

# The Dark Heart Of Christmas

Christmas is a unique time of year.

Traditionally, it's seen as a season of joy, hope, celebration, and family—a chance for many to unwind and find rest as the year draws to a close.

Yet, for others, the story is different. Christmas can be a lonely and isolating season, marked by fractured relationships, the pain of missing loved ones, or financial pressures that overshadow the festivities. It can feel less like a time of rest and more like a whirlwind of exhaustion and unmet expectations.

For many, Christmas is a complex mix of emotions—hopeful yet heavy, joyful yet sorrowful, warm and welcoming but also marked by loneliness and discouragement. It's a time that holds both the brightest lights and the deepest shadows, depending on where one stands.

It seems to me that all these emotions are deeply rooted in the true Christmas story—a story far removed from the sanitised, child-friendly version we often share. Yes, Christmas is a time of hope and celebration as we mark the birth of Jesus Christ. But it's also a season for introspection and solemnity as we reflect on why Jesus came and the profound purpose of His arrival.

Christians are often accused of being overly focused on [sin](#)—and it's true that we sometimes tend to emphasise sin more than the grace that forgives those sins. But sin, and humanity's separation from God, are central to the Christmas story.

Without sin, there would be no need for redemption or reconciliation with God. Without sin, there would have been no need for Jesus Christ to come “to save his people” (Matthew

1:21). Without sin, Jesus would not have had to die. At the heart of the Christmas narrative lies a profound hopelessness—a darkness that calls us to pause and reflect.

## **Jesus | The Hope Of The World**

Before there was a baby in a manger, there was a crisis in a garden—a catastrophic severing of humanity’s relationship with God. It was a moment that cast a long shadow of darkness over the world and which set the scene for the arrival, many centuries later, of a Saviour. Jesus came as the light that would pierce the darkness, bringing hope and redemption to a world in desperate need of reconciliation with God.

One of my favourite chapters in the Bible is the opening of the Gospel of John. John begins his account of Jesus Christ’s origins with words that echo the first chapter of Genesis. He reflects on the darkness present in the beginning—a world without form and void—and reveals how light entered that darkness. That light, John tells us, is Jesus, through whom God’s unfailing love and faithfulness has come to humanity. It is through him alone that God has been fully revealed to us.

*“Comfort, comfort my people,” the prophet Isaiah would write, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell her that her sad days are gone and her sins are pardoned. Yes, the LORD has punished her twice over for all her sins.” Listen! It’s the voice of someone shouting, “Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God! Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills. Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places. Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. The LORD has spoken!” | Isaiah 40:1-3*

## **It’s Definitely Good News**

*“Keep it positive,” my daughter urged when I mentioned I was writing about the deeper, darker side of Christmas. “Not*

*everything has to be a negative.*” And I do understand her point. Christmas, with its twinkling lights, joyful songs, and festive feasts, is a season meant for happiness and celebration.

Do we really want to turn our thoughts to more solemn, existential realities? Do children really need to understand *why* Jesus came into the world? Some might say it feels like ‘raining on the parade’ or being a bit of a party pooper during such a joyful season.

But I think the answer should be yes.

Reflecting on the deeper meaning of Christmas doesn’t take away from the celebration—it adds depth and significance. The joy and festivities are wonderful, but they become even more meaningful when we understand the “why” behind them: Jesus came into the world because of God’s immense love, to bring light into darkness and offer hope and reconciliation. Christmas is definitely *good news*, but its true significance shines brightest when we understand just how broken things were before it.

For children, this truth doesn’t need to feel heavy or complex. Instead, it can be shared as a simple, hope-filled message—that Jesus is the ultimate gift, given to bring peace, love, and joy to the world. Far from lessening the joy of the season, this understanding can make Christmas even more special.

## **God-With-Us**

Christmas celebrates the gift of grace found in Jesus, a gift that came at a great cost. While the festivities—lights, songs, and feasts—bring joy, they are merely the wrappings around this profound truth: Jesus Christ is the ultimate gift, the hope of the world, fulfilling God’s mission to redeem humanity.

John tells us that the light that was in the beginning, the Word Himself, would step in the very creation He had made in order to save and redeem it. In his human body, the war against sin and death would be waged and won.

His name would be Emmanuel, that is, *God-With-Us*, and he would save us from our sins.

