

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

I really love talking about church.

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

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

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

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

There is nothing quite like her in all the world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **She Isn't Perfect**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# She's Exclusive And Yet Inclusive

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

direction with many failures along the way.

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

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

## **I Love The Church**

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

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

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

There is nothing quite like her in all the world.

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# Ruth: The Inconsequential Outsider

## The Weft And Warp Of Scripture

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 narrates again and again to us the way in which God views our world and us, the people who inhabit it.

The story of Ruth, a seemingly inconsequential outsider, is one of these golden threads. At face value, it appears to be a brief narrative concerning an unimportant family, living in a [small and insignificant rural village\\*](#). It hardly seems a grand stage on which the compelling drama of God's purpose is to be acted out.

The story is placed within the time period known as "The Judges" (thought to be around 1220 – 1050 B.C.), when heroes like Samson the Mighty and Ehud the Brave lived- impressive and inspiring characters, who took centre stage in the dramas that unfolded around them.

The story of Ruth seems, at first glance, a strange and somewhat ordinary inclusion in the rather extraordinary cast that surrounds it. And yet, when we consider each part of this remarkable story, we understand that we are being told something very important about God and about ourselves. We learn that God sees into our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7). He is more interested in what we can become, than in who we are right now, and that our very ordinariness is what God sees and



works with to bring us to an extraordinary place.

In fact, God often does some of His best work with the most unlikely people, as the story of Ruth proves.

## Who Was Ruth?

Ruth was, by definition, an outsider. She was not an Israelite but a native of the country of [Moab](#), a mountainous tract of land now in modern Jordan. She had married an Israelite man who was living in Moab with his family; his parents and his brother. The family had relocated due to a famine that had occurred in their homeland and in chapter 1 of the story, Ruth and her husband had been married for 10 years before he, and his brother, both fell ill and died.

It seems tragedy had already befallen the family previously, with the death of Elimelech, Ruth's father-in-law, very soon after the family's relocation. The death of the sons now left Ruth, her sister-in-law, Orpah, and Naomi, her mother-in-law, as widows, in probably very bleak circumstances.

Ruth was, of all people, an unlikely heroine. Not only was she a woman, in a time when women were of minor importance, but she was also now a widow. Finally, she was poor and foreign and would have been considered an outsider to any true-born Israelite.

## Ruth's Story

Ruth may have been poor in position but she was rich in love and faith. When Naomi, her mother-in-law, made the decision to return to her homeland of Israel, Ruth did not hesitate to follow her. She left all that was familiar, everything that she was culturally connected to, and, much like [faithful Abraham](#) before her, she *"went out, not knowing where she was going..."* (Hebrews 11:8).

She heard the call of God and she followed, with an implicit

faith and unswerving devotion. She trusted the journey and embraced the destination, even though she hadn't yet seen it. This is the definition of faith (Hebrews 11:1-3). Faith is what distinguishes her character and faith is what motivated her choices, which become more and more evident to us as we discover her story.

The story is short in its telling and it's well worth pausing here and [reading it quickly for yourself](#).

Like every great story, it contains all the important elements of interest; drama, grief, desolation, decision, redemption, and resolution. As a stand-alone story, it would be successful in its own right. Yet it is the conclusion to the story that makes us really sit up and take notice. This is where we realise that nothing is an afterthought to God, nobody is *actually* inconsequential and His plan is purposeful and far-reaching.

He has a definitive purpose and plan and every single person can play their part. There is a place for all of us in God's story, if we choose it.

Ruth made the choice and decision to follow Naomi, to become part of God's plan. Yet even she couldn't have realised the extent to which God would involve her. The epilogue of the story contains an unbelievable twist, a beautiful thread that we almost have to read twice to believe.

## **Ruth's Defining Legacy**

Ruth found a home, belonging, and happiness in Israel and went on to marry Boaz, a wealthy and respected landowner. She was accepted completely into the family of [Abraham](#), father of the Israelite people.

She also became the mother to a little boy called Obed (Ruth 4:16). Obed was the father of Jesse and Jesse, in time, became the father of David, one of the greatest kings in Israel's

history. David would become famous, not only for his skill with the harp and his compassionate love for and protection of his sheep as a shepherd boy but also for his courage and bravery in fighting against the enemy Goliath, his stirring example as a brilliant military leader and king, and his complete trust and faith in God.

Most breathtaking of all, King David became an ancestor of Jesus Christ, God's own Son! This makes Ruth an incredibly significant and vital part of God's plan of salvation for the world.

God's methods often [confound and confuse us](#). He doesn't always choose who we would expect or work in the way we would like. He sees all, from the beginning to the end (Isaiah 46:10), while we can only see a small portion of now. His purpose is perfectly orchestrated and remarkably interwoven in ways that amaze us.

In the story of Ruth, an inconsequential outsider, we see that God gets involved in the lives of all kinds of men and women, bringing about His purpose. We can take confidence and have faith that He can and will work in our lives, in the same way, and that we too can become part of [His story](#), if we choose it.

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\* Here's another plot twist for those of you who love a good story! Wondering about that "small and insignificant rural village", found at the beginning of this tale? That village is none other than the little town of Bethlehem, where, many years from Ruth's time, a small baby [would be born](#), in humble circumstances, and would be laid, sleeping, in a manger; [Jesus – the hope of the world!](#)

This article was first published on 19 March 2018

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# 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*

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**\*“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*.

This article was first published 10 February 2021

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# Will Progressive Christianity Destroy The Church?

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

I want to talk about something that's been on my mind for a while. Some time ago, I watched a commentary by a 'Christian pastor' that totally shocked me. In fact, I haven't really stopped thinking about it since.

I found it disturbing; equal parts ridiculous and horrifying, and I really couldn't believe it was being presented under the guise of legitimate Christianity.

For me, it highlighted a disturbing and, frankly, heartbreaking direction that modern Christianity, or at least a part of it, has taken; a wild trip sideways down the labyrinth-like rabbit hole of progressive Christianity\*. And I believe this pervasive ideology, left unchecked, could signal the death knell of the church as we know it.

Here's the commentary and then I'll get to discussing it (this video has been removed from YouTube since the writing of this article, only the transcript is available, which is below):

*"There's a part of the gospel where Jesus uses a racial slur [for context, the story of the syrophenician woman in Mark 7 and specifically Mark 7:24–30]...what's amazing about this account is that the woman doesn't back down, she speaks truth to power. Her boldness and bravery to speak truth to power actually changes Jesus' mind. Jesus repents of his racism and extends healing to this woman's daughter. I love this story because it's a reminder that Jesus is human. He had prejudices and bias and, when confronted with it, he was willing to do his work..." | [Brandan Robertson](#)*

Brandan Robertson, poster boy for the progressive Christian movement, is, by his own declaration, 'spreading the good word of an inclusive, modern gospel'. Progressive Christianity, part of a larger movement called "the emerging church", claims that at the heart of this movement is the desire to articulate a way of being Christian that is an alternative to the traditional Christian faith portrayed in the public realm.

Brandan is a "noted author, pastor, activist, and public theologian working at the intersections of spirituality, sexuality, and social renewal" (taken directly from his website). He currently serves as the Lead Pastor of Metanoia Church, a "digital progressive faith community". In July 2021, *Rolling Stone* magazine included Robertson in its annual "[Hot List](#)" of top artists, creatives, and influencers who "*are giving us reason to be excited about the future.*"

Well, I, for one, am not excited in the least.

There's a lot to unpack in his words and, to be honest, it's hard to know where to start. The problem with progressive Christianity is that it is, by nature, slippery and hard to pin down at a glance; it comes so prettily packaged and cleverly articulated.

Words like inclusivity, deconstruction, equality, and truth-seeking are marched out in quick succession and used in such a way so as to sound noble but humble, and demonstrative of authentic faith.

Issues such as social justice or economic disparity and the marginalisation and discrimination of certain social or ethnic groups are highlighted and cited as key issues for which the progressive Christian will boldly campaign.

While these kinds of issues are certainly addressed within the biblical texts, they do not stand alone from the sound theology or biblical context in which they sit.

And this is one of the core issues with progressive Christianity; seemingly meritable values are affirmed and offered up as convincing proofs of a reshaped and reimagined 21st-century gospel, but, the reality is, they've been cleverly detached from the context or theological truth in which we find them in scripture.

