

Religion // Cruciformity

There is no standard scholarly agreement on what exactly is meant by the word *religion*, so defining *religion* (from the Latin *religiō*) can be a bit tricky. In fact, prior to the 16th and 17th centuries, the concept of religion, as a *distinct set of beliefs or doctrines*, didn't really exist.

Today, we would probably summarise religion as a *unifying social-cultural system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred, supernatural, or spiritual elements*. We may tend to also think of religion, particularly in a Christian context, as somewhat *creedal*, that is, as a set of ideas, formulas, regulations, or practices that are defined in some formal way, such as through statements, creeds, confessions, and denominational distinctives.

The word religion, from the Latin *religiō*, 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 a *creedal position* and it related to the *individual* rather than the *collective*.

The act of *binding to* – of *religio* – is an act of faithfulness to something or someone, to which one is bound as if by a pledge or duty. It's similar to when someone makes an *oath of allegiance* to their country, effectively *binding themselves* to that country and pledging to respect, uphold and obey its laws.

In fact, companions to the word *religio* would be words like *duty, fealty, allegiance, or obedience*. Used with its original meaning in mind, it's a worthy addition to a list of descriptors we might use for the relationship that is formed when someone surrenders authority over their life to Jesus.

Religion is actually a necessary undertaking of every

Christian who wishes to give their life and allegiance to Jesus as king and who chooses to surrender to his guidance and leadership in their life. This *binding to Jesus – religio* – and the reality that he becomes everything in a person's life – is what it means to become a child of God, joined to the mission of God to the world and submitting to His will, in Christ, for our lives. It is an act of individual virtue of worship, not simply an acceptance of a creedal statement or list of practices.

“So, then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” | Ephesians 2:19-20 CSB

For many of us, however, this isn't our experience of religion.

What we may have experienced or grown up with and what we would describe as *religion* is probably; adherence to a distinct set of beliefs, doctrines, or practices (some of which find their roots in scripture, some which don't).

Perhaps our family's beliefs eventually became our own; their set of doctrines were absorbed as ours, and we found ourselves one day 'a Christian, attending church', without giving too much thought to the process by which we got there. We accepted, without question, someone else's *religion*, as we might accept an old, hand-me-down sweater, thinking to make it our own.

Religious is perhaps what many of us became; that is, we converted to Christianity by adopting a set of beliefs and practices related to the historical figure of Jesus. Our *religiosity* as Christians might have been further defined by our identification with one particular denomination's creeds and practices over another.

Yet both these actions are not describing the true nature of *religion*. The differences may be subtle, almost indistinguishable from one another; however the reality is that what we may have ended up giving our allegiance to was a *system*, rather than to *Jesus*.

While being a Christian is certainly communal, and while Christians tend to believe mostly all the same fundamental creeds, and while the creeds and practices of Christianity can be taught and preached and are, in many ways, intrinsically invaluable to religion, *true religion* is the *individual and deeply personal matter of an individual's binding to the person of Christ*.

Religion, in the true sense of the word, cannot be passed down.

'Part of the genius of genuine Christianity is that each generation has to think it through afresh. Precisely because God wants every single Christian to grow up in understanding as well as trust, the Christian faith has never been something that one generation can sort out in such a way as to leave their successors with no work to do.' (N T Wright)

"Don't think of worship in terms of attending a church service, singing praise and worship songs or honouring the name of Jesus. The meaning of worship touches much larger questions. Namely, worship is all about who has the authority over our lives. Who will have our submission? Who will be given first place? Who will win our love, allegiance and devotion? True worship is absolute committal, surrender and submission to God." | Frank Viola, Insurgence

Counterfeit Religion

Paul the Apostle wrote his letter to the Galatians addressing an idea that had taken root at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did plus additional 'spiritual

acts' that are undertaken, that we are made "*right with God by what we do*".

However, this is performance-based Christianity – in fact, probably a rather apt description of our modern understanding of *religion*. Paul reiterates to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

"Foolish Galatians, who has cunningly deceived you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly set forth as crucified? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now completed in the flesh? He therefore who supplies the Spirit to you, and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by hearing of faith?" | Galatians 3:1-5, New Heart English Bible

Patterns of thought, actions, or behaviours, which are deemed 'godly' 'spiritual' or 'biblical' can often become the outward markers of people who are perceived to be *religious* but may, in reality, mask a heart far from allegiance to Christ.

Anything apart from 'binding to the cross of Jesus' results in toxic faith – *religion* that has gone wrong, leading to dependence on others' approval and not God's. Anything that adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and binds us to human systems of belief or worship, and not to God.

