

# Heaven + Earth: The End Of The Story

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

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

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

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

*What are we here for?*

*What is the purpose of life?*

*Where will we end up?*

## Life's Most Profound Questions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

glorious than we could ever have imagined.

## The Purpose Of God

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

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

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

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

## The Kingdom Of God

This glorious and absolute rule and reign of the wise and

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Heaven + Earth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# An Argument For The Trinity

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

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

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

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



# The Context Of The Council Of Nicea

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

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

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

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

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

## What Did The Early Church Teach?

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Is 'Trinity' In The Bible?

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

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

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

Honestly? I find that extremely unlikely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# What Does It Mean To Be God?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

## **Nothing Is Impossible With God**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# God Does The Saving

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And finally, I would respectfully encourage you to consider this: our theology – what we think about God – is important. How can we begin to know and understand ourselves and our place in this expansive creation if we have no sense of the One who made us and the purpose for which we've been made?

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

To know God is to know Jesus, whom He sent ([John 17:3](#)), and, therefore, the true starting point of our theology as Christians is looking to Jesus and, fundamentally, to God, in Jesus, crucified. It is in this that we see the extent to which God was prepared to go in order to rescue and redeem us.

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

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## Keeping The Faith

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

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## Crossing Over

There are many crossings a human will make in a lifetime. Our introduction to life is just the first.

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# The Incarnation Of The Word

In the beginning, the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God.

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## Leaving

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Leaving is never because of just one thing. Not really.

It's the result of a thousand, inconsequential *one things* that all converge in a single moment of sudden, irreconcilable difference.

For me, the eventual leaving of the religious community I grew up in began as a tiny question fluttering at the back of my mind.

Back then, I'd never met a question I didn't want to take apart, examine, rearrange and then carefully reassemble, perfectly ordered, and satisfactorily answered.

I'm, by nature, a lover of straight lines and exact dimensions. I find predictable angles strangely comforting, the even length and width of squares reassuring. Curved, irregular edges and uneven portions, I had decided, are one of life's great menaces. Questions without answers were anathema.

## Questions + Answers

However, this question-with-no-answer was an uncomfortable and irregular shape, one that I could not find a corresponding answer to in my existing theology. It was like a jigsaw piece that had been accidentally caught up from another puzzle, and no matter how I turned it around in my mind, I could not make it fit into my existing framework.

I was possessed with an uncomfortable sensation that something didn't add up, that what I had been told no longer carried sufficient weight or authority. It was an inconsistency I could not overlook nor satisfactorily explain, an unexpected bump in an otherwise smooth spiritual life.

But back then, it was just *one thing*. It stood alone in its irregularity and I let it sit, like a bothersome pebble in my shoe, not fitting, never resolved. This question wasn't the explosion, merely the spark; but when I cast my mind back to all the *one things* that finally resulted in my departure, I get no further back than this question.

This is a difficult article to write in many respects. I have many friends and family still within the community that I have left. The thoughts I share are entirely my own and are not intended to imply any lack of conviction or sincerity in any one of them, or indeed anyone else from within that community. I hope I am able to write about my experiences with respectful thoughtfulness for the many loving and good people who remain there still.

Yet I am also aware that I cannot be alone in my uncomfortable questioning. There must be others who have asked, if not the same questions, ones that are very similar and who have then sat with the same unsatisfactory answers, ones that simply won't fit.

What are we to make of such inconsistencies? Does faith ask us



to suspend our questions or does faith ask us to push deeper into them, despite the challenges, despite the possibility we may need to admit another answer is not only possible but probable and necessary?

You may be wondering what the question was. Well, it was hardly earth-shattering. It was a question of *when and where a woman ought to wear a head covering*. Yes. I grew up in a head-covering church.

## **Principles + Applications**

(I would like to make a brief comment at this point; if you are a woman – particularly one who I know personally – who believes head coverings for women are a biblical principle that should be applied in perpetuity and therefore choose to cover your head, I deeply respect your conviction. I am not seeking to change your conscience on this issue. But I can bet you have questions, particularly if the application of this principle in your church looks anything like it did for me...)

The religious community I grew up in wore head coverings for church services, Bible classes, and Sunday school, but not fellowship meals or family Bible readings. We wore them at church preaching meetings, but not during community hall cleaning or evangelistic neighborhood visits. We would wear them for youth activities, more specifically, the formal part of the event but we wouldn't wear them for the supper and games that followed, nor at church picnics or community outings.