For example, progressive Christianity **affirms the right of women to choose what happens to their bodies\*\***. Initially, we might chorus a resounding yes; surely this is speaking to the unarguable value we place on free will and the intrinsic liberty of every human to choose their own destiny...until we realise this is really another way of supporting the legalisation of abortion, in any circumstances and for any means.

Progressive Christianity offers the statement that **Christianity is the truth for us. But it is not the only truth. We share our lives with people who are Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist. We experience these people as loving and caring by following their religious traditions. We believe there are many trains [to God] and God welcomes them all\***.

Again, we may begin to agree. Many religions affirm values in which we see merit (such as love and care for others)...but this is not what is really being said. This is really another way of advocating the post-modern ideology that there is more than one truth, that, in fact, there are many truths, different from each other but all true nonetheless. Critically, this statement asserts that Jesus is not the only way to God and that *being a good person* – “loving and caring” [of others] – will do the job just as well.

Not only that, personal experience is given primary authority in determining truth. Instead of the Word shaping the conclusions we draw from our experiences – *sola Scriptura*, our experiences become the primary authority in determining truth, requiring the Word of God to conform to and find agreement

with our own conclusions and experiences.

Our experiences certainly form part of a raft of resources that provide value in decision-making or conclusion-drawing, but only when the conclusions we draw or the decisions we make are first and foremost shaped by the sound theology expressed in God's Word and in light of the truths expressed therein. Our experiences are not to be considered reliable in and of themselves; scripture warns us that the heart of humanity is deceitful above all things and that our way of viewing the world is shaped by a mind that defaults to our own self will and not the will of God.

The conclusion expressed in the statement that **because we experience people as loving and caring therefore their expression of religion [without the need for Jesus] is still an acceptable path to God** is in direct contradiction to what scripture teaches. *Sola Scriptura*, therefore, demands that this conclusion must be reworked and submitted under scripture; reason, logic, tradition, and experience are valid but subordinate to what God's Word teaches.

Dig a little deeper and you begin to see that progressive Christianity has an agenda, one that claims to be supported by biblical truth but is, in reality, a radical reappraisal and, often, rejection of traditional Christianity in favour of what is largely a human rights agenda.

The words employed and issues raised are used in ways that are deceiving, that relegate Jesus to simply a remarkable helper, spiritual teacher or life guru, that advocate for the inherent divinity in humanity, and that change the meaning of the gospel and its call on believers' lives entirely.

The primacy of personal experience, as expressed by progressive Christianity, propounds the idea that *our truth is true* and therefore cannot be argued against but must be accepted as valid, irrespective of God's Word saying



differently.

Progressive Christianity teaches that you can find God within yourself, that sexuality and gender are fluid, that morality is relative, and that the primary call of Christian faith is to “love God, love our neighbour, and love ourselves”, which is simply a clever reworking of Jesus’ words in order to redefine ‘love of neighbour’ as including “affirmation of the LGBTQ+ community...”

*“The significance of the word ‘progressive’ in a sociological sense is rather deceptive in that it misrepresents and downplays the very gospel the church exists to proclaim. It implies and claims that the traditional Christian faith has served its purpose, it is now old-fashioned, restrictive, irrelevant and even repressive.” | Rev E.A. Curnow*

*“At its core, progressive Christianity is a different religion. It gives you a different God and a different Jesus. It’s not a Jesus who can save you.” | Alisa Childers*

I want to analyse some of the ideas inferred in Brandon Robertson’s commentary, who, by the way, states that he “cannot know if Jesus was the incarnation of God with any degree of certainty”, and who “sometimes, believes in the divine claims Christians have projected back onto the historical Jesus and sometimes doesn’t.”

## **1. Jesus Was A Racist**

I’m appalled even typing that sentence. However, it has been said so it must be countered.

Racism is defined as *prejudice against or antagonism towards a person or people on the basis of their membership of a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalised.* However, throughout the Bible, God makes no distinction between people based on their social

status ([Jeremiah 22:3](#)), their ethnicity ([Acts 10: 34-35](#)), or their gender ([Galatians 3:28](#)).

He sends rain on the just and the unjust and causes the sun to rise on the good and the evil (Matthew 5:45). His message of good news, first preached to Abraham, was intended to be a blessing for all humanity (Genesis 12:3). The whole world is separated from God by sin and His salvation through the sending His Son is for the whole world to receive, if they will (Romans 5:12, Ephesians 2:12, 2 Peter 3:9).

God is just, holy, perfect, generous, impartial, and good. If this is who God is, then this is also who Jesus, God-With-Us, is. Jesus was no racist.

## **2. Speaking Truth To Power**

While the woman mentioned in this story 'spoke truth' and while Jesus certainly was 'power', the use of this phrase is intended to convey something else entirely. The idea behind the phrase *speaking truth to power* is that of an individual courageously confronting (possibly corrupt) authority, calling out injustices, and demanding change. It presumes that the one speaking is the true moral authority in the matter, someone who is willing to proclaim 'what is right' in the face of criticism or consequence.

Again, if we've seen Jesus then we've seen God and any display of power sits alongside absolute morality, justice and truth. Jesus himself *is* truth (John 14:6) and the use of this phrase here to imply he manifests injustice or untruth is plainly ridiculous.

## **3. Jesus Was Willing To Do His Work**

This phrase *willing to do his (or her) work* is another favourite in progressive circles and is used to imply there is some character deficit or lack in an individual (in this case, Jesus), which needs adjusting or repenting of (a word which

Brandon also employs in his commentary regarding Jesus).

Jesus was certainly prepared and “willing to do his work”, but it wasn’t the work of self-improvement or repentance.

The Lamb, without spot or blemish, sent into the world to reconcile the world again to God, his work was to do the will of his Father (Luke 2:49, John 5:36). Though he entered into our human experience and is, therefore, able to understand us in every way, right down to the alluring call of sin and the temptation to choose self will that we experience, his life and character were perfect. It could not have been otherwise, else our forgiveness and reconciliation could not have been obtained (Hebrews 9:14, Hebrews 4:15, 1 Peter 2:22).

This is just a poor attempt to reinvent Jesus into a caricature that serves the cultural slogans and trends that the progressive Christian movement wants to advance, and which bear no resemblance to the real Jesus of the scriptures; perfect lord, saviour, king.

#### **4. Brandan Robertson’s Conclusion: ‘A Reminder That Jesus Is Human’**

It’s sad but unsurprising that this is Brandan’s take-home point from this story. In reality, the story in Mark 7 marks a significant turning point in Jesus’ ministry of kingdom-preaching and repentance-calling, where the mission is expanded to include the Gentiles; obviously super good news for you, me, and anyone else of non-Jewish heritage!

The world that we see in the Bible and all around us still is one where all of creation, including humanity, groans to be set free from the bondage of sin. The good news of the gospel is that in Jesus, who is both saviour and king, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

The story of Mark 7 is about the inclusive call of the gospel,

the invitation extended to all to come out of the dominion of darkness, ruled over by the prince of this world, and into the kingdom of the Son of God's love, a kingdom of light and life. A call to *come as you are...but not stay as you are*; a challenge to surrender, to receive forgiveness and renewal, and to be transformed into the kind of human God always intended you to be (John 5:24, Acts 26:18, Luke 24:47, Colossians 1:13).

## Will Progressive Christianity Destroy The Church?

*"Progressives are not just a group of Christians who are changing their minds on social issues and politics...they often deny core essential doctrines of the faith, which leads them to preach an entirely different gospel." | Alisa Childers*

Despite the descriptor, I don't believe progressive Christianity to be Christian at all. The movement often denies key tenets of the Christian faith; the primary authority of the Bible as God's inspired Word, the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus, the dark reality of sin and the resultant separation it creates between God and humanity, and the need for Jesus' atoning sacrifice as a means of reconciliation with God.

Sin itself is often redefined, simply becoming *"all of our greedy impulses that create inequity in the world"* (Brandan Robertson), rather the biblical definition of rebellion against God's law, *"a word, deed, or desire in opposition to the eternal law of God"* (Augustine of Hippo) (1 John 3:4), *"evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and sorcery; hatred, discord, jealousy, and rage; rivalries, divisions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, false testimony and slander and the like."*

The truly dangerous reality is that the insidious ideology of

progressive Christianity is infiltrating and hijacking genuine Christianity, silencing the church's ability to speak into and about the real-life situations for which she exists.