Yielding our allegiance to a set of beliefs, as *the primary driving force*, will result in Christians who may have a form of godliness but who deny the miraculous power of transformation implicit in such a life; a Christian life marked by the cruciform love of Jesus (John 13:5).

It is, quite simply, putting the cart before the horse.

As Christian Evangelist Gordon Fee comments, *“If you had asked Paul to define what a Christian is, he would not have said, ‘A Christian is a person who believes X and Y doctrines about Christ,’ but ‘A Christian is a person who walks in the Spirit, who **knows** Christ.’”* (Gordon Fee, 1934-2022)

There is a subtle yet crucial difference and the long-term effects of mistaking one for the other can be disastrous.

Christian life will become joyless, suffocating, without meaning, and without power. This kind of Christian morphs into ‘clouds without water, carried along by the wind, inflated but empty; fruitless trees in autumn, whose branches are disappointingly empty at harvest time.’ They become rooted in performance, rules, patterns of behaviour, and intractable systems of belief that leave very little room for any theological growth or deeper understanding. The lifeblood of faith – the crucified and resurrected Christ – seems almost an afterthought when laid alongside the many parameters they will use to define their *religion*.

Critically, a true and meaningful relationship with God will never be sustained on this basis.

“When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.” – Abraham Heschel

This is why Paul makes what initially seems to be a brief and insignificant statement regarding the gospel (but is, in actual fact, one of the most powerful statements he makes), *“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David; such is my gospel.”* (2 Timothy 2:8, ISV).

The starting point – the impetus behind the act of binding to (*religio*) for the Christian life is *faith by grace alone in the crucified Christ*. The animating and life-transforming force in a Christian's [walk with God](#) is the [resurrection life](#) of the living Christ; a cruciform life.

This, and this alone, is what any Christian must first and foremost be bound to.

“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” | 1 Corinthians 2:1-3, CSB

Journey To Cruciformity

Choosing Jesus, truly choosing him above all else, means rethinking everything you thought you knew about your faith and what – or who – your life is bound to. It means learning that your identity must rest on the rock of Christ, not in others' opinions of you or in the set of beliefs to which they subscribe, even if those beliefs are ones which you would agree with. It means making decisions others can and will criticise and judge you for. It means being much less certain in your own abilities and more certain in the reality of God's grace in your life.

It means wrestling and arguing with God, with fervent prayer and pleading, to finally arriving at the understanding that God will provide everything that you need. It means, perhaps, starting again at the place where Jesus needs to truly become the Lord of your life; that he has your complete allegiance and your life is bound to his.

You may discover that what you have been searching for, all this time, to feel whole and secure, will only be found in the one who loved like no other, laying down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

“To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus, for my life is wholly bound (religio) to his. Oh, how strange and divine, I can sing: all is mine. Yet not I, but through Christ in me.” | City Alight

Jesus taught his disciples that following him meant that one had to be willing to *“pick up their cross daily”* (Luke 9:23; 14:27). Cruciformity is, in essence, *conformity to the cross*; a life that is shaped by the narrative of the cross.

Cruciformity was the beating heart of God’s mission to the world demonstrated in full measure by the ministry of Jesus, who came *“not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:1-17). The cruciform life, therefore, is one that is a living exegesis of the story of Jesus, beginning firstly in identification with his death and then flowing outwards in a living embodiment of his resurrection.

Cruciformity does not mean *‘being spiritual’* or *‘belonging to a faith community’* or *‘seeking spiritual direction’*. Of course, it may involve those things but the cruciform life is grounded in the wholehearted trust that God will keep His promises, demonstrated in the crucified Jesus, and this trust is constantly affirmed and expressed by a transformed life.

A truly cruciform, gospel-shaped life starts with the activity of God. It is God who is saving us and it is God who is renewing us. It is God who accepts our belief in the sacrifice of Jesus and sends [His Spirit](#) into our lives to regenerate us as new creatures in His Son.

A cruciform life is one that is pointed in pursuit of Jesus and utterly and completely *bound to him*.

“A person who lives by the indwelling life of Christ through the Holy Spirit is a person who is under Law. But it is not the Law of Moses. Nor is it a Law that some preacher created

from his own personal standards. No, the Law I'm referring to is 'the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:3). This Law is like the law of gravity; it's a constant force or power. You and I have an indwelling Lord. The Law of God has been written on our hearts because Jesus Christ lives within us by his Spirit. This is the promise of the new covenant. Spiritual people (religious people)(italics, ours) are those who live by the Lord's life that indwells them. They know by instinct what the will of God is (1 John 2:27). Where the Spirit leads them, they yield to it (for the most part) – no matter what the cost. And life and peace are the results (Romans 8:6). The external Law, then, is no longer an outward thing full of dead letters and cold commands. It has been transferred into the indwelling life of Christ. To live by Christ is our highest calling as people of the insurgence." | Frank Viola, Insurgence

"Christ carried the burden of our sins. He was nailed to the cross, so we would stop sinning and start living right. By his cuts and bruises, you are healed. You had wandered away like sheep. Now you have returned to the one who is your shepherd and protector." | 1 Peter 2:24-25, CSB

***"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 therefore 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 knowing

and experiencing *who God is* and what *He has done for us*, in Jesus, and is not simply 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](#)). By knowing him, we can know God (Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3, 2 Peter 1:3).