*“What gift of grace is Jesus, my Redeemer,  
There is no more for Heaven now to give,  
He is my joy, my righteousness, and freedom,  
My steadfast love, my deep and boundless peace” | City Alight*

As we celebrate Christmas, we can embrace both the joy and the meaning of the season. The twinkling lights, festive songs, and shared meals remind us of the happiness this time of year brings. But it’s also an opportunity to reflect on the deeper story—the arrival of Jesus, the true light of the world, who stepped into our darkness to bring grace, redemption, and reconciliation.

At its heart, the Christmas story contains both joy and sorrow, loss and restoration, light and darkness. Christmas is about this extraordinary gift—freely given—and a hope that continues to shine brightly today.

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## Loving The Church

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*“You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honour.” | James 3:18, MSG*

Loving the church can be hard.. Frankly, at times, she can seem like a big, fat disappointment.

Infighting. Divisions. The failure of leaders and the apathy of congregants. The assimilation to culture. A preoccupation with prestige and power. Intolerance. Liberality.

Sometimes the church is hard to love.

*“It is clear that the church regularly breaks our hearts, disappoints, and even damages us. Both history and our current headlines reveal a church that can be a deeply flawed, sinful, and unhealthy institution, marred by acts of injustice, corruption, abuse, misogyny, and oppression. The contemporary [American] church is wrecked with bickering and division, celebrity worship and unaccountable leaders, false and shallow teaching, and a Christian industrial complex formed around greed and vanity.” | Tish Harrison, A Church Called Tov*

Negative experiences often lead people to ‘give up on church’. They decide they will ‘follow Jesus’ but reject the church. Their solution: to walk an individual and untroubled path, to become a solitary lighthouse bravely resisting the wild seas alone.

And I get it. I do.

It’s an unsettling reality that many people who’ve left the church and moved away from Christian community have suffered real disappointment and hurt at the hands of the church. For many, their view of the church has been (justifiably) tarnished by their negative experiences within it.

People can be very wounded by the church, unfortunately, because it’s made up of imperfect people who often mess up.

But here’s the rub.

We are the church.

All of us, together, collectively, communally.

There's not *ourselves* and then, over there, *the church*. There's not *me*, in my own personal little faith bubble, and then, over there, the raging, incompetent screw-up of a *church* that I, personally, have no connection to (and neither do I want to).

There aren't *some Christians* who just love doing church and other Christians who, well, it's just *really not their thing*.

'An individual Christian does not a church make.'

## **We are the church**

Christianity is, by definition, collective, and communal. There is no church, without all of us.

Too often we separate out Jesus and 'the church' in our minds as if they're two different identities. We say we love Jesus but we're less enthusiastic about his people.

But the church is Jesus' body. Loving Jesus means loving the church too. It's part of him and he's part of it. He died for the church, for his people, and it's in his death and resurrection that we are brought together in community.

Jesus said that he would build his church, purchased with his own blood, and of which he is the chief cornerstone (Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:28, Ephesians 2:20). His language is organic, inclusive, and corporate. He is in the house-building business and we are each his individual stones, selected and fitted together, according to his good pleasure (1 Peter 2:5).

We therefore can't say we love Jesus but we hate his people/body... it's simply incongruous.

Loving the church isn't an optional extra to our life of

faith. It's an intrinsic part of it, with all its joy, pain, and disappointment. She is us and we are her.

### **3 Reasons To Love The Church:**

#### **1. Because Jesus Asked Us To (And Because He Loves Her)**

Jesus brings real people, diverse and divided in life, into common union 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 around the Passover table, over the first Christian communion, and right before Jesus was betrayed, sentenced to death, and then crucified, that he gives his disciples a new commandment to live by once he is gone.

*"...love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." | John 13:34-35, ESV*

By loving one another as he has loved us, all the world will know that we 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.

Love isn't always easy, but it is the more excellent way. And it's the way that Jesus has asked us to take.

First, we were loved, now we love.

Sure, we will have to work at it at times (and 1 Corinthians 13 is full of pastoral advice on how to go about this) but, quite simply, loving each other – loving the church – is what Jesus has asked us to do.

He loves her and he wants us to love her too.

## **2. Because The Church Is The Hope Of The World (Despite Her Flaws)**

Around that communion table, Jesus could see the seeds of the church – his church – that was soon to be born. His small band of followers represented the expansive and diverse family that God would build through him, for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

*“You are my ambassadors”,* Jesus had told them, *“and behold, I am with you, even until the end of time.”* (Matthew 28:20).