We are becoming less comfortable about naming sin and preaching the need for true biblical repentance and more concerned about being labelled as intolerant, judgmental, old-fashioned, or irrelevant. When did morality become simply degrees of relativity and we became afraid to speak up and say, "*that is wrong*", or conversely, "*this is right*"?

We are becoming confused by cries of inclusivity, tolerance, and *love of the other*; mistaking the inclusive call of the gospel for the exclusive reality of the church.

We are uneasy repeating the biblical truth that "*narrow is the way and few there be that find it*", preferring instead the idea that multiple superhighways of every description will surely lead to God. The discovery of our *true, inner self* through spiritual evolution seems a more palatable message for the masses than the sombre alternative; the biblical narrative of *death to self* and radical rebirth in Jesus.

Despite her flaws, the church still needs to be the voice, the hands, the beating heart of Jesus in a dark and sin-enslaved world. We need to speak with sensitivity and compassion, yes, but we ought not to shy away from talking about the things people may not want to hear about but desperately need to; sin, estrangement, sacrifice, surrender, death, reorientation, transformation. We need to speak about these things too, with boldness and conviction.

Will progressive Christianity be the death of the church? No, I don't think so. I think the blood of Jesus, by which his church was purchased, is more powerful than that.

But I do think the church is facing one of her greatest challenges yet; not through external persecution as in times past, but through subtle, internal perversion. There is a

desperate need for discernment and a deep commitment to the gospel of the Bible, in doctrine and practice.

I think we need to pay attention, to have our wits about us, wary of those who may come in sheep's clothing, disguising themselves as servants of righteousness. We need to be unafraid to boldly and confidently lay their claims and teachings alongside the sound words of Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, for scrutiny and assessment, acceptance or rejection.

And I think we need to courageously recommit to our commission that, collectively, we, the church, the 'woman of valour' for whom Jesus died, will shine brightly in a darkened and impoverished world through our most basic and guiding principle: that is, to incarnate Christ.

*"But test everything; hold fast what is good." | 1 Thessalonians 5:21, BSB*

\* <https://www.bethelbeaverton.org/progressive-christianity>, <https://progressivechristianity.org/the-8-points/>, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive\\_Christianity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_Christianity)

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/05/progressive-christians-abortion-jes-kast/590293/>

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## John Writes A Letter

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

*"God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life*

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

## **Authentic Christianity**

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

John's words on this subject are blunt and straight to the point. *"You cannot be a Christian and hate other people"*. It's incompatible and hypocritical. Not only that, it's a blatant subversion of everything that is intrinsically bound up in a Christian's salvation by God's grace. We love God, because He **first** loved us and, despite our complete unworthiness, He sent His son to die for us. There is no greater love than a man dying for his friends, and there could be no greater demonstration of what love looks like, to die, even for those who were your enemies.

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

Of all the people on this earth, it would seem obvious that Christians would understand the implications of this. We are the recipients of a love so deep and vast and completely undeserving, it should be impossible for us to not respond to

this in our relationships with others. We haven't received from God what we should have. And what we shouldn't have received, we have. Grace, freely given, has been demonstrated by a love lavished on us in abundance. This recognition of grace should empower and transform us to demonstrate the same kind of love in all our relationships, and especially to our Christian family.

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

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

## **Are We Really Born Again?**

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

Jesus told a story to illustrate what a life untransformed by grace looks like – that of the *ungrateful* servant ([Matthew 18:21-35](#)). Despite having been forgiven a massive debt of some several million dollars by his master, the servant proceeded to demand repayment of a debt owed to him by a fellow servant,



of only a few dollars. When the fellow servant was unable to immediately repay, he had him thrown into prison, 'until he could repay the debt' – which would have been practically impossible from his prison cell. The master soon heard of the ungrateful servant's behaviour and the conclusion of the tale is sobering:

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

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

*"Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen."* [1 John 4:20, NIV](#)

## **What Does Real Love Look Like?**

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

These are all attributes of a life that is lived walking with

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

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

## **Hate Will Destroy Us**

The opposite of love is hate. And let's get real. Hate, in all its forms, whether displayed passively or aggressively, is like a poison that destroys our soul. It will ruin our life – and not just ours. It causes havoc in our families, our relationships, our churches and, critically, to our witness of the Gospel. We may think that we have never been guilty of 'hating our brother or sister', but when we harbour bitterness in our heart, when we gossip about them to others, when we withhold doing good on the basis of preference, when we are angry at them, when we don't treat them with dignity and honour, 'esteeming all better than ourselves', we are hating them.

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

They may fool everyone else but they cannot fool God.

## **Hate Is An Issue Of The Heart**

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

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

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

*“For from within the hearts of people come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery.” – Mark 7:21, ESV*

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

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

warn us of it.

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

## How Can We Change The Narrative?

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

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

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

*“So don't lose a minute in building on what you've been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others.*

*With these qualities active and growing in your lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus.”*  
– 2 Peter 1:5-9, MSG

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

## **A Powerful Witness To The Truth Of Jesus Christ**

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

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

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

wisely for Christ.

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

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

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

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**This article was first published 10 February 2020**

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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 rules for Him;” | Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-10, ESV*

## **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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**This article was first published 26 July 2021**

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## **By One Man**

**(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)**

I like the Apostle Paul.

I like his ability to ‘call a spade a spade’, the unrelenting pursuit of his faith, and his bold assertion to “preach nothing but the cross of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:2). No doubt he ruffled more than a few feathers at times, with his unapologetic directness and refusal to tolerate any other gospel than that of being [saved by grace through faith alone](#).

He doesn’t shy away from telling it how it was; the reality that his zeal for God had been seriously misplaced early on, and that he had been a violent persecutor and destroyer of the very faith he was now thankful to call his own.

He doesn’t downplay the facts of his former life; that not only had he been zealous for the traditions of his fathers, he had also been considered an ‘up and coming’ amongst his peers,

his upward trajectory in Judaism eclipsing many of those his own age (Galatians 1:13).

Yet he also doesn't state this just for effect or from a place of pride, but rather as facts relevant to advancing the true gospel narrative he now endeavors to preach. He states that he counts all those things of his former life as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, his Lord.

He has a particularly warm and fatherly relationship with Timothy, his 'son in the faith' and he shows deep regard for several fellow workers whom he commends by name: Epaphroditus, husband-and-wife team, Priscilla and Aquila, Barnabas, Titus, Silas, Luke, Lydia, and Onesiphorus.

He demonstrates tenderness and genuine love and concern for all those of the "household of faith" and he is a passionate evangelist to those who are yet still "strangers and foreigners" to the gospel of grace. His letters to the early churches are full of pastoral advice and authoritative direction. Yet he is also unapologetically direct and is prepared to meet and name injustice or falsity head-on, as in the situation that he writes about in 2 Corinthians 7 (see also 2 Corinthians 11, Galatians 1:6–9, Galatians 2:4; 2 Corinthians 11:26).

*"Paul's letters reveal a remarkable human being: dedicated, compassionate, emotional, sometimes harsh and angry, clever and quick-witted, supple in argumentation, and above all possessing a soaring, passionate commitment to God, Jesus Christ, and his own mission." | [Britannica.Com](https://www.britannica.com)*

Paul's influence, passion, and commitment enabled the gospel of Jesus Christ to take root and flourish throughout Asia Minor, and its spread continued long after his death, reaching even to the ends of the earth.

Paul wrote several letters, one of which was the letter to the

church at Rome. In chapters 5 and 6 of Romans, he covers some significant theological territory by dealing with the themes of death, life, and resurrection, which came about, he states, 'by one man'...

## **By One: Death In Adam**

The need for our forgiveness and reconciliation with God sits at the heart of the gospel. Paul recounts in Romans 5 how humanity found itself in the dismal state of being sinning, dying creatures and why we need forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal.

He makes his first point in Romans 5:12 where he teaches that Sin came into the world *by one man* and that death followed swiftly on Sin's heels, enslaving all of humanity in a dominion of darkness and, ultimately, separation from God.

The word he uses for 'man' is the Greek word ἄνθρωπος (anthrōpos) meaning *human*. We get our English word anthropology from the combining of *ánthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος, "human") and *lógos* (λόγος, "study"). It's therefore strictly more accurate to say that *by one human* Sin entered the world and death spread to all.

