

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

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, 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.

Religion // Cruciformity

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

Today, we would probably summarise religion as *a unifying*

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

The word religion, from the Latin *religiō*, meaning 'to bind', is a word which in the ancient and medieval world was used to refer to *individual virtue of worship; respect for what was sacred, and a reverence for the divine.* It described an attitude of *being* rather than a *creedal position* and it related to the *individual* rather than the *collective*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While being a Christian is certainly communal, and while Christians tend to believe mostly all the same fundamental creeds, and while the creeds and practices of Christianity can

be taught and preached and are, in many ways, intrinsically invaluable to religion, *true religion is the individual and deeply personal matter of an individual's binding to the person of Christ.*

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

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

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

Counterfeit Religion

Paul the Apostle wrote his letter to the Galatians addressing an idea that had taken root at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did plus additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken, that we are made "*right with God by what we do*".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Journey To Cruciformity

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

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

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

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

Jesus taught his disciples that following him meant that one had to be willing to *“pick up their cross daily”* (Luke 9:23;

14:27). Cruciformity is, in essence, *conformity to the cross*; a life that is shaped by the narrative of the cross.

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

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

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

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

"A person who lives by the indwelling life of Christ through the Holy Spirit is a person who is under Law. But it is not the Law of Moses. Nor is it a Law that some preacher created from his own personal standards. No, the Law I'm referring to is 'the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:3). This Law is like the law of gravity; it's a constant force or power. You and I have an indwelling Lord. The Law of God has been written on our hearts because Jesus Christ lives within us by his Spirit. This is the promise of the new covenant. Spiritual people (religious people)(italics, ours)

are those who live by the Lord's life that indwells them. They know by instinct what the will of God is (1 John 2:27). Where the Spirit leads them, they yield to it (for the most part) – no matter what the cost. And life and peace are the results (Romans 8:6). The external Law, then, is no longer an outward thing full of dead letters and cold commands. It has been transferred into the indwelling life of Christ. To live by Christ is our highest calling as people of the insurgence.” | Frank Viola, Insurgence

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

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

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

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

By affirming the biblical narrative, that we are saved by grace through faith alone, we begin a journey towards a deeper understanding of *who God is*, which only grows as our Christian life progresses. Our theology is, perhaps then, best described

as an expedition of discovery, rather than a destination at which we arrive. We discern more and more about the heart and mind of the Creator as our life progresses. This knowing and experiencing – this [walking with God](#) – renews us day by day to become more like the crucified Lord we follow.

Jesus was the exact representation of God and the very imprint of His nature ([Hebrews 1:3](#), [John 14:10-11](#)), the Word-made-flesh who took up residence amongst us ([John 1:1-14](#)). By knowing him, we can know God (Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3, 2 Peter 1:3).

To know God is to know Jesus, whom He sent (John 17:3) and, therefore, the true starting point of our *theology* as Christians is looking to Jesus and, fundamentally, to Jesus crucified. Our *theology* begins with *cruciformity*; a life first and foremost surrendered to the crucified Christ in faith.

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

This article was first published 10 February 2021

Majors And Minors | The Danger Of Extremism

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between [grace](#) and spiritual performance. Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness for all people; not on the basis of their social status, their ethnicity, or their gender, but on the basis of God's generosity and undeserved grace (Mark 16:15, Luke 14:23).

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” | John 3:16-17, NIV

Grace gives us what we don't deserve and cannot earn. This is why it's so frequently contrasted against the Law of Moses (the Torah), which still resulted in condemning every man or woman, no matter their sincerity or good deeds. Righteousness could never come by law-keeping, simply because it was impossible for it to be kept perfectly in its entirety.

Straining Out Gnats, Swallowing Camels*

Many of the conflicts that were initiated with Jesus came from the Pharisees, members of a Jewish religious party that flourished in Palestine from around 515 BCE–70 CE. The movement was marked by both a meticulous adherence to their interpretation of the Torah as well as their particular eschatological (end times) views.