From the dark soil of an empty tomb, the seeds of Jesus’ church sprang forth, bringing new life and hope.

The church – full of saved sinners – is the place that tells of God’s goodness and faithfulness, and His enduring love for humanity.

The church is the place that speaks hope, shining the light of the gospel into a dark world.

The church is the place where broken and damaged people find healing and redemption, basking in the warmth of God’s radical grace.

The church is the heart of God’s kingdom mission, spilling over into the world and showing that a different way is possible: life that gives life, in abundance.

We love the church because, despite her flaws, she is the hope of the world, the place where people finally come home.

## **3. Because We Were Made For God’s Community**

We were made for community and we grow and are nurtured in community. (Yes, we are wounded in community but it’s also in community that we heal. *“Healing might not come from the community where the wounding took place, but community is needed for healing nonetheless.”* | Rich Villodas)



It was in the very beginning that God said, ‘let us make humanity in our image and after our likeness.’ To be with God and to be like God, together: this is what we were made for and the purpose of human existence. This is why we all feel that deep longing to belong, why we continually search for meaning in the mundane. God has placed eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

We aren’t really ‘Christian’ in its fullest sense unless we’re doing life together within the God-community we were created for. Otherwise, we’re just like a random toe or finger, disconnected from a body and essentially useless (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) (in this analogy, that is; please don’t read that to be saying ‘you are useless’!).

The Apostle Paul has this to say about the body of Christ: “*A body is made up of many parts, and each of them has its own use. That’s how it is with us. There are many of us, but we each are part of the body of Christ, as well as part of one another.*” (Romans 12:4-5, CEV)

Each one of us, brought together, makes up the body and, as Ephesians 5:29 comments, “None of us hate our own bodies. We provide for them and take good care of them, just as Christ does for the church.”

This is what we were made for! Relationship with God and relationship with His people. Church people are kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that are “connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

We love the church because she is the community of God.

## **Finally...**

Sometimes the church can feel hard to love. Sometimes we rub up against people who don’t exactly show Jesus as we think he ought to be seen. *Sometimes we are those people.*

But for those who have been disillusioned by the church, please know that she is full of people who really are the real deal; people who love Jesus, love his people, and are working every day in his kingdom mission with sincerity and authenticity. I know, because I've met them!

So, don't give up hope in the church, in finding your place in it, and in loving her, despite her flaws.

She is us.

We are the church.

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## **In Him Was Life**

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

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## **Keeping The Faith**

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

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# Judging // Discerning

It seems to me that it has become increasingly difficult to speak into many issues or situations that the church faces today; not because the Bible is silent, not because the church doesn't have or hasn't held a historical position on a matter, and not because we, as Christians, don't know *what we ought to be doing*. Rather, we are feeling pressed into silence, in many instances, simply on the basis of one little verse found at the beginning of Matthew 7; "*Judge not, that you be not judged*".

This verse, plucked from Matthew's gospel, thrown around *ad voluntatem* by Christians and non-Christians alike, and often applied wildly out of context, is causing widespread paralysis for many Christians and indeed the church, preventing us from being able to affirm and proclaim the reality that Christian life calls us to.

Afraid of being labeled 'judgy', 'divisive', or 'self-righteous', we're clamming up about things we really should be vocal about, choosing silence over sincerity. We're focused on preaching love and acceptance (both good things, by the way), but we're failing to qualify how and what that looks like in a Christian context.

Not only does there seem to be a growing degree of confusion about the difference between '*judging*', particularly in the context of Matthew 7, and '*discerning*' for the individual Christian, there also seems to be some confusion about the church's responsibility and role in all this.

Perhaps embarrassed by our failures and our unchristian treatment of both believers and unbelievers in the past, we're now collectively overcompensating by saying nothing at all, reducing the church's critical witness of the name of Jesus, in many instances, to a 'cloud with no rain'.

Many times, the church actually looks no different on the inside to the way people are living on the outside, as if coming to Christ *changed nothing at all*.

## The Christian Ideal

Christians are called to a life of holiness, of renewal and transformation; becoming part of the new creation found in Christ. Christians are those who have accepted the call out of the dominion of darkness, with all its pointless chaos and unfruitful works of darkness, into kingdom life; and the acknowledgment that living God's way, according to His plan and purposes for humanity, is good for us and glorifying to Him.