We would wear them during formal preaching and Bible exposition but not during informal discussion group activities. We would wear them for church worship (although a woman wasn't able to 'pray or prophesy', despite the scriptural prerequisite of 'a covered head' being satisfied), and remove them immediately afterward.

Head coverings denoted submission we were told, yet submission, strangely, didn't seem to be required in the home, on trips to the beach, or when we were doing the grocery shopping. Little discussion was given to the biblical principle of submitting *one to another* and what that might possibly mean.

Finally, head coverings were required for a church meeting of business, which was neither an act of worship nor a church service of any kind. The question took shape in my mind and refused to be dismissed – *why?*

*Why did we wear head coverings anyway? What was their purpose then or now? Are they even required now? What is submission really? Women had clearly prayed and prophesied in public worship then, why no longer? Or why, even with the required head covering in place did women 'remain silent'? Why on earth did we wear head coverings to a business meeting?*

Did we have it all completely wrong?

I'm not proposing to suggest an answer in this article to the questions this particular subject raises (if such an answer exists) or that the questions I've noted form a comprehensive list of all the relevant points of discussion. I'm simply highlighting the moment, for me, that scriptural principle and practical application suddenly appeared to be inconsistently applied and self-contradictory.

Just one question. One little spark.

## **Piles Upon Piles**

Time passed. Over the years, the questions gathered in untidy piles in my mind.

Why did we bemoan the state of the world yet we seemed to do very little by way of community engagement or civic involvement to fix it?

Why did we seem to know a great deal about the end times and prophecy yet precious little about the here and now; the practicalities of Christian witness; paying our taxes, saving our marriages, stewarding our lives and finances well?

Why didn't more of us recycle?

Why could we eat lunch with our non-believing co-workers but not socialise with them over dinner?

Why was taking communion at church – *common union* – such a solitary and miserable affair, hemmed in on either side by silence and woeful introspection?

Why, if we were a people saved and redeemed and made new, did we sing such mournful hymns of lament?

Why, if woman was created to stand alongside man, equal partners in the great mission of God to fill the earth with His glory, were the women I saw all around me prohibited from contributing in meaningful ways within the church; in teaching; evangelising, praying, and leading the congregation with wisdom and grace?

Why did I see power posturing and spiritual manipulation manifesting themselves in a community born out of the sacrificial heart of Jesus, *who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*? Why did *nobody* do anything about it?

Why, when we were meant to celebrate *grace*, did we seem to reward *intelligence*, beginning at a young age?

Yearly examinations to determine biblical knowledge were undertaken each year by Sunday School students. The questions were often difficult and, it seemed, purposely disorientating. The premise seemed clear: the more you knew, the more spiritual you were and the closer to God you got. We all received prizes at an end-of-year award ceremony, for what

exactly I'm still not really sure, but 'first in exam' and 'first in class' always got a mention and an additional prize.

I don't recall any mentions for *character development*, *personal growth*, *kindness*, or *showing Jesus to others*.

The motivation may have been sincere but the subliminal messaging was flawed. We were taught to compete against each other, not run alongside each other. We were taught that what we knew was more important than who we were being.

It often seemed to me that the word of God was something to be sermonised from, bored by, afraid of, or wielded, weapon-like at others, but never the spirit-breathed and living words of Heaven's Creator, active and able to deeply transform our hearts and lives, shaping us for His purpose.

Compliance seemed more relevant than character, uniformity more desirable than unity and, in the end, what I could *explain about Jesus* significantly more important than whether I actually loved Jesus and was following him (or at least trying to).

## **The Spark Ignites**

All the things I've mentioned, the questions I've shared (and the many I've left out) can most likely be found in many other churches or religious communities, to a greater or lesser degree. And no church is perfect or has it all sorted, this I am willing to admit.

None of these things, alone, were enough to cause a leaving.

But I did resolve to do something about my questions, to seek opportunity and space to ask them, to give voice to my doubts, to challenge my perception of Christian life, and, if necessary, to adjust and reorient my direction.