While Adam becomes the representative of us all, the focus, I think, is not primarily on his gender (as a man) but on his humanity. In fact, scripture elsewhere confirms that Eve was complicit in sin alongside Adam (Genesis 3:6,12, 1 Timothy 2:14). Together, they were responsible for the catastrophe that unfolded.

*"The narratives of Genesis focus on conflict and resolution. God's purpose from the beginning is to have His presence fill the earth; humans are to image God and subdue the earth, i.e., bring about order and fruitfulness in creation (Genesis 1-2). Conflict enters the story when humans rebel against God (Genesis 3). Shalom is shattered, and the earth is cursed.*

*Further degeneration takes place (Genesis 4–6) until God brings judgment and mercy (Genesis 6–9). Humans then attempt to restore God’s presence (Genesis 11) before God launches His own initiative to re-establish His presence on Earth (the covenant). Genesis 1–11, then, is the founding story of humanity, ending in crisis. These narratives give a real and true assessment of God’s initial purposes and the human plight. Genesis 12–50 is the founding story of the nation with whom the covenant is eventually made at Sinai. The covenant establishes the relationship to Abraham and his descendants, provides the structure for living in God’s presence, and lays the foundation for God’s presence to be established on earth.” | [BioLogos](#)*

The consequence of the fall in Eden – mortality – flowed from Adam and Eve to all of humanity; a literal reality and a core theological truth embedded within the Genesis record. Dying became hard-coded in our DNA.

Not only that, Paul comments later in Romans 7, Sin is a powerful and destructive force that humans find impossible to resist. Humanity has been *sold under sin*, constantly battling against the pull of our own self-will, which is invariably in opposition to God. Despite having the desire to do good, more often than not, we lack the ability to do what is right, so powerful is Sin’s hold and influence over us. There is no one in all the world who has not fallen prey to Sin’s insidious, whispering temptation\* (Ecclesiastes 7:20, Romans 3:21).

The introduction and continued presence of Sin in the world is what gives death its power over humanity. We die because we’re mortal and death now reigns supreme and we remain dead because of the power that Sin gives death.

***In Adam, all die. This is Paul’s first point and the incontrovertible theological teaching of Romans 5.***

## By One: Life In Christ

Yet, says Paul in Romans 5:21, and here he makes his second point, in Christ, there is life. There is another theological truth embedded within the Genesis record, a promise “that new life would be delivered out of death.”

*“And I will put enmity (open hostility) Between you and the woman, and between your seed (offspring) and her Seed; He shall [fatally] bruise your head, And you shall [only] bruise His heel.” | Genesis 3:15, AMP*

Humanity was promised that a descendant of Eve – [another human](#) – would arise to wage war against Sin and to overthrow death. Yet in waging this war, death would deal him a powerful blow, a seemingly mortal wound. But out of his death would flow life.

This promise would be affirmed countless times throughout scripture, and, particularly, by Jesus himself during his ministry, who stated the reason for his coming was that “they [humanity] may *have life*, and have it in abundance [to the full, till it overflows]” (John 10:10, Amplified Bible).

Unable to wage the war for themselves, God’s promise and gift to the world would go into battle on humanity’s behalf. He would wage war for all those who were weak, utterly helpless, and hopelessly enslaved to Sin. Those who were living in darkness, far from the eternal life God had intended for them. Those whose greatest enemy was death itself.

In fact, this hero’s [redemptive work](#) *on behalf of humanity* would be deeply connected to *his own humanity*. He had to be human, like us, in order to make atonement for the sin of humanity (Isaiah 53:6, Hebrews 2:17)

As a human, he would still feel keenly the pull of Sin’s seductive promise, the desire and temptation, as *the first*



*Adam* had, to undertake this battle on his own terms. He would wrestle with the terrifying but necessary reality of confronting death up close; not just any kind of death but the painful and humiliating death of a traitor.

He would face the world's great enemy alone, rejected by all, even by those who were closest to him, in the moment of his greatest need. Defenseless, *like a lamb led to slaughter*, he would cling to the words of the Psalmist that, though he walked through the valley of the shadow of death, God would be with him still. He would choose to suffer according to God's will, committing his soul to a faithful Creator.

This war would be brutal and bloody and seemingly fatal for our hero.

And yet, there would be an extraordinary twist...

Where *the first Adam* had been a living being; *the last Adam* would be a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45). This hero would be human *but not merely a human*. He would be the "Word-Made-Flesh" – the 'one and only of his kind' and in him would dwell 'the entire fullness (completeness) of God's nature (Colossians 2:9).

Written into the very fabric of our reality was a powerful promise that Sin *could be* defeated by the willing sacrifice of one who had committed no sin and who had lived a perfect, moral life according to God's will. The sacrificial death of such an individual, on behalf of all of humanity, would heal the division between God and humanity, reopening the way to the eternal life God had always intended for His creation.

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, the Word-Made-Flesh. Sent in the likeness of all of humanity, but in whom dwelt all the fullness of God, only the Son of God would be able to overcome and defeat our greatest enemy.

Not only that, in meeting death head-on, he would deal it a fatal blow, overturning and destroying its claim on him. Sin's power to command death would be vanquished. Jesus himself would now hold the keys of death and the grave. On the third day, at the break of dawn, he would rise from the silence, Life himself having swallowed up death in victory (Acts 2:24, Romans 6:9, 1 Corinthians 15:54).

One act of righteousness, Paul says, led to justification and life for all humanity. By one man's obedience, many would be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19).

*"As sin has exercised kingly sway in inflicting death, so grace, too, may exercise kingly sway in bestowing a righteousness which results in the Life of the Ages through Jesus Christ our Lord." | Romans 5:21, Weymouth New Testament*

## **Deeper Magic**

I love how C S Lewis writes about this epic moment in his fictional work, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*:

*At that moment they heard from behind them a loud noise—a great cracking, deafening noise as if a giant had broken a giant's plate...The Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan. "Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?" "Yes!" said a great voice from behind their backs. "It is more magic." They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself. "Oh, Aslan!" cried both the children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad... "But what does it all mean?" asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer. "It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time.*

*But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward.” | C S Lewis*

This “deeper magic” is an immutable law of consequence, as certain as the law of gravity or the rising of the sun. Jesus has brought life and all those *in him* will live. This gift of grace has been given, the work has been finished and the end has been written. *“While we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, and, further, now that we are reconciled, we will also be saved by his life.”*

***In Christ, all will live. This is Paul's second point and the incontrovertible theological teaching of Romans 5.***

## **The Resurrection: Proof + Promise**

One of the great theological truths of the Christian faith, as taught by Paul and, indeed, written into the earliest Christian creeds is the necessary and factual reality of [the resurrection](#), particularly, the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, Paul asserts that resurrection underpins the entire gospel narrative, without which all of Christian life is rendered futile.

*“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even **Christ has been raised**. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.” | 1 Corinthians 15:17, NIV*

He actually summarised the gospel by affirming three statements, one of which is a declaration of the reality of

the resurrection of Jesus:

*“Remember Jesus Christ [the anointed], raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.” | 2 Timothy 2:8 | NIV*

The Christian faith asserts and teaches that resurrection is a historical reality; Jesus Christ really did live, die, and was raised again to eternal life.

The resurrection is not only relevant to the gospel narrative, it's essential. Author Craig Blomberg comments, *“As wonderful as Jesus' life and teachings and miracles were, they were meaningless if it were not historically factual that Christ died and was raised from the dead and that this provided atonement, or forgiveness, of the sins of humanity.”* Embedded in this reality is the proof that what was begun in Jesus, God intends to do for all creation.

*“The most startling characteristic of the first Christian preaching is its emphasis on the resurrection. The first preachers were sure that Christ had risen, and sure, in consequence, that believers would in due course rise also. This set them off from all the other teachers of the ancient world...Nothing is more characteristic of even the best thought of the day than its hopelessness in the face of death. Clearly, the resurrection is of the very first importance for the Christian faith” – The New Bible Dictionary 1996, p. 1010, “Resurrection”.*

Jesus didn't just overcome death, his death also made reparation for all the sins of the world. Sin, in its entirety, was dealt with, once and for always\*\* (Romans 6:10). His resurrection was both proof and promise that the war against Sin had been waged and won. Death has lost its power. Those in Christ *will live*, no longer be held by death but merely passing through it. They too, like him, will be raised

to life, never again to experience death.