*"You can't read the New Testament without seeing the call to holiness in the Christian life. But that holiness is a work of God's grace as the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to live a life pleasing to God. New Testament holiness is a joyous privilege not a heavy burden and duty. New Testament holiness enhances life, it never diminishes it." | Lance Ralston*

God's way is the benchmark for Christian living, the way we should aspire to, the truth we ought to affirm. It's referred to often in scripture as *walking in the light, walking with God, or walking in the way* and I talk more about this in my article ['Walking With God'](#).

The caveat to this is, of course, that we are *not there yet*. The Christian life is a journey, not an instant transformation. *We have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved*. Sanctification, the 'being saved' part, means we are all a constant work in progress, being renewed and conformed daily into the image of Christ.

What this means, in real terms, is that we will still mess up, sometimes in big ways. These lapses in our Christian walk are

stumbles off the path leading us home, deviations from the good way that God has intended for us to live.

While these failures can often be hard to move past, it's important to recognise that they don't need to define us, at least not in a negative way.

We are not that terrible decision we made five years ago, five months ago, or five days ago. We are more than simply the sum of our mistakes. I talk more about this in my article ['Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow'](#).

The joy of Christian life is that sin no longer has the same hold over us as before. We belong to Jesus and his blood cleanses us from all sin. In him, we can find forgiveness and find it many times over.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul the Apostle wants us to comprehend the reality that we are no longer in this battle on our own. He says, *"May you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully."* (Ephesians 3:18, NLT). God is with us in this fight, empowering us daily through His Spirit and washing us clean in the blood of the lamb.

What may seem impossible to us is made possible by the love of Christ.

## **Objective Truth**

It feels difficult to write this article without coming off as intolerant, self-righteous, or bigoted. Any time one states a definite opinion on a matter as if that position is the right one, one risks sounding dogmatic and judgmental and I acknowledge it may be no different in this case.

I think our post-modern society has further exaggerated this

reality. Our 21st-century culture posits the idea that truth is not absolute and universal (as was once accepted), but rather that our truth *is* truth, even though that truth may be merely subjective and based on or influenced by our own personal feelings, tastes, or opinions.

Conversely, our neighbour's truth, based on or influenced by their personal feelings, tastes, or opinions is also just as true, irrespective of the reality that our two truths may be diametrically opposed to one another.

It's often no longer acceptable to hold to and defend certain views as anything more than being subjectively true, particularly in religious or moral matters.

The Bible cuts through this subjective narrative and states that truth is objective, rooted in the person and character of God Himself. Whatever we hold to be true to the Christian faith has its roots in God (or should, at least), who has been revealed to us in His Word, and which is sufficient to inform our Christian way of life and ethics.

*"Every scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice."* (2 Timothy 3:16, DR). This is what is meant by *sola scriptura* – that the Bible is the sole infallible source of authority for Christian faith and practice.

As Christians, we believe that biblical truth is not *our* truth and therefore merely subjective, it is God's truth. We hold to the reality that God's truth was demonstrated in Jesus for all humanity to see; and we acknowledge his supremacy and authority over our lives. In doing so we affirm that living God's way is right and true and good.

The question is, what do we do, individually and collectively, when Christian life doesn't look as it should, where there is disregard or apathy toward living God's way, or where it seems that sin is being trivialised, tolerated, or overlooked?

What does the gospel of Matthew mean when it says 'judge not'? Is an individual's responsibility different from that of the collective body, the church? Is it being too judgey to talk about sin?

And how does the church protect the name of Jesus, displaying the glory of God to the nations, in practice?

## **Judging Or Discerning?**

### **Discerning**

I want to make the distinction between discerning and proclaiming what *God's way* is, and judging someone's eternal reality.

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. As individuals and collectively, as the church, it is our mandate to preach God's good news to the world and to live as if we believe it to be true.

Paul the Apostle puts it this way: *"Live no longer as the Gentiles do...for they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against Him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasures and eagerly practice every kind of impurity...Put on your new nature, created to be like God-truly righteous and holy."* (Ephesians 4:17-24, NLT)

He goes on to give several examples of what '*being like God looks like*': no longer lying, no longer using foul language, no longer stealing, no longer engaging in sexual immorality, or being selfish or greedy (amongst other things). He states, '*with the Lord's authority*' (v17), that those things are not of God, are not life-giving, and ought not to be pursued by a

person professing to be a Christian.