To let scripture speak to me, unfiltered, and be confident

that the Spirit would lead me in all truth. To allow my questions and convictions to sit in tension with one another while my Christian life continued to grow and deepen, built on the solid rock of faith in Christ.

To believe that the important things God wished me to know, He would make known.

I can't say for sure whether, in the end, it was I who left or whether I was the one who was left; perhaps it's more accurate to say that I was simply a strange shape that no longer fitted into a space that could not change.

Like the question that started this journey of deconstruction, I was now an uncomfortable and irregular part, a puzzle piece that no longer worked with the whole. The posture I had adopted and the resulting reorientation were now incompatible with my existing religious community.

Officially, I was ex-communicated, an ecclesiastical term weighted with censure and disapproval. *We can no longer affirm you as a Christian.*

It implied I had not measured up to the expectation of Christian living, and this judgment sits uncomfortably with me. I have no glaring moral issue or unrepented sin that would give cause for such action. The seeming dismissal of the authenticity of my faith was painful and difficult to understand.

This only resulted in further questions. What happened to *come and let us reason together*? Who decides whether another Christian's life of faith is lacking?

What really is the purpose of ex-communication in scripture? How much power, if any, should Christians wield over each other in spiritual matters?

What makes a Christian *Christian* anyway? Is it what I know or

Who I trust?

Why does the church gather? How is unity in Christ really achieved?

*Where did I belong?*

I did not deserve ex-communication. And yet here I am, on the other side of something that, at one time, seemed the most scandalous thing that could happen to any Christian.

I find that I belong nowhere and everywhere. That a leaving is also a beginning. And that, when Jesus said *you will know the truth and the truth will set you free*, he really meant it.

I have not been ex-communicated by God.

## **Still Asking Why**

*Why did I feel the need to write about this?*

Well, firstly, I don't think I am alone, in my questions or my sense of something not quite fitting right. I am certain that there are others out there, people I know well and people who may be strangers, who are *asking questions*.

And I want to tell you, it is okay to ask those questions; don't be deterred in your asking. *It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.*

The true function of Christian theology is faith that seeks understanding; to not just know more about God, but to *know God*. We start with what we do know – and Abraham, the great father of faith is given as the classic example – *that God exists and He is a faithful rewarder of those who seek Him*. And then we keep searching, and asking, and growing, and learning, and building our life on this certainty, all with the intent to *know God more*.

*Our questions aren't just interesting, they're vital to an informed, robust faith that will last us a lifetime of Christian journeying.*

Secondly, you may be afraid to ask your questions. I want you to know that I understand your fear and your hesitancy; your desire to avoid similar censure. And yet I would say to you, *in everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

You are God's beloved child and He is not afraid of your questions. If you commit your heart in faith to Him, He will lead you in all truth. *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*

And finally, to those who would feel the need to censure such questioning, I would urge you to pause and reconsider. The Christian faith is not defined by all the things we could possibly know or articulate. None of us would dare to claim we have all knowledge or fully understand all there is to know about God.

The Christian life is not an academic exercise.

The Christian life is built upon the simple premise: *This Jesus, who was crucified, God has raised again to life and he is both Lord and Christ.* Those who confess this truth are God's children, adopted into the household of faith by God's grace.

The question then becomes not *what do I know but who am I being?* Are our lives demonstrating the fruit of a walk guided by the Spirit; *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?* Jesus told

us *by their fruit you will recognise them*; that these are the markers that will distinguish a true follower from one who is a follower in name only.

The local church does have a corporate responsibility in the moral matters of each Christian's life (another day, another blog), but *the people are the church*, we are *all responsible to each other* to encourage, disciple, equip, and, if necessary, admonish in our Christian walk.

And how can we grow, make mistakes, experience grace, or mature in our discipleship if we cannot ask questions and, if needed readjust, no matter how uncomfortable?

This is the messy but vital reality of the local church; filled with sinning and flawed humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God, asking their questions and voicing their doubts along the way.

Leaving is never because of just one thing. It's the result of a thousand, inconsequential *one things* that all converge in a single moment of sudden, irreconcilable difference. Every question I had ever had, every answer I had been given, and every answer I hadn't found brought me to the painful realisation that this was a religious community in which I no longer fitted.

In the end, leaving was inevitable.