*“I assure you: Anyone who hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life.” | John 5:24*

Life, and life abundantly – the same life that Jesus now has [awaits them on the other side](#).

It's no wonder Paul concludes his thoughts on this subject with these inspiring words: *“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! (Romans 8:7-39, CEV).*

This is indeed good, good news!

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**\*apart from Jesus, of course.**

**\*\*This, of course, doesn't mean that we don't still struggle with sin – this is the challenging reality of the Christian life – but rather that the penalty that sin inflicts, death, has been absolved for those in Christ (Isaiah 53:6, 1 John 2:2, John 1:29). We eagerly wait, with all of creation, to be completely set free from the bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:22).**

**A large part of the inspiration for this article came from the worship song 'This My Soul' By The Gray Havens. It's truly worth a listen and captures Paul's sentiments from Romans 5 and 6 perfectly. This song is one of my personal favourites.**

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# Three Reasons I Don't Believe In Hell

Before beginning, I would like to acknowledge that discussing this particular topic may appear to be controversial and that you, the reader, may not share the views I express. This article is not intended to be offensive or divisive in nature, but rather to open a channel of respectful conversation about a subject that is deeply important to many people.

I have chosen some time ago to abandon a rigid position on issues or topics which are non-essential to the gospel, from which there is no possible room to move or breathe, and allow my questions and convictions to sit in tension with one another while my Christian life continues to grow and deepen.

What this means, in practical terms, is that I'm genuinely interested to hear from you, that I welcome engagement and even difference on many biblical subjects, including this one, and, while I express this to be my currently held position on this topic, I would hope I am still open to learning new things as scripture speaks to me and as I hear from others.

The following thoughts are expressed in that light:

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The subject of *hell* has popped up in a few different conversations recently, and, while I tend to try to avoid speaking from a position of a negative ('*what I don't believe...*'), this doctrine is one that's never rung true for me.

I genuinely doubt the validity of the doctrine of hell or that it's an actual teaching of scripture. For many Christians, a requirement to believe in hell has been a deal breaker in their faith and, I think, for good reason. It's hard to reconcile the many elements of this doctrine with the picture the Bible paints of a good, good God.

In this article, I'd like to share three compelling reasons why I think the doctrine of hell doesn't biblically add up and why I think it's actually in opposition to the truth of the gospel narrative.

## **But Firstly, What Do I Mean By *Hell*?**

Well, I'm referring to the (assumed to be) biblical teaching about the destination of the soul at the moment of death; either to heaven if you've 'done okay' or, alternatively, to hell, if you 'haven't quite measured up'. *Saints* go up. *Sinners* go down.

The parameters for 'not quite measuring up' can differ greatly depending on who you might be talking to. Some would say that *anyone* who hasn't [received Jesus as Lord and Saviour](#) is outside God's salvation. Therefore, either by ignorance or purposed willfulness, they have rejected God and earned themselves a one-way ticket to hell.

This includes, for example, people living deep within the Amazon jungle (who have had limited contact with the outside world and may never have heard the Christian message of Jesus Christ), those who may have been Christian once but have turned their back on Christ, those who have heard the message of Jesus but decided *no thanks*, as well as those who have engaged in various horrors such as rape, torture and mass murder during their lifetime.

Others are more uncomfortable with the thought of Adolf Hitler rubbing shoulders with good and sincere people (who, while they might not have been Christian, could hardly be described as having lived a 'wicked life'). Or those who, through no fault of their own, had never even heard of hell, let alone Jesus. It does seem a little heavy-handed a response towards people who were essentially clueless about the rules but were punished anyway. Hell, they therefore conclude, is only for the truly wicked; surely [God makes concessions for nice](#)

[people?](#).

The traditional teaching of hell is that it's a place of both psychological and physical torment; an 'eternal lake of fire' where the wicked are perpetually burned for all eternity (decide for yourself who qualifies). This imagery was further elaborated on during medieval times by the artists who graphically displayed vile creatures eating flesh and devouring sinners in the place of torment. (These images, together with fragmented texts of the Scriptures, and the circulation of [apocryphal](#) books, led the medieval church into some strange and grotesque doctrines).

The period of history known as The Great Awakening (1730-1740) placed particular emphasis, as a method of conversion, on the horror that awaited the unrepentant sinner. Jonathan Edwards, a famous American congregational preacher of the time, described hell as a place where "God holds men over the flames in the way that one holds a loathsome spider over a candle. He speculated on how it would feel to have the searing agony of a burn drawn out through eternity. He told listeners that the ground beneath their feet was a rotten flooring over a blazing pit, ready to give way in seconds." (Bruce Shelley, Church History In Plain Language)

## **What Does Scripture Teach?**

Psychologists today would no doubt have a field day with the profoundly damaging psychosocial and spiritual effects of this kind of preaching, dubbed 'fire-and-brimstone', but, more particularly, what does the Bible preach? Is this kind of reality really found in scripture?

Here are three reasons why I don't think scripture teaches this at all:

### **1. Hell Doesn't Fit The Gospel Narrative**

One of the amazing aspects of the Bible is the consistency of



its message and theme, from start to finish. It's remarkable, given the reality of its varying authorships and the different time periods during which it was written, that the major theme of God's sovereignty, rule, and purpose remains intact. In fact, affirming God's sovereignty throughout the biblical record gives shape and purpose to the role for which humanity was created.

[The gospel narrative](#) is one that tells the story of Jesus, God's only Son, and announces that he is both Lord and King. In him, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose (Acts 2:36, Romans 8:19-21).

But what is He saving people from?

The first book in the Bible, Genesis, tells us something important about our own history, and it sets the stage for the drama that subsequently unfolds throughout the rest of [God's story](#).

It tells us, firstly, that we were created with purpose, designed to be like God, to image Him throughout His good world and rule wisely and well on His behalf (Genesis 1:26).

Secondly, it tells us that instead of partnering with God in this purpose, we chose our own will, introducing the evil of sin into God's good world. The terrible consequence for the first humans, Adam and Eve, is that they were banished from the garden and from God's presence. Furthermore, humans became 'dying creatures', subject to disease, aging, and mortality. Dying became hard-coded into our DNA.

*"You will sweat all your life to earn a living; you were made out of soil, and you will once again turn into soil." | Genesis 3:19, CEV*

*"Adam sinned, and that sin brought death into the world. Now*

*everyone has sinned, and so everyone must die.” | Romans 5:19, CEV*

**We are subject to mortality. Death is our great enemy; this is the consequence of disobedience, passed on Adam and Eve and received by all those who came after them.**

*“So then, as through one trespass there is condemnation for everyone, so also through one righteous act there is justification leading to life for everyone.” | Romans 5:18*

The gospel narrative tells of humanity hopelessly enslaved to sin and at the mercy of mortality (Romans 6:15-23). Far from the spiritual life God intended for us, we're incapable of saving ourselves or of overcoming death (Acts 4:12). The gospel, however, offers good news! : rescue, redemption and eternal life – God's own life, by the simple act of [giving allegiance](#) to His Son, Jesus, as Lord and Saviour (Romans 10:9-10).

The gospel confirms the biblical reality of a just but loving God who is for His creation, who is not willing that any should perish, and who has actively worked to reconcile and transform us so that we can live the life of purpose for which He created us (2 Peter 3:8-10, John 3:16).

*Hell* – further punishment after death – simply doesn't fit the gospel narrative.

## **2. Hell Doesn't Fit The Character Of God**

God is the God of promise, at whose Word the universe came into being and whose Word will never return to Him void, not accomplishing the purpose for which it was sent ([Genesis 1:3](#), [Isaiah 55:11](#)). His loving devotion endures forever. He is faithful, true, just, and all glorious ([Psalm 136:3](#), [1 Timothy 1:17](#)).

The Psalmist declares the wonder and worthiness of this Eternal God, who is clothed in light, who stretches out the heavens like a tent, and who walks on the waves of the sea ([Psalm 104:2](#), [Job 9:8](#)). All of creation bows in obeisance to His majesty, for all things, owe their existence to Him ([Psalm 104:30](#), [Psalm 6:4](#), [Psalm 96:11](#), [Luke 19:40](#)).