The precise details of religious life were the Pharisees' passion and the conflicts they engaged in were usually over minor issues such as fasting (Mark 2:18), sabbath keeping (Mark 2:24), eating with 'unclean' people (Mark 9:11), or attitudes towards civic duties, like paying taxes (Matthew 9:11) – all [performance-driven markers of supposed spirituality](#). They made uncompromising stands on matters of no particular spiritual importance, while issues of greatest significance were minimised or neglected.

The Pharisees 'majored in these minors', presuming that this kind of religiosity made them more spiritual and 'right with God'. In reality, they were actually inverting the spiritual values that God was really interested in, like mercy, justice, and [faithfulness](#).

They should have known better. God had already made plain to His people what He required of them. He'd already told them that He found the saccharine solemnity of their religious assemblies nauseating and the melodious noise of their songs infuriating.

"He has told you, O human, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" | Micah 6:8, ESV

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

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

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

The Pharisees could recite the law by heart yet they couldn't have said what the heart of the law really was. They failed to see or understand Jesus had no interest in setting up rigid religious and social guidelines for his followers. His focus instead was on majoring in the majors; the gospel and the significant agendas of the kingdom of God.

The Danger Of Extremes

Legalism takes different forms at different times and is often hard to pin down, manifesting itself in subtle ways.

There is much that can be said about legalism and the hypocrisy that arises from it. An emphasis on externals makes it very easy to fake what is really going inside. Promoting or insisting on conformity to these outward markers of 'spirituality' often results in people who may look spiritual on the outside but who are, in reality, suffering from deep inner turmoil and sin.

"I know of only two alternatives to hypocrisy: perfection or honesty. Since I have never met a person who loves the Lord our God with all their heart, mind, soul, and loves their neighbour as themselves, I do not view perfection as a realistic alternative. Our only option, then, is honesty that leads to repentance. As the Bible shows, God's grace can cover any sin, including murder, infidelity, or betrayal. Yet, by definition, grace must be received, and hypocrisy disguises our need to receive grace. When the masks fall, hypocrisy is exposed as an elaborate ruse to avoid grace." | Philip Yancey

The focus of this article, particularly in light of the global pandemic, is another issue that I believe arises from a spirit of legalism. This is the issue of extremism; when we begin majoring in the minors instead of majoring in the majors.

Right now, the world is being sharply delineated. Nearly as quickly as the virus has spread, so too has the chatter and the differing opinions about both the cause and the cure. There is an ocean of information and propaganda, together with an overabundance of access to information, some of it accurate and some of it not.

However, the most disturbing aspect of all this is the

noticeable polarisation of people into two opposing groups; *them and us. And the church is not unaffected in this.*

We, the church, are being drawn into extremes, into focusing on external markers (*whether you believe covid is real or not, whether you choose to vaccinate or not...*). We're using these markers as some kind of external test of authentic Christianity and displaying the same misguided zeal for religious purity as the Pharisees of Jesus' day. We're gazing outward, looking for specks of sawdust in other people's eyes, instead of looking inward and paying attention to the plank in our own eye.

The dangers of this kind of religiousness – extremism – are as great a threat in the twenty-first century as they were in the first. As Philip Yancey comments, "*the spirit of law-keeping stiffens into extremism. I know of no legalism that does not seek to enlarge its domain of intolerance.*"

Our focus in this [global crisis](#) seems to have shifted away from our most basic and guiding principle: that is, to incarnate Christ in a darkened and impoverished world, and, instead, Christians are showing themselves to be intolerant, judgmental, and divisive to those who think differently to themselves.

Not only that, we're being distracted from majoring in the majors; *the gospel, and the significant agendas of the kingdom of God.*

I think we must be careful, particularly right now, but in any circumstance, to ensure that the hills we're choosing to die on are the ones that have a cross firmly planted at their summit.