Discerning God's way of living ('*carefully determining what pleases the Lord*' (Ephesians 5:10)), which is intended to be life-giving and good for humanity, is a vitally important element of our Christian discipleship, and, collectively, as a witness to the watching world.

Moral truth exists, vested in the person and character of God Himself, and Christians ought to be preaching and pursuing it with all their hearts, both individually and collectively. To do otherwise is to reject the authority and supremacy of God over our lives.

## **Judging**

Yet, we don't get it right a lot of the time. Sin no longer has the same hold over us as before, but we still give it plenty of opportunities to gain a foothold in our life.

And too often, we, as individuals, look sideways at our Christian family and privately (or publicly) make bold pronouncements about their *eternal salvation* based on past failures or current struggles. We judge them harshly and with finality in the secret recesses of our hearts, by standards that we would buckle under ourselves.

We say to ourselves, 'they *may* have found forgiveness with God (though we highly doubt it) but they will never find forgiveness with us or in our church, no matter their repentant heart or confession of failure'.

Matthew warns us about taking such a harsh position of judgment against our Christian brothers and sisters, for with the same inflexible judgment we exact we risk being judged ourselves. If we truly believe and accept the grace God has shown to us, this same grace needed to be demonstrated by a life oriented towards forgiveness to others. I talk more about the implementation of grace in my article '[The White Flag Of](#)



[Grace](#) and the necessity of forgiveness in my article ['Forgiveness Is A Tough Gig'](#).

We need to hold in careful tension the critical reality of the eternal consequences of not living God's way, of choosing a way that is not life-giving, resolutely naming sin and the need for repentance, alongside the reality that Christians still mess up and that forgiveness is always possible with God and should be practiced between individuals and within the church.

(In saying that, there are often consequences that flow from our actions which may negatively impact our life moving forward, particularly in relation to our ministry or relationships in the church. These consequences are often complex, requiring wise pastoral care and support to work through.)

We are not to judge one another's *eternal salvation* based on past or present struggles but neither are we to overlook our calling to holiness and the orienting of our lives toward God.

## **What Is The Church's Responsibility?**

The Apostle Paul dealt with some real doozy situations in his letters. Take, for example, the situation in the church in Corinth; a case of sexual immorality not even heard of among 'pagans' (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). A believer in the church was boldly and proudly 'living in sin' with his stepmother, or, as some translations have it, his father's wife.

Paul is horrified at such a situation and tells the church that, collectively, they ought to be in mourning in sorrow and shame. Such things ought not to be even named among the people of God, let alone practiced (Ephesians 5:3).

The letter to the Corinthians is a very confronting letter, in many respects. Paul leaves no room for doubt as to what he thinks about the situation and what the church must do. He

(shockingly) tells them that they must remove the man from their fellowship. *"You must call a meeting of the church. I will be present with you in spirit, and so will the power of our Lord Jesus. Then you must throw this man out and hand him over to Satan so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns."*

He continues, *"In my other letter, I told you not to have anything to do with immoral people. But **I wasn't talking about the people of this world.** You would have to leave this world to get away from everyone who is immoral or greedy or who cheats or worships idols. I was talking about **your own people** who are immoral or greedy or worship idols or curse others or get drunk or cheat. **Don't even eat with them!** Why should I judge outsiders? **Aren't we supposed to judge only church members?** God judges everyone else. The Scriptures say, "Chase away any of your own people who are evil." (1 Corinthians 5:4-9)*

It's very clear, the church is not to sit in judgment of the world, that's God's prerogative. But we are to collectively judge the conduct and witness of the church to which we belong (essentially, the whole body is responsible for judging the whole body) and leave no space for evil to grow, unchecked. For those Christians who are unrepentant and proudly indulging in sin, the church isn't even to eat with such people (1 Corinthians 5:11).

(It's important to note here that one church is not at liberty to sit in judgment of another. A local church has oversight over its own members, not over another church. The authority to remove a lampstand of Jesus or determine whether a lampstand should be removed from its place of influence belongs to the King alone (Revelation 2:5). No person or group should dare presume such authority over Jesus' church and its local expressions.)

Yet the church can sometimes be too hasty in pronouncing

judgment. Paul clearly differentiates in other places in scripture between those Christians who are *indulging in sin* (1 Corinthians 5:9) and those who find themselves *caught in transgression* (Galatians 6:1). His pastoral advice regarding the response to each is different, despite both being issues of 'sin'. An important element of church discipline is to sensitively and accurately establish the nature of a situation, before deciding how the church ought to proceed.