God proclaimed both His Name and character to Moses, the great deliver of Israel [during the Exodus](#), stating:

*“The Lord – the Lord is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers’ iniquity on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.” | Exodus 34:5-9, ESV*

The Psalmist also writes often and extensively about the innate goodness of God:

*“For the LORD is good; His steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” | Psalm 100:5, ESV*

*“The LORD is good and upright; therefore He shows sinners the way.” Psalm 25:8, CSB*

*“The LORD is good to all; His compassion rests on all He has made.” | Psalm 145:9, BSB*

There’s a lot to unpack in all those verses. Yet perhaps the overwhelming take-home point is this: God is just. He’s not vindictive or biased and He [doesn’t show favoritism based on our social status, gender, or nationality](#). In fact, He is generous-hearted and gracious, even to those who are His enemies.

Jesus demonstrates this in His famous sermon on the mount, where he sets out the characteristics of those who would be children of the kingdom. He shows that choosing to behave in this way is simply imitating the characteristics of their Heavenly Father:

*“You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don’t even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” | Matthew 5:45-48, CSB*

This aspect of God’s graciousness – His undeserved love and favour to humanity – permeates every aspect of the gospel narrative, giving it weight and power. Because He is just, He wouldn’t overlook the sin of the world. But because He is also gracious and good, God sent His Son into the world, to suffer under the hands of wicked men, so that humanity could be rescued from the curse of sin and death (Matthew 16:21, Isaiah 53:4-6). In His goodness and in His justice, He made arrangement for sin to be absorbed and absolved, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

God is not a vindictive sadist. It simply doesn’t fit the character of a good and gracious God to punish people by “holding them, like a loathsome spider, over a flame for all eternity.” I would have serious concerns about other aspects of God’s character if I truly believed He is capable of sustaining such indefinite torture, even to those I might consider deserving of such a fate.

Interestingly, during the time when kings ruled the nation of Israel (926BCE – 586BCE), Israel engaged in the practice of child sacrifice by fire to the pagan god Molech, a practice they had absorbed from the nations they had previously conquered. God considered this to be a great evil; it was completely abhorrent to Him and something which he had expressly forbidden (2 Chronicles 33:6, Jeremiah 32:35, 2 Kings 21:6).

The doctrine of hell, in its many terrifying forms, perhaps tells us more about the capability and cruelty of human imagination than the reality of what occurs at death.

*Hell* – as a place of fiery, eternal torture for the wicked – simply doesn't fit the character of God.

### **3. Hell Isn't Found In The Bible**

Well, it is. But not in the way you think.

While the word *hell* is certainly found in some of our English translations, it's usually a translation of the original Hebrew word *she'ol* (שְׁאוֹל), and on the remaining occasions, three other Greek words (*hades* (αἴδης), *gehenna* (γεέννα) and *tartarus* (ταρταρόω).

It's translated by the King James version as *hell* 54 times, however more accurate translations like the NASB or NIV show the word *hell* only occurring between 13–14 times, all of which are found in the New Testament. The Hebrew word *she'ol* is translated in other places as 'grave' and 'the pit' and the more accurate translations tend to translate it in this way ([Genesis 37:35](#), [1 Kings 2:6](#), [Job 17:16](#), [Isaiah 14:11](#), Ecclesiastes 9:10)

The English word *hell*, comes from 'helan', meaning 'to conceal'. It conveyed no thought of heat or torment but simply of a 'covered over or concealed place.' In the old English dialect, the expression "helling potatoes" meant, not to roast

them, but simply to place the potatoes in the ground or in a cellar (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged).

Here's a brief overview of the original words:

## She'ol

**She'ol** was understood, by Jewish writers, as a place of stillness and darkness to which all the dead go, both the righteous and the unrighteous, regardless of the moral choices made in life. In *she'ol*, one is cut off from life and from God.

*"For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun" | Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, ESV*

*"Humans and animals come to the same end—humans die, animals die. We all breathe the same air. So there's really no advantage in being human. None. Everything's smoke. We all end up in the same place—we all came from dust, we all end up as dust." | Ecclesiastes 3:19–20, The Message*

*She'ol* is used throughout the Old Testament and is derived from a word meaning *hollow*, the place under the earth where all previously living things rest in eternal, silent repose, without knowledge, consciousness, or reward.

*"Since she'ol in the Old Testament times referred simply to the abode of the dead and suggested no moral distinctions, the word 'hell,' as understood today, is not a happy translation." – Collier's Encyclopedia (1986, Vol 12, p.28)*

## Hades

In the [Septuagint](#) (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) and throughout the New Testament, the translators used the Greek word **hades** (ᾍδης) in place of the Hebrew word *she'ol*, translating with the Jewish concepts of *she'ol* in mind – a place where there is no activity – rather than the mythology of Greek concepts. This can be shown to be the case as they expressly use *hades* as an equivalent for *she'ol*, both in the Greek translation and also where they are quoting passages from the Old Testament (Hebrew text). One example appears below comparing [Psalm 16:10](#) with [Acts 2:27](#) (where the former is being quoted by Peter the Apostle):

*“For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” – [Psalm 16:10, ESV](#)*

*“For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.” – [Acts 2:27, ESV](#)*

With one exception, mentioned further below, the word *hades*, in all appearances in the New Testament has little, if any, connection to afterlife rewards or punishments.

The best equivalent understanding, which most modern translations use is *‘the grave’*. The context of the verses in which this word is used support the Jewish understanding of *she'ol* as a place of silence and inactivity to which all those who die are consigned.

The exception, as noted above, is Luke’s parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31), in which the rich man finds himself, after death, in *hades*, and “in anguish in this flame”, while in contrast the angels take Lazarus to “the bosom of Abraham”, described as a state of comfort.

A parable is a type of analogy – a succinct, didactic story written in prose or verse, designed to illustrate one or more

instructive lessons or principles, and is never intended to be interpreted literally. Additionally, it would be problematic for an entire theology to be built around one specifically non-literal section of scripture; or even from several parables put together. *“Parables should never be used as sources of doctrine, but rather we take doctrine as a norm for interpreting the parables”* (Tertullian).

This passage, in my opinion, therefore shouldn't be considered to be literally describing aspects of an afterlife, including hell: that is, a place of eternal fiery torment *because this is not what scripture teaches elsewhere* Nevertheless, it is certainly an fascinating passage, intended to illustrate some lesson or principle and therefore requires an interpretation of some sort.

## **Gehenna**

Another Greek word that has been translated as *hell* in some translations is 'Gehenna'. It appears twelve times in the New Testament and is actually a Greek compound, derived from the Hebrew words *ge* and *hinnom* or the “valley of Hinnom”; a proper name which literally means valley of the son of Hinnom. Gehenna is actually the word that Jesus uses in the New Testament and [you can read more about what Jesus really said about heaven and hell here](#).

The valley of Hinnom is a deep narrow slice of earth just outside the city of Jerusalem. Also called Tophet, or 'the valley of dead bones', it already had a long and disturbing history by Jesus' time. Firstly, as mentioned earlier in this article, in the early days of Israel's kingdom, it was the place of idolatry and child sacrifice, by burning alive with fire to the pagan god Molech (2 Kings 23:10).

Later it was used as a place where rubbish, filth, and the carcasses of beast and men alike were disposed of. Fires were kept constantly burning to consume the valley's refuse and to



prevent contamination. In the days of Jesus, the highest mark of ignominy that could be inflicted upon a person was a criminal's burial in the fires of Gehenna.

Gehenna is a literal place of perpetual burning; *but it was in Israel, not in a subterranean underworld*. Therefore Jesus' meaning when warning of Gehenna was quite different to what might be understood by *hell* today. The theological implication of Jesus' words is likely this: that the consequences of unrepented sin in our life will lead to the finality of death and, by inference, the complete and utter annihilation of existence.

Just as the fire of Gehenna burned indefinitely, completely obliterating any trace of whatever was cast into it, so is our existence in death, without the salvation that is to be found in Jesus. Extinction of not just of our physical body, but of our life, our soul, our spirit, the very thing that makes us *us*. *All of us*.

Again, the theological implications point to the need for and provision of [a saviour, the hope of the world](#); the very core of the gospel narrative.

The translation of Gehenna to *hell* is actually a mistranslation. More correctly, it should have been transliterated into English (ie it should read 'Gehenna' on every occasion) and left in its proper form for the reader to interpret.