Majoring In The Majors: The Gospel +

Kingdom Of God

While the global pandemic is certainly is a troubling and anxious time, I don't believe *our personal opinion* about it changes anything in relation to our right standing with God. Certainly, there are considerations around [our response to the crisis](#) which must be thought about in relation to our Christian witness, and these are convictions that each Christian must personally decide for themselves, in the light of scripture.

Jesus is the only way to find right standing with God. The name of Jesus is the only means by which humanity can be saved. Jesus' performance, not our own, is what secures this extraordinary gift of grace. And in Jesus, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose.

This is what the Bible describes as *the gospel* and *the kingdom of God*. These are the major agendas that Jesus focused on and these should be our focus too.

The world is changed by our example, not our opinion. Our primary purpose and responsibility as Christians and, collectively, as the church, is to point the world to Jesus. We do this, not by imposing our opinions or judging the world, but by *being salt and light*.

The significant agendas of the kingdom will be seen in lives that are surrendered to the guidance and leadership of God's designated king, Jesus. Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth, he becomes the first claimant on our affections, the motivating force in our decisions, and the final judge of our soul.

Therefore, we will also be on guard to avoid any kind of system that employs the use of 'formulas' and 'doctrines' to press good people of faith into conformity with a system

instead of conformity to Christ. We will be on the lookout for cultures that promote or enable power posturing, performance preoccupation, unspoken rules, and a lack of balance.

And we will resist mindsets that seek to quantify authentic Christianity by anything other than a confession of trust in the saving name of Jesus Christ.

What Does This Look Like In A Pandemic?

The ability to exercise critical thinking is an important reality for every person, but, in the end, opinions must be formed by each person for themselves and never coerced or compelled upon us by others.

Christians may therefore see a situation in very different ways but this doesn't make them any more or less Christian than each other. It's important to understand that *unity as Christians* is based on our commonality *in Jesus*, not our uniformity of thought or opinion about *non-essential* topics.

Whether I think covid-19 was created in a lab, whether I think covid-19 is no worse than seasonal flu, or whether I think covid-19 is some kind of elaborate ruse enabling Bill Gates to digitally track the world's population through microchip-carrying vaccines, doesn't make me *any less Christian* (although, arguably, at least one of those opinions infers I'm probably less adept in critical thinking than I should be).

How we *respond* or *behave* as Christians, however, is clearly set out for us in scripture and, in this, we should be united. The Apostle Peter, when encouraging the early church in their Christian witness in relation to the pressures they were under, had this to say:

- Keep your conduct honourable ([1 Peter 2:11-12](#))
- Respect and submit to authority ([1 Peter 2:13](#))
- Love earnestly and do good ([1 Peter 1:22](#))

What I think this looks like right now, in practical terms, is this; that Christians will be people of peace, kindness, and compassion. That we'll look for opportunities to do good and love others well. That we'll give no cause for the name of Jesus to be brought into disrepute and no opportunity for the kingdom mission of God to be thwarted.

That we'll have soft hearts and open minds, willing to listen and understand, rather than judge and disparage. That we'll realise that this time of trouble, at its core, is no different to any other crisis or trouble that Christians have faced and that, in all things, Jesus is over everything.

That we'll choose to not let our differences divide us, but instead, we'll be reminded of what truly unites us.

And that we'll be people who choose to major in the majors, those things that the world needs most; the *gospel of good news* and the *significant agendas of the kingdom of God*.

***The Jews had a law that forbade eating any flying insects that did not have jointed legs for hopping (Leviticus 11:20–23), and in this, they were strictly observant. Because water could have insects and insect larvae in it, pious Jews were careful to strain the water through a cloth before drinking it. They did not want to accidentally ingest an unclean insect and thus violate the law. Jesus mentions this practice in His proverb and then contrasts it with a hyperbolic picture of gulping down a camel. In this way, Jesus accused them of taking great pains (straining out gnats) to avoid offence in minor things of little importance, while tolerating or committing great sins (swallowing camels) such as deceit, oppression, and lust. | [Got Questions](#)**

Christianity + Missional Living

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

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

The Eternal Light Of Life

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

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

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

They are his ambassadors; the good news about the glorious, life-giving king placed in them like treasure put in jars of clay. They know their source of empowerment is from God, not themselves, and can boldly proclaim: *“We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14)

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

Christians + Missional Living

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

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

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

Missional living, missional churches, or missional communities are also phrases that have become popular in recent times. You may have heard them used in podcasts, online sermons or discussed by various authors. You may have assumed these

phrases are referring to a special kind of Christian living or community; one that operates differently to 'regular' or 'traditional' Christian life or church.