## **Restoring**

First and foremost, we are ambassadors of the great ministry of reconciliation; of pointing to the work of Christ, and our great need for forgiveness and reconciliation to God.

We are part of God's great mission of restoration and redemption and this reality should be at the forefront of any response to sin in the church.

The church has a responsibility to make sure that we are accurately representing Jesus to the world; preaching the necessary call to holiness of the Christian life whilst acknowledging we are not yet made perfect and we still mess up.

We ought to seek first, on every occasion and at every opportunity, to restore a person who has *wandered away from truth*. We pray for them and with them, we remind them of the realities of the gospel, of the forgiveness found in Jesus, and of the healing warmth of God's light.

We love them, we accept their struggle with sin as something common to us all, and yet we encourage them not to shrink back from Christ in shame but rather to turn to him anew in humble confession and repentance.

One of the most powerful and eternally significant things a church can do is to rescue one who has fallen into sin. "*My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away*

*from the truth and is brought back, you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back from wandering will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.” (James 5:19-20)*

Discipleship within the local church means that each member acknowledges they are part of the body, a body that collectively has the authority to declare who belongs to Jesus and the responsibility of teaching, caring for, correcting, loving, and disciplining its members.

The church, therefore, *affirms a person’s profession of faith in Jesus and gives oversight to that individual’s discipleship*, and, in turn, the individual *submits his or her discipleship to the care and oversight of the church and commits themselves in service to the building up of the church*. It’s a symbiotic-esque relationship referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 as ‘*one another-ing*’.

## **Protecting**

Unfortunately, as the case in the church at Corinth demonstrates, there will be some who are completely unrepentant, who ‘*make a practice of sinning*’ (1 John 5:18), and who reject the pursuit of holiness that Christians are called to. These people “*are ungodly men and women, saying that God’s marvellous grace allows us to live immoral lives. The condemnation of such people was recorded long ago, for they deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*” (Jude 1:4)

An individual Christian is not responsible for overseeing another Christian’s membership in the body of Christ, but the church, made up of all its members is. It’s how the church protects the name of Jesus.

*“Church discipline, then, is fundamentally about love. The Lord disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:6). The same is true for his church. Love in the Bible is holy. It makes demands. It yields obedience. It doesn’t delight in evil but*

*rejoices in the truth.” (1 Corinthians 13:6) | Jonathan Leeman*

*“But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good – crucified. Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” | Galatians 5:22-25 MSG*

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## **Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow**

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

I don’t know about you but sometimes I feel bad for not *knowing then what I know now.*

Bad, as in, I wish I’d *known better*, I wish I had *known more*,

I wish I had *known sooner* or *responded better* or *chosen differently*.

But here's the thing. We only wish this *because* of what we know now. Which is to say, in all the time that's passed from *then* until *now*, we've learned something, we've grown, we've become more equipped, less reactive, we can make better choices *only because* of what we've experienced in the past, both good and bad.

This is the value of life experience, it's what we often call the beauty of hindsight; those lessons from life that can be seen today *only because* they've been learned from what has been experienced in the past. In order to gain the wisdom needed for our tomorrow, we had to learn from experiences, both positive and negative, in our yesterday.

## **If I'm Honest...**

There are things in my life that I look back on and still blush over. There are things said and unsaid in my past that still cause me regret when I recall them today. There's definitely a sense, at times, that if only I could go back and do *that thing* over, things would be different.

But do you know what? Things probably wouldn't be any different. Because that was *then* and *this is now*. I'm not the same person I was yesterday or the day before that. Life is changing me.

I may face a similar situation in the future and have learned enough from the past in order to do things differently. I perhaps wouldn't make the same choices or mistakes today as I did then, but only because those choices in the past *taught me differently* and *made me different*.

But I can't change the past, no matter how much I wish I could. I can't take today's insights into yesterday's mistakes, I can only use today's insights to grow tomorrow's

wisdom.

And perhaps I shouldn't wish to change the past. Maybe I should be learning to make peace with it. Maybe I should be more thankful for yesterday's mistakes, as strange as that seems, because of the valuable lessons I learned, not just about life but also about myself.

We often look back on our past, our mistakes, or our decisions and hate ourselves for them. And while I'm not for a second suggesting we glory in sin or our mistakes (Romans 6:2), these things can nevertheless be seen from a different perspective – as powerful lessons from life – and what we learn from them can be used for good in the future. We can take the pain or regret or shame that spills over from the past and use it to empower us to do better today, to choose more wisely, and love more deeply.