## **Tartarus**

Used in 2 Peter 2:4, this Greek word actually occurs nowhere else in scripture.

*"For if God did not spare messengers having sinned, but having cast [them] down to Tartarus with chains of deepest gloom, delivered [them], having been reserved to judgment..." 2 Peter 2:4, LSV*

Tartarus was considered in Greek mythology to be the great abyss, situated far below *hades* (the grave). Together with the context of this verse, the use of this word suggests a particular and specific meaning. Some kind of *imprisonment* is implied, certainly, but no sense at all of fiery torment or torture. In fact, the verse suggests that judgment (of who and what kind isn't stated) is still yet to come.

Certainly, there are questions raised by these passages – the parable of Lazarus for example. What does it mean? What lesson are we intended to take from it?

And what is Peter referring to in his letter? Who are the messengers He refers to? What was their crime? And why is this Greek word found here, yet used nowhere else in scripture?

It's not my intention to discuss these at any length in this particular article, only to comment that I don't believe these single instances are compelling enough evidence for the doctrine of hell, particularly when compared alongside all of scripture as discussed earlier in this article.

Again, as with Gehenna, *Tartarus* should have been transliterated into English and left in its proper form for the reader to interpret.

## **What I've Concluded**

While scripture certainly has much to say about what happens *after life* and why, it's a markedly different story than perhaps we've been led to believe.

Scripture tells us that we're all bound by mortality, a one-way, downhill journey from cradle to grave, where life – all aspects of *living* – cease. This situation is permanent and final (Genesis 3:19, 2 Samuel 14:14, Psalm 103:15-16, Romans 5:12, Romans 8:20-28).

Death is not just the enemy of life itself, but also thwarts

the purpose for which humanity was created. Even the noblest of men or women soon pass from the world's stage, their personalities and achievements more often than not fading from memory. *"No wisdom of man or rebellion can deliver new life out of death."*

But the perfect human was promised to come, one who would bear the sin of the world and who would wage war against sin and death in his own body (John 1:29). Through his perfect life, his willing sacrifice, his dishonorable and painful death, and his glorious resurrection, all of humanity were promised that rescue would come and that death would be overturned. Jesus was going to build his church and not even the *gates of the grave* would prevail against it (Romans 8:3, Matthew 16:18).

*"He [God] has revealed this grace through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has abolished death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the gospel" | 2 Timothy 1:10, BSB*

The gospel narrative is the story of God, in Jesus, saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose. Those who believe in Jesus will live, even if they die, for Jesus promises that he is not just the light and life of humanity but the resurrection itself (John 11:25, John 3:16).

**The traditional doctrine of hell finds no place in this narrative, nor does it fit the character of a good and gracious God, nor can it actually be found in scripture.**

Instead, the final pages of the Bible close with the great conclusion promised as part of Jesus's reign, once He has put all His enemies under His feet, that the last enemy to be destroyed will be death itself (1 Corinthians 15:26): *"Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their*

**eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more because the previous things have passed away.”**  
(Revelation 21:3-4, CSB)

*“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](#))

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## **In The Shadow Of The Empire**

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Christianity in the first century was a spiritual explosion, fueled by the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the Jewish community, who lived and worshipped largely by themselves, Christians were active evangelists, eager to share the good news about Jesus with all who would listen. They preached Jesus everywhere, not just as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but as Lord, Saviour, and King; over and above Caesar.

Initially planted in the soil of Jerusalem, the gospel message soon spread rapidly beyond Israel; throughout Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the Mediterranean world. In as little as just over 10 years after Jesus' resurrection, Christianity had already reached as far as Rome itself. As Jesus had promised, his disciples were to be his witnesses, even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, Acts 2:41-47).

The area of [Asia Minor](#) was a huge melting pot of ethnicities and also one of the [first areas to flourish with converts to the new religion of Christianity](#). It was also part of the expansive [Roman Empire](#), at the height of its glory, and was therefore subject to Roman law and Roman customs.

Living in the shadow of the Empire would prove a difficult tension for Christians to navigate. No longer [giving allegiance to Caesar](#) as 'Lord of the earth' but instead confessing that this title belonged to Jesus Christ, how were they to behave as people *in the world but not of it*?

As *citizens of heaven*, did the laws of Rome no longer apply to them?

And, as *people of the kingdom*, how were they to live out the values of the kingdom in the society around them? Were they justified in using force to make *the kingdoms of this world the kingdom of the Lord and Christ*?

These are all important questions, not just for those in the first-century church but for every generation of Christians who have come after them.

How should Christians conduct themselves, living in the shadow of the Empire?

## **A Letter From Peter, An Apostle Of Jesus**

# Christ

The importance of the way a Christian behaves so as to be a credible witness for the gospel is a significant principle emphasised throughout the New Testament. It's a [theme picked up by Peter the Apostle](#) in his first letter to the early churches (1 Peter 1-5).

Discouraged by the persecution they were suffering because of their faith, Peter writes to the early churches throughout Asia Minor to encourage them and to provide wisdom and counsel in their response to the pressures around them and in their life of Christian witness.

## Keep Your Conduct Honourable

Firstly, Peter urges them, *keep your conduct honourable*. They are holy people, [called out of darkness](#) into God's marvellous light. Walking in the light means [walking humbly alongside God](#), doing justly and loving kindness. Deceit, malice, hypocrisy, slander, drunkenness, sensual living; these are all fruitless deeds of darkness (Ephesians 5:11) and Peter encourages the church to choose differently, to live exemplary lives in their neighborhoods so that their actions will refute pagan prejudices (1 Peter 2:11-12).

They had been [born again](#), by the living and imperishable Word of God, new creations guarded through faith for a salvation that would one day be revealed to all. Demonstrating lives that paralleled what they preached would witness to the truly supernatural power of the gospel and its ability to effect transformation.

## Respect And Submit To Authority

For the Lord's sake, Christians were to show respect to all people and, particularly, to those in authority. They were to be model citizens, subject to every human institution (1 Peter 2:13). As Jesus the master had made clear during his earthly

*ministry, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.*

Their allegiance to Jesus wasn't an excuse to engage in illegal behaviours, disrespect of their masters, or dishonour of the Emperor or his delegates. *Pay your taxes, submit to the laws of the land, pray for those who have the rule over you.*

They were to treat their service to the Emperor, their master (if they were a slave), and indeed each other as service rendered to the King himself.

The Christian life wouldn't always bring blessing, and the persecution and suffering they were currently experiencing were proof of this reality. Yet Peter encourages them to look to the example of Jesus himself, who demonstrated that the kingdom of heaven advances not through power and might, but through missions of mercy, kindness, and humility and, ultimately, through suffering.

The greatest suffering of all brought about the greatest victory for all (1 Peter 4:13-14).

## **Love Earnestly And Do Good**

They were to love each other earnestly. This was the defining mark of those who belonged to the King and it was how the world was to know they were his disciples.

Given to hospitality, they were to love with open hearts and generous lives. They were to live bright and unafraid: remembering that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. They were to entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while continuing to doing good to all and especially to those of the household of faith (1 Peter 1:22, Galatians 6:10). *Love and do good to others just as Jesus has loved you. By this, all people will know you are his disciples.*

Early Christianity found particular expression through philanthropy; care for the poor, widows, and orphans, for those brethren who had been imprisoned or condemned, and particularly for brethren, who due to poverty, could not afford an honourable burial. The early church would often provide services for such persons, believing care in death as well as life was an active expression of love. The early Christian insistence on caring for those *made in the image of God* transformed the ancient world.

## **In The World But Not Of It**

*“The Christian ideal is not freedom from work, but strength to do it; not freedom from temptation, but power to overcome it; not freedom from suffering, but joy in an abiding sense of the Father’s love; not absence from the world, but grace to make the world better for our presence; not holy lives driven from the world, and living apart from it, but holy lives spent in the world and leavening it.” – Ellicott’s Commentary For English Readers.*

Like our early Christian brethren, we too continue to live in the shadow of the Empire. We too must wrestle with issues of allegiance, to show submission to those institutions and ordinances which have authority over us, yet not be conformed to this world in the process.

We may think this requires us to limit our interaction with the people around us or remove ourselves ‘from the world’, but this isn’t what scripture is concerned with. It’s the ruler of this world who is our enemy, not those who are enslaved to him; those who, like us, have also been made in the image of God. They, too, desperately need the presence of Jesus in their lives, whether they know it or not and our Christian witness in this current world is vitally important.