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

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

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

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

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

message in their fragile, imperfect lives of clay.

They have been commissioned by Jesus himself, who declared “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20; compare Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, John 20:21–22, and Acts 1:8).

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

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

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

Like Salt, Like Light...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

within us.

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

Missional Churches

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

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

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

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

“Christ did not die just to save us from sins, but to bring us together in community. After coming to Christ, our next step is to be involved in community. A church that does not experience community is a parody, a sham. Simply put, the purpose of the church is to stand for God’s eternal purpose. In short, wherever the church gathers together, its guiding and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ.” – Frank Viola, Reimagining Church

Missional Christianity = Intentional Christianity

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

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

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

We carry, every day in our bodies, the death of Christ so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed (2 Corinthians 4:7-10). Through us, others can also be empowered and equipped to

receive and live out the gospel message, demonstrating God's mission in all aspects of our lives, both personally and as church communities.

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

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

Why Belonging To A Local Church Isn't Optional

The last six months have been an unsettling and disruptive time for millions of people around the globe. The impact of COVID-19 on our ordinary routines and daily habits has been, in many cases, bewildering. The ways in which we would usually connect have had to adapt to these new and strange times – and it seems we're not out of the woods just yet. Our lives may not return to normal any time soon, if, in fact, at all.

COVID-19 Discloses A New Reality

COVID-19 has also brought to light just how busy and frantic *normal* actually was and, for many people, the slower pace and limited ability to travel too far afield has come as a welcome relief. This has been an unexpected opportunity to slow down and 'smell the roses', enjoy time with family, working or learning at home and passing lazy afternoons with nowhere particular to be; apart from in the garden or buying essentials at the supermarket!

For others, however, the sense of isolation and abandonment has been acute. Loneliness, anxiety and depression have been constant companions, with no assurance of when things might return to normal. Being able to still connect, albeit in the online space (hello Zoom!), has been critical for many people to support their mental health and maintain a sense of community and belonging.

For many Christians, however, the inability to 'go to church' (ie to gather physically together in a building) has uncovered a new reality; one that has perhaps laid hidden and undisturbed beneath the surface of our busy, ordered, *normal* lives.

What has been exposed is the troubling reality that when habit or routine no longer forces us to physically show up to church, we quite often stop showing up emotionally. Our connection to church – to the local expression of the body of Christ – is revealed to be a shallow, top-surface connection, driven and maintained only by habit. As soon as the opportunity to exit has materialised, we've opened the door and welcomed it with open arms. Physically, we may have been attending church, but emotionally, we've been long gone.

Is Church-Going Important?

The necessity of finding other means to connect as a church

and the resultant disconnect for many Christians has highlighted important questions: Why do Christians gather anyway? Is 'going to church' even important?

Nearly 50% of Australians believe that church-going is no longer relevant. Out of a list of 13 facilities and 10 services that people agree a community needs, including foods and cafes, parks, libraries, local childcare and sports facilities, relationship seminars and support or social activities for seniors, a local church comes in at 13 and 9 respectively (only just ahead of English classes and migrant support, in the case of the latter).

Clearly, for many people, church-going is not only personally irrelevant, but it's also considered practically superfluous to a community's needs. At a time when the ability for gathering together in person has been greatly limited, increased disconnect from 'church' has been, for many Christians, a sobering reality.