We do not need to be only the sum of all our mistakes or regrets, we can be so much more than that.

## **Cancel Culture < Grace**

I've been thinking a lot about cancel culture and how it's the antithesis of grace. The current climate seems so quick to cancel others, on account of one mistake, one indiscretion, one ill-formed thought spoken out loud, one ugly sentence spoken out of the season. Yes, those things are disappointing when they happen, and sin is still sin. We ought not to shy away from calling out sin and calling each other to repentance, reparation, and renewal.

But in others, and, specifically in the light of this article, in ourselves, our mistakes only become who we are when we embrace and celebrate them. When we show remorse, or regret, when we apologise and repent, and commit to doing better in the future, our mistakes become valuable building blocks to a better version of ourselves. Grace towards ourselves or others

becomes the fertile ground for spiritual renovation and renewal. It is in our weakness that God's power is perfected (2 Corinthians 12:9).

We cannot condemn sin or mistakes or the things in our past that we're ashamed of without also offering ourselves the much-needed balm of grace that dispenses kindness, favour, advocacy, and forgiveness. We hold both in tension; the disappointment of our (or life's) failures with thankfulness for what we learned from these experiences; the grief of sin that stains alongside the healing embrace of grace that cleanses.

I can recall some unthoughtful words I once spoke about someone, a criticism of sorts I suppose. I think about these words often, actually, and still deeply regret speaking them. While I can give all sorts of reasons as to why I said them and argue that *my* underlying feelings were justified, I still wish I hadn't said them. They weren't particularly kind or graceful and, mostly, I can look back now and see that, in that moment, I was a terrible witness for Christ. The way I spoke and acted was so detrimental as an example of discipleship to others and was deeply hurtful to another person.

Although I felt I was on the receiving end of critical words, instead of taking a beat, thinking the situation through, and responding with grace, I simply responded in kind. There were a million different ways I could have probably responded but the reality is, at that moment, I didn't. Of course I wish I could do it differently now *but I can't*. I can only apologise (and I have done so), learn from this mistake, and use it as wisdom for tomorrow.

I learned four valuable lessons from that experience, which I have endeavoured to implement today.



## **Words Matter**

Words matter, even when said in the heat of the moment or when we believe our feelings are justified. There's a way to speak truth but do so in love, in a way that isn't harmful or wounding. Just because we're upset, or feel maligned, criticised, or challenged doesn't mean that the way we speak doesn't matter.

I think we have all been taught to avoid having difficult conversations as a way of securing some kind of false peace. What we really should have been taught is how to have civil conversations with those very different from us, in a way that communicates our feelings or opinions well, without wounding the other.

I learned that words matter. And that I needed to guard my heart for it's out of the heart that the mouth speaks (Proverbs 4:23, Luke 6:45).

The second thing I learned flowed from this:

## **I Belong To Jesus**

I was painfully unaware of just how important other people's opinions and validation were to me. I had long considered myself to be a bit of an island, quite secure in my own company, likably sociable when necessary, and generally unaffected by others' criticisms. But this piece of stray criticism, directed at me in a time of deep upheaval in my personal life, struck like a barb in my soul. I learned at that moment just how affected I actually was by what other people thought of me and how little security I was actually placing in Jesus's opinion of me. It came as a shock and it really rattled me.

I had to seriously rethink where I was getting my validation from. I had to reevaluate what was guarding my heart. Was my validation placed in Jesus, the rock of the ages, or did I

have it resting on the unpredictable, shifting sands of popular opinion? Was I living in the freedom of Christ or stifling under the suffocating need to please people?

I needed to get more intimate with Jesus and this was an invaluable lesson to learn.

## **There Are Consequences**

Every choice, every decision, and every failure has consequences. Sometimes we or others do or say things that have irrevocable consequences in our life. And sometimes those consequences are painful and hard to live with. Other times, those consequences prove to be God moments, times when our focus was redirected or the direction of our life shifted, for good. Sometimes, they're both.

Sometimes that regretful indiscretion spurs a greater commitment to faithfulness in our relationship. Sometimes that reduced income refocuses us on what we really need in life. Sometimes that failed leader redirects our gaze towards the One we should really be following. Sometimes that disappointing verbal exchange convicts us to do better with our words. Sometimes that closed-door signals a new beginning.