Jesus’ prayer for his disciples was not that God would take



them out of the world but that He would protect them from the evil one. We must not be conformed to the image of the ruler of this world, nor choose his way, a path that only leads back to darkness (John 12:31, 1 John 1:5-7). Jesus prayed for the protection of his followers, knowing we are left in this world for a specific purpose; to witness to the power of his saving name. *"You are the salt of the earth,"* he said, *"you are the light of the world"*.

Our commission is to live and work, to love and forgive, to mourn, trust, despair and hope [alongside and together with](#) our unbelieving neighbours and friends, all the while telling of the faithfulness of a good God and the hope found in the gospel message.

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.

How we conduct ourselves, as we live in the shadow of the Empire, is still just as relevant and important today as it was for our first-century brethren.

As Christians, we're now citizens of a spiritual city whose builder and maker is God, people of a heavenly kingdom, living out the values and ideals of [that kingdom](#) in this earthly life.

Yet we're also still literal citizens of the countries we live in. We still retain all the privileges that citizenship affords, together with the responsibilities it holds. *Because* we have given our primary allegiance to Jesus and, for the Lord's sake, we're to continue to submit to the laws and ordinances of the countries in which we live.

Christians have a greater not lesser responsibility to do good and model appropriate citizenship. We don't get a leave pass to flout the regulations and laws passed by those in authority, just because we're 'not of this world.' *"It is*

*God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules." (1 Peter 2:13-17)*

Yet, there must be a disclaimer at this point. We also have a responsibility – a greater responsibility, it can be argued – to model the values of the [kingdom of heaven](#). This responsibility often highlights issues of injustice, prejudice or inequality which may exist both within the church and without, issues to which God is adamantly opposed and therefore we also should be opposed.

The Atlantic slave trade, which operated between the 15th and 19th centuries, might never have been abolished, had it not been for the public agitation of those who spoke vocally against a legally sanctioned practice and campaigned tirelessly for its elimination.

Two distinct laws passed in Nazi Germany provided the legal framework for the systematic persecution and resulting genocide of millions of Jews, demonstrating that sometimes doing what is lawful isn't the same as doing what is right.

And in our own country of Australia between 1910 and 1970, at least 100,000 Aboriginal children were forcibly removed – stolen – from their parents and families as a result of various government policies, leaving a legacy of loss and trauma that persists today. The pain inflicted on an entire people through separation and forced assimilation was enabled by governmental law, regardless of the reality that it was morally repugnant to do so.

*As Christians, the law cannot be our ultimate moral guide. Slavery was lawful. The holocaust was legal. Segregation and apartheid were legally sanctioned. Many of today's laws are created to protect corporations rather than people. Simply put, the law does not dictate our ethics. God does. | Craig*

[God's values have the final word in our actions](#) and this may mean, at some point, our choices or actions put us in conflict with the culture around us or the laws of the country in which we live. *We submit, until, for conscience sake, we can no longer submit* (Acts 5:29, Exodus 1:7).

## **The Covid-19 Pandemic**

For Christians, times of trouble are opportunities to test and prove our own conviction; that there is One God who rules over all things and that we remain confident that He continues to do so, even through trouble and difficulty ([Psalm 103:19](#), [Daniel 2:21](#), [Ephesians 4:6](#)).

While the early Christians faced very different times of trouble than we do today, comparable only perhaps by how we choose to respond, our faithful response is no less necessary than theirs.

The ongoing crisis of Covid-19 is a troubling and anxious time. The most recent reports regarding the virus are particularly concerning, causing fear for many people, especially the elderly and vulnerable in our communities. Whilst we shouldn't be ambivalent about what's going on around the globe, we also need to be measured in our response and very careful not to be contributing to or escalating the level of panic that people may be experiencing.

It's extremely disturbing that Christians would contribute to misinformation regarding both the virus and associated treatment options, particularly in the social domain. Many, in reality, are unlikely to be qualified to actually comment from a medical perspective, yet this doesn't seem to prevent them from offering advice, suggestions, criticisms, or conjecture on the subject.

Verified medical information shared in responsible ways is helpful; unfactual, fear-inducing conspiracy theories are not. By all means, discuss the situation with those around you but choose to do so in responsible ways, with a view to banishing exaggerated fear.

Neither is it appropriate for Christians to participate in acts of disrespect or civil disobedience of those in authority, whilst current regulations don't directly contradict God's directives. We ought to instead continue to pray for wisdom and guidance in our own personal choices as well as for those in the difficult situation of accessing risks and making decisions on behalf of our nation.

Christians also have both a responsibility and a privilege to point the world's attention to the One who is still in control of all. We can choose to positively redirect the conversation, to comfort people's hearts and try to settle their fears, whilst still acknowledging the gravity of the current pandemic and assist in supporting practical measures to combat it.

There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God (Romans 13:1). We are to seek their welfare, to speak evil of no one, to respect the government and be law-abiding. If it is possible, as far as it depends on us, we're to live at peace with everyone. (Titus 3:1-2, Jeremiah 29:7, Romans 12:18).

We need to continue to pray, worship and connect in all the ways that are possible to us right now. Most of all, we need to continue to point the people of the world to Jesus, who told his much-loved followers: "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Trust in God and trust in me also" ([John 14:1](#)).

## **Convictions + Conduct**

Our convictions and conduct go hand in hand. What we say and

what we do must show itself to be in agreement.

*“We don’t believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.” | Dallas Willard*

If we believe that God is King of all the earth and remains sovereign still, then we must act in such a way that confirms this truth to the watching world.

We are to be thankful for those in authority and especially at a time like this, those in healthcare, who risk their own lives to treat and save others ([1 Timothy 2:2](#)). We need to remember to pray for them and assist where we can.

We ought to show responsibility in following the direction of the government and officials, acknowledging measured concern for the situation we all find ourselves in and abiding by recommendations for the good of everyone ([1 Peter 2:13](#)). Now, more than ever, is the time to show consideration and restraint and to lead the world by example. It is not the time (or ever!) for Christians to display greed or selfishness but to consider those who are our neighbour and to love them, as ourselves ([Romans 13:8-10](#)).

And, particularly, it is vitally important to consider those who are weak and vulnerable amongst our communities, who have always found a special place in God’s heart ([James 1:27](#); [Psalm 68:5](#)).

*We have opportunity right now, to remind the world of a good, good God, who is actively seeking to overthrow the effects of sin in the world and restore humanity to full relationship with Himself.*

Even here, in times that seem very dark, God is still busy making all things new.

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I first wrote about [the Christian response to the pandemic](#) over a year ago, when things had really started to impact our communities. We've seen a lot happen around the world in that time and, recently, it seemed as if Australia had finally gotten a handle on things and life might be returning to normal.

I confess, I've not personally felt any real sense of fear throughout this situation until very recently, when the various mutant strains became more contagious and seemingly more virulent. The recent restrictions in Sydney give cause for concern and Covid-19 now feels very much on our doorstep. I had to intentionally take time this week to remind myself of my faith, my conviction that God is sovereign still and that the wind and waves still know His name. Through it all, my eyes must remain on Him.

At the same time as this was occurring, three events impacted me personally and I felt compelled to again write about the situation.

One was several shares in one week on social media of what can only be described as 'doomsday' commentaries; fear-inducing and based in theory, not fact.

The second was the illegal, unmasked gathering/protest that occurred in Sydney, which was also shared on social media (whether to criticise or congratulate I couldn't say for sure, although it did appear to me to be in support of the protest).

The third was two different statements from Christian pastors within a denomination stating this: that if you chose to vaccinate, you weren't faithful, and, that if you didn't choose to vaccinate, you weren't faithful. In my opinion, this kind of religious pressure, criticism or coercion about a very personal choice is completely irresponsible and amounts to spiritual abuse, especially from those in a pastoral position.

I was reminded again of the relevance and importance of the Christian faith in our world, to provide hope, comfort, and assistance to those who are struggling, fearful, or angry. And I was reminded of the example left for us in God's Word, which seems to have an answer for every situation, of those in the early church who lived in the shadow of the Empire and navigated the same tensions with faithfulness and steadfast hope. We can learn a lot from them.

**Pictured: Sculpture of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, Emperor of Rome 24 January AD41 – 13 October AD54**