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 Jesus crucified. Our *theology* begins with *cruciformity*; a life first and foremost surrendered to the crucified Christ in faith.

Theology, *true theology* – thinking about God – will be seen and witnessed in *cruciformity* (Galatians 5:22-23); a life pointed in pursuit of Jesus and utterly and completely *bound to him*.

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**Christianity + Missional
Living**

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“You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:14-15 | MSG

The Eternal Light Of Life

Light illuminates, not just dispelling darkness, but making visible that which is unseen. Jesus came into the world as the light and life of humanity, making visible the way to the Father (John 14:6), shining the glory and light of God and showing us the path home.

He was the way, the truth, and the life – that eternal life that was with the Father in the beginning and revealed to us in the Word-Made-Flesh (1 John 1:2, John 14:6). Whoever follows him is enveloped in his radiance and has no fear of stumbling or becoming lost in darkness (John 8:12).

While Jesus remained in the world, he was the light of the world. At his return to his Father, his light remained still, shining brightly in those who had seen and believed the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4).

They are his ambassadors; the good news about the glorious, life-giving king placed in them like treasure put in jars of clay. They know their source of empowerment is from God, not themselves, and can boldly proclaim: *“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)

They have seen God and He’s not a secret to be kept.

Christians + Missional Living

As Christians, Jesus’ earthly mission, to reveal the eternal life and light of God to the world, now becomes ours. We are tasked with the great commandment: “*love God, love your neighbour*” and the great commission: “*preach the gospel*”.

We are not just followers **of** Jesus, but are led by him out of the darkness into the light, to be witnesses **for** him. We are collectively commissioned people of his kingdom, reconciled to God and entrusted with this liberating message of reconciliation – the message of light and life – for all people (Colossians 1:18-20).

The phrase *being on mission* or *going on mission* has commonly been used to refer to those who travel overseas, often to poorer countries, to preach and teach the gospel. They are sent into these areas by their ‘home churches’ to promote their faith or provide services such as education, literacy, social justice, health care, and economic development, as an outworked ministry of their faith. Primarily seen as evangelism, *mission work* is rarely described as something that is undertaken locally, rather, something a Christian would participate in or be involved with overseas.

Missional living, missional churches, or missional communities are also phrases that have become popular in recent times. You may have heard them used in podcasts, online sermons or discussed by various authors. You may have assumed these phrases are referring to a special kind of Christian living or community; one that operates differently to ‘regular’ or ‘traditional’ Christian life or church.

However, the reality is that, as Christians, we are all on mission, right here, in our quiet, suburban neighbourhoods and

in our bustling city streets.

The word “mission” is derived from the Latin *missionem* (nom. *missio*), meaning “act of sending” or *mittere*, meaning “to send”. The word mission (Latin: *missio*), as a translation of the Greek *apostolē*, “a sending,” appears once in the English New Testament (Galatians 2:8). An apostle (*apostolos*) is one commissioned and sent for a purpose and we find the word *apostle* mentioned over 80 times in the New Testament.

The theme of *mission*, or *sending*, particularly in relation to God’s mission, can be found all throughout scripture. His active involvement in humanity’s story and His promise of reconciliation and redemption was finally realised in the greatest mission of all, the *sending* of His son, Jesus the *apostle* (Hebrews 3:1)

“Just as You commissioned and sent me into the world, I also have commissioned and sent them (believers) into the world. I do not pray for these alone [it is not for their sake only that I make this request], but also for [all] those who [will ever] believe and trust in me through their message, that they all may be one; just as You, Father, are in me and I in You, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe [without any doubt] that You sent me.” | John 17:18, 20–21, Amplified Bible

Just as Jesus was sent into the world, to witness to the eternal life and light of God, so each Christian has been commissioned and sent as an ambassador for Christ. They have been authorised, by virtue of his saving work, to represent his kingdom and to carry the great treasure of the good message in their fragile, imperfect lives of clay.

They have been commissioned by Jesus himself, who declared “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and

lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20; compare Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, John 20:21–22, and Acts 1:8).