And in every choice, in every consequence, Jesus is with us in it all. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, he is the same. He's been with us in our worst moments – yesterday's regrets, he's with us in our current circumstances of fear, doubt, growth, and joy – today's insights, and he'll be with us in our greatest triumphs – tomorrow's wisdom.

## **Don't Beat Yourself Up About The Past**

Choices have consequences and sometimes those consequences are negative, with reverberations that echo down through our and others' lives. You only need to look at the life of King David to realise that one poor decision can cause ripples of pain and fracture in individuals and families for generations.

Where we can, we ought to make reparation and we should, rightly, regret our part in consequences that cause pain or injury to others.

But I think we also need to draw a line in the sand. We need to learn to forgive ourselves, to afford ourselves the same kind of grace that God so willingly offers to those who repent. We are not that terrible decision we made five years ago, five months ago, or five days ago. We don't have to stay in that place or be that person.

Jesus' sin-covering sacrifice means that we get to start each day new, means that we are washed clean and made perfect in his righteousness and that, although we are weak and often stumble, God is committed to completing His good work in us (Philippians 1:6). Jesus died for us, not because we weren't at fault but precisely because we were, sinners completely unable to save ourselves. God is not surprised by our weakness or our failure; it was part of the equation in the sending of His Son.

*"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." | 2 Corinthians 4:16, ESV*

*We are like clay jars in which this treasure is stored. The real power comes from God and not from us. We often suffer, but we are never crushed. Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up. In times of trouble, God is with us, and when we are knocked down, we get up again. We face death every day because of Jesus. Our bodies show what his death was like, so his life can also be seen in us. This means that death is working in us, but life is working in you." | 2 Corinthians 4:7-8 CEB*

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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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# The Faith | Works 'Conundrum'

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

## Acceptance By Grace Through Faith Alone

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

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

*"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince*

*of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.” – Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV*

## **Salvation Isn't Earned**

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

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

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

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

# Justified By Deeds And Not By Faith Alone

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

Paul wrote his [letter to the Galatians](#) addressing the growing idea at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did **plus** additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken, that we are made "right with God by **what we do**". This is performance-based Christianity and Paul reaffirmed to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

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

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

James starts his letter by asking an important question:

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

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

## **Works Are Essential Evidence Our Faith Is Real**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

## What Does Living Faith Look Like?

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.*

*Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives." – Galatians 5:22-25, MSG*

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

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# Leaving

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

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

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

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

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

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

## Questions + Answers

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

I was possessed with an uncomfortable sensation that something didn't add up, that what I had been told no longer carried

sufficient weight or authority. It was an inconsistency I could not overlook nor satisfactorily explain, an unexpected bump in an otherwise smooth spiritual life.

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

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

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

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

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

## Principles + Applications

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

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

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

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

Finally, head coverings were required for a church meeting of business, which was neither an act of worship nor a church service of any kind. The question took shape in my mind and

refused to be dismissed – why?

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

Did we have it all completely wrong?

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

Just one question. One little spark.

## **Piles Upon Piles**

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

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

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

Why didn’t more of us recycle?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yearly examinations to determine biblical knowledge were undertaken each year by Sunday School students. The questions were often difficult and, it seemed, purposely disorientating. The premise seemed clear: the more you knew, the more spiritual you were and the closer to God you got. We all received prizes at an end-of-year award ceremony, for what exactly I'm still not really sure, but 'first in exam' and 'first in class' always got a mention and an additional prize.

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

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

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

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

## **The Spark Ignites**

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

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

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

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

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

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



into a space that could not change.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Where did I belong?*

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

I find that I belong nowhere and everywhere. That a leaving is

also a beginning. And that, when Jesus said *you will know the truth and the truth will set you free*, he really meant it.

I have not been ex-communicated by God.

## Still Asking Why

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

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

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

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

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

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

*below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

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

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

The Christian life is not an academic exercise.

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

The question then becomes not *what do I know but who am I being?* Are our lives demonstrating the fruit of a walk guided by the Spirit; *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?* Jesus told us *by their fruit you will recognise them;* that these are the markers that will distinguish a true follower from one who is a follower in name only.

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

And how can we grow, make mistakes, experience grace, or

mature in our discipleship if we cannot ask questions and, if needed readjust, no matter how uncomfortable?

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

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

In the end, leaving was inevitable.

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

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

No part of this article is intended to be received as

criticism of any one individual, or offensive or divisive in nature.