine, but from 'Him who called you by grace'. It's a severing of the real and personal relationship a Christian has with God. And it's a distortion of the gospel Paul first preached to them, Christ's gospel, of forgiveness of sins by grace – by Jesus' performance – and not by their own. In fact, Paul says, it's really no gospel at all.

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

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

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

Law Versus Grace

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

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

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

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

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

In other words, there was a group in Galatia propounding the

idea that right standing with God depends on what Jesus did **plus** additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken. This is completely in opposition to the message of the cross, that salvation comes through Jesus' performance, not our own:

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

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

This 'different gospel' was a serious perversion of God's gift of grace and a not-so-subtle manipulation of the relationship between the individual and God. No wonder Paul was furious.

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

The Collision Of Grace And Spiritual Performance

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

In the wrong hands, however, or wrongfully used, the word of

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

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

The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between grace and spiritual performance. The conflicts the Pharisees initiated with Jesus were usually over minor issues such as fasting (Mark 2:18), sabbath keeping (Mark 2:24), eating with 'unclean' people (Mark 9:11), or attitudes towards civic duties, like paying taxes (Matthew 9:11) – all performance-driven markers of supposed spirituality.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be [saved](#).” | Acts 4:12, ESV

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

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

“God’s steward, an overseer (leader) must be above reproach – not self-absorbed, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not greedy for money. Instead, he

must be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it was taught, so that by sound teaching he will be able to encourage others and refute those who contradict this message. For many are rebellious and full of empty talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced.” | Titus 17-10

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

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

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

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

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

Traditions: Good Or Bad?

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

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

What Are Traditions?

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

'Traditions' are described as inherited, established, or

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

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

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

*A woman was preparing the evening’s roast dinner and divided the large piece of meat into two smaller, equal portions, placing them in separate trays in the oven. When her husband asked her why she did it that way, she replied that she actually didn’t know – it was just the way her mother had always done it. That got her thinking and later that evening, she phoned her mother to find out the reason behind the two trays of meat. Her own mother didn’t know either, it was just what **her** mother had always done. They decided to phone the woman’s grandmother and, when asked what was so important about dividing the meat, she laughed and replied. “oh,*

nothing. I just never had an oven large enough to fit my entire portion of meat on one rack. Dividing it in two simply meant I could fit it all in my oven at the same time."

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

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

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

Traditions: Good Or Bad?

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

Traditions matter when they relate to important human values, such as faith, freedom, integrity, education, personal responsibility, a strong work ethic or selflessness. They provide context for thoughtful reflection and a deeper

appreciation of the things that matter in life. Traditions are a language unto themselves; with a meaning that conveys something deeper.

What Does The Bible Say About Traditions?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold fast to the traditions, just as I handed them on to you.” – 1 Corinthians 11:2, CSB

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

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

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

True Religion

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

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

Nearly 85% of the world’s population identifies as being

religious, claiming affiliation with one of the five largest religions; [Christianity](#), [Islam](#), [Hinduism](#), [Buddhism](#) or forms of [folk religion](#). These different religions all have distinct rules, regulations and beliefs that form part of that particular religion.

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

What Is Religion?

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

Yet the ancient and medieval world understood the word *religio* quite differently. For the ancients, it carried a meaning of *individual virtue of worship*, never as doctrine, practice, or actual source of knowledge. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, there is no precise equivalent of the English word *religion*. The Greek word *threskeia*, used in the New Testament, is sometimes translated as religion, however, the term was more correctly understood as ‘worship’, well into the medieval period.

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

Religion, in itself, is a modern, western concept and it was

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

Religion Has A Bad Reputation

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

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

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

What Is True Religion?

The aim of this article is not to impress on any reader the 'rightness' of our particular beliefs or doctrines. Whether a

man or woman chooses to be religious, or not, should be a deeply personal consideration, without manipulation or coercion from others.

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

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

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

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

"Now men began to worship God, not only in their closets and families, but in public and solemn assemblies. The worshippers of God began to distinguish themselves: so the margin reads it. 'Then began men to be called by the name of the Lord' – or, to call themselves by it. Now Cain and those that had deserted religion had built a city, and begun to declare for irreligion, and called themselves the sons of men. Those that adhered to God began to declare for Him and His worship, and called themselves the sons of God." | Benson Commentary

Another commentary has this to say:

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

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

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

“Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless (‘the fatherless and the widow’) in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.” – James 1: 26-27, MSG

Jesus put it in another way:

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

And again, in Hosea:

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

What True Religion Isn't

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, the word religion, from the Latin *religio*, meaning ‘*to bind*’, is a word which in the ancient and medieval world was used to refer to *individual virtue of worship; respect for what was sacred, and a reverence for the divine*. It described an attitude of *being* rather than *creed*.

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

Avoiding Church Burnout

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical

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

Church Burnout

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

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

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

Wrong!

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Church Is Only As Healthy As Its Members

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

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

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

What Does Church Burnout Look Like?

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

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

1. You’re always busy, at everything, constantly in motion. You find yourself overcommitting and double booking.
2. You have idealistic standards about what a ‘real church’ should look like.
3. Your day always seems to arrive with constant low-grade stress and periodic crisis.
4. You often decline offers of help and assistance.
5. You feel a strong sense of responsibility, even when others don’t.
6. You feel extremely guilty about not attending church events or activities, even if you’ve already attended several that week.
7. You feel a strong sense of expectation from other church members.
8. You have an inability to say no and if you do, it’s with reluctance and guilt.
9. When you think about church, you feel suffocated, resentful, despondent and angry.

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

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

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

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

Tips For Preventing Church Burnout

- Emphasise grace over works in your personal life. Concentrate on who you're ***being*** rather than what you're ***doing***. Remind yourself that we don't earn God's blessings by the amount of work we do. He wants us to lead healthy, balanced lives where ministry service is a joy, where giving becomes as simple as *doing because it has been done for us*.
- Make time for regular recreation. These are the times when you can pause, reset and renew. Without recreation, burnout is inevitable.
- Know your limits and set reasonable, achievable boundaries for the work you take on. Giving of yourself is a valuable and worthy service, but sometimes giving isn't always possible or profitable. If you need to say "no", then do so, with **no guilt attached**.
- Remember that the work is God's, not your own. Seek His guidance and help when you consider your responsibilities and commitments within your church.
- Learn to put [first things first](#). Being involved within your church community is a valuable part of a fulfilling spiritual life – but never at the expense of your time with God or your family. Set priorities and look for ways to involve your partner or family in church activities. Be willing to occasionally say no to low

priority church activities when they conflict with quality family time.

- Listen to your body's warning signs, such as headaches, backaches, dizziness, insomnia, and unexplainable fatigue. Learn to slow down and be less anxious. **You can only do what you can do, right now** – nothing more.

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

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