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**As I have written this article, I have endeavoured to share my thoughts and experiences in an accurate and factual way, as they relate to me personally, summarising many aspects for brevity. For some of you reading this, my words may have deeply resonated with you and your experience closely mirrors my own.**



Others reading this may be confused, disappointed, angry, or offended by what I've shared and may have received this article as critical or directed personally at them or someone they know. It is true that I have written in such a way that gives a critique of sorts. However, I would respectfully remind my readers that criticism is simply an evaluative or corrective exercise that can be applied to any area of human life, and is perhaps at its most relevant in the evaluation of our spiritual lives. Critique, while uncomfortable, can be the catalyst for much-needed reinvigoration, renewal, and revival.

No part of this article is intended to be received as criticism of any one individual, or offensive or divisive in nature.

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# Jesus, The Hope Of The World

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

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

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

Exhausted from the arduous travel to Bethlehem, necessitated by the tax decree from Cæsar Augustus (Luke 2:1), Mary and Joseph found space in the ground floor family room with

Joseph's extended family; a comfortable, homely room filled with hollows of straw, and where the animals also slept and fed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*“There are three creation stories of the creation of humanity in the Bible. The first is that humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. The second is that a human is formed from the dust of the earth and the woman is taken from man: she is flesh of his flesh. The third is that humanity is reborn through a saviour; who is born of a woman, and he is flesh of her flesh...Jesus is made of her, not just in her. He is made from her and not just through her. How else could Jesus be connected to the line of David [King of Israel] through Mary unless the baby was truly hers, albeit born of the Spirit. This physical connection to Mary is the basis of the story of salvation, the proof that our own flesh, our souls and bodies, can be redeemed and cleansed and resurrected.” | Lucy Peppiatt*

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

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

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

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

Disobedience of God’s directive in the very beginning and the first act of sin in the world brought about its awful consequence for humanity; a sentence of death, and being sent

from God's presence in shame and disappointment. Instead of beauty, the first humans received a crown of ashes and instead of joy, they experienced loss and mourning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **The Necessity Of Jesus’ Divinity**

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus was human, born of a human mother. However, prophecies that spoke of the coming saviour made it clear that he was to be born of a virgin, with no human father involved in his

conception (Isaiah 7:14). Instead, the Holy Spirit moved and, in the same way that creation sprang into being at God's command (Genesis 1), so too it was the animating force for the conception of God's Son. "God said" and it was so!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **A New Creation In Jesus**

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

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

In Jesus Christ, we find the reasons for truth and life. In him, we find the source of life and the light of humanity, the light that shines in the darkest places of the human heart,

bringing peace to the chaos and creating order and beauty again (John 1:4, 2 Corinthians 4:6).

In the unique person of Jesus, God was doing a completely new thing; bringing about a new creation and restoring again the hearts of humanity to a whole relationship with Him (Isaiah 43:19, 2 Corinthians 5:17).

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

## **Focusing On The Miracle**

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

## **Nature + Nurture**

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

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

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

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

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

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

He is born to a young woman descended from the family of the

great King David, a woman favoured of the Lord and deeply devout and spiritual in her faith (Luke 1:28, 47-55). Joseph, the man who would become his earthly adoptive father, was also 'a good man', honourable, faithful, and generous-hearted (Matthew 1:18-19). Joseph was not willing to put Mary through public disgrace, despite the initial assumption of scandal that surrounded her pregnancy.

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

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

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

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

Yet despite outward appearances, he was anything but ordinary. In nature, his heart belonged to His Father (John 6:38, John 4:34) and his mission was to do his Father's will,

accomplishing the work that He had given him to do (John 6:38). In him, God was glorified and in him *'mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other'* (Psalm 85:10-11).

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

In Jesus, we see everything that God is.

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

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

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

# Theology | Faith Seeking Understanding

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus was the exact representation of God and the very imprint

of His nature (Hebrews 1:3, John 14:10-11), the Word-Made-Flesh who took up residence amongst us (John 1:1-14).

To know God is to know Jesus, whom He sent (John 17:3), and, therefore, the true starting point of our theology as Christians is looking to Jesus and, fundamentally, to God, in Jesus, crucified. It is in this that we see the extent to which God was prepared to go in order to rescue and redeem us and why Jesus, and Jesus alone, truly human and truly divine, was the hope of the world.

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

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

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

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

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# 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*

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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](#).