Jesus lives in and through them and God has placed each one of them like a city on a hill, to bring light to the whole world. They are to glow – with their open houses and generous lives – like homecoming beacons, drawing all humanity to the light that comes from Him, that in this, ‘His name is glorified’.

The reality is that *every. single. Christian.* is a missionary and *every. single. church.* is missional. It’s the very nature of our Christianity and an intrinsic part of our identity as people of the kingdom.

I am a missionary. You are a missionary. We are all missionaries. And we don’t need to be anywhere else apart from where we are right now to *run on mission.*

Like Salt, Like Light...

‘Living on mission’, ‘living missionally’ or ‘missional living’ is simply the way in which we choose to order and arrange our ordinary, everyday lives; springing from a life framed by grace and pointed in pursuit of King Jesus. It means that we live out his life, his words, his actions and his love towards others; attempting to show *his* love by *our* actions and *his* truth by *our lives.*

Jesus first declared to his disciples, “follow me and I will make you fishers of men” Missional living, therefore, flows from ‘following Jesus’ and representing him in the world, shining in it like light and flavouring it like salt.

The people around us that we interact with, in a thousand ordinary ways, all experience the same joys and difficulties that we do, turning, as we are, on the wheel of life. They have the same questions that we do, the same challenges that we face, and, most importantly of all, are formed in the same

image that we are, the image of God Himself.

Living missionally means showing genuine interest in other people, simply because they are *human*, just like us. It means being curious about them, their children, their lives, and their passions.

Like Jesus, we celebrate with them in all their joys and grieve with them in all their losses.

“On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.” | John 2:1-12, ESV

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept.” | John 11:33-35

We are called to share the good message – that the gospel is able to speak to the heart of every human need – and, as missionaries (in our own backyards!), we look for opportunities to share this hope. In every relationship we encounter, we are acting as ‘ones sent’ for Jesus.

It means loving people well, being generous with our time and our resources, and open with our lives, that in doing so, we’ll prompt them to ‘open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.’ Our lives – our everyday, mundane, messy, uncomfortable, terrifying, joyful, and thoroughly human lives will be the greatest witness of all to the hope that lies within us.

So throw open all your doors! Be generous with your lives! Live bright and unafraid: remembering that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.

Missional Churches

All believers are ambassadors for Jesus' name and the reality of the church includes not individuals simply gathered together in a building, but a collective kingdom and priesthood of people, worshipping and witnessing together to the astounding truth of the gospel narrative and the risen king.

What happens, then, when Christians, 'living on mission', regularly gather together? Each individual Christian is personally on mission – this is a key aspect of their Christian identity, but the truly exciting thing is that now, collectively, these people become a 'church on mission'. The *being* and the *doing* of missional living doesn't change, it just multiplies!

Like the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Jesus' presence permeates their gatherings and multiplies the fruit of their labour. 'Like yeast through dough, or like stars appearing one by one as the night sky darkens', these local expressions of the church of Christ can cross all earthly boundaries, prevailing against even death itself. The world has never known anything like them. (Jonathan Leeman)

"I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."... | Jesus, Matthew 16: 18-19, BSB

"Christ did not die just to save us from sins, but to bring us together in community. After coming to Christ, our next step is to be involved in community. A church that does not experience community is a parody, a sham. Simply put, the purpose of the church is to stand for God's eternal purpose. In short, wherever the church gathers together, its guiding

*and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ.” –
Frank Viola, Reimagining Church*

Missional Christianity = Intentional Christianity

Whether a church is a ‘mega-church’ or a ‘home-church’, has five members or 500, is only made up of over 50’s or is an eclectic mix of ages, it should always, by definition, be ‘missional’. That is: intentionally living as a collective community representing the king and his mission.

A Christians’ individual life is no different. The great commission to preach the gospel and take the good news of Jesus to all the world was given to all believers. We see this commission of witness declared firstly in [Matthew 28:18-20](#) and shown to be affirmed throughout the letters of the Apostles to the church.

Missional living, therefore, isn’t a special kind of Christian identity. It’s the *only way* of viewing our Christian identity and, by extension, our corporate church identity. Missional Christianity is being intentional in our Christianity, open to the work of the Spirit in our own lives and the lives of those around us, active in our communities, and purposeful in our involvement in the mission of God, the great ministry of reconciliation.

We carry, every day in our bodies, the death of Christ so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed (2 Corinthians 4:7-10). Through us, others can also be empowered and equipped to receive and live out the gospel message, demonstrating God’s mission in all aspects of our lives, both personally and as church communities.

This is the essence of what it means to live a missional Christian life.

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” | Acts 2:42-47, ESV