Yet the Bible tells quite a different story. It describes [the church](#) as an essential reality, in vibrant, organic language; as a body, a vine, a family, a woman, a building of living stones, a kingdom. It describes the church as a single identity, made up of many individuals, with the ability, as a corporate reality, to affirm and give shape to the lives of each Christian who becomes a member. It reminds us that when we choose the King, we are also choosing the King's people.

"The starting point of the Christian life is an unqualified trust in the power of Jesus' death and resurrection to save humanity from sin, a trust that comes to individuals through grace and by faith. Once that trust in Jesus has been born in us by the Spirit, then our baptism signifies our willingness to commit ourselves to God, to submit to the lordship of Jesus, and to identify ourselves not just with the church but as the church." | Lucy Peppiatt

Paul the Apostle speaks at length about the connection between the individual and the church. He comments in the book of Corinthians that “God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it”. This body of believers is governed or directed in all its functions by the head, who is Jesus.

It’s remarkable that God has designed the human body – every part dependent on every other part – as a working model for understanding our lives together as a community of believers (1 Corinthians 12:27).

How Do We Identify Ourselves Not Just With the Church But As The Church?

Why is it important for a Christian to feel like they not only have a local church they call ‘home’ but that they truly belong there? How does a Christian identify not just with the church but as the church?

“A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ’s name to officially affirm and oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.” | Jonathan Leeman

Acts 2:42-47 describes not only *how* but *why* the first Christians began gathering themselves together. They were a new organic identity, citizens of the kingdom of God, ‘called out to follow and serve King Jesus’. These new Christians regularly gathered together to honour God and His Son, to grow in community, to grow together spiritually, to give themselves in service and to share and witness to the good news of the risen King. We describe these collective [Christian activities](#) as ‘worship’, ‘fellowship’, ‘discipleship’, ‘ministry’ and ‘evangelism’.

The local church is the tangible evidence of the reality of

the kingdom of God. Church people are [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” (Ecclesiastes 3:11) (Matter Of The Heart).

Gathering together as a local church is therefore a public declaration, to both fellow Christians and to the world, that an individual has submitted to the rule of King Jesus and that their allegiance has been transferred to him. It affirms that each person gathered is a person of the kingdom, for whom Jesus is Lord. It’s how one Christian says to another Christian: *“What! You too? I thought I was the only one.”* (C S Lewis)

Through Christ’s work on the cross, Christians have been made his body, his family, his temple, his people, his flock, his joy and crown. But they only become these things collectively, never individually. *“Christianity isn’t meant to simply be believed; it’s meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. Try as I may, I can’t be a Christian on my own. I need a community. I need the church.”* | Rachel Held Evans

The Christian life, as it turns out, is a package deal. If you choose the King, you must also choose his people.

Why Belonging To A Local Church Isn’t Optional

The biblical imperative of belonging to a local church is an important and often neglected conversation. The idea of committing can seem uncomfortable, even legalistic for some people. For many Christians, the experience of church has been one of hurt and disillusionment.

Not every church hurts people, but most churches have hurt someone at some point, simply because churches are made up of

imperfect people. This reality can leave people reluctant to re-engage, afraid of being hurt again, wanting to protect themselves, and questioning the place of the church or even God in their lives.

“Christians need relationships to grow. We don’t grow in isolation; we develop in the context of fellowship.” | Rick Warren

Yet despite all the imperfections that can be found within a church or the fact that a church can (and will) mess up and get it wrong, it’s the way we’re supposed to ‘do life together’ as Christians.

Jesus didn’t say that he would ‘build Christians’, but 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. His church, as an instituted organic reality, has authority and governance that an individual Christian simply doesn’t have

Church isn’t just something we go to, it’s the tangible evidence of the reality of the kingdom. Church isn’t just an event we attend, it’s a fellowship we belong to (1 John 1:3, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 1:9). Choosing a church home – choosing to belong to a local church – isn’t optional but essential for a Christian.

‘The local church enables the world to look upon the canvas of God’s people and see an authentic painting of Christ’s love and holiness. The local church lays down a pathway with guardrails and resting stations for the long journey of the Christian life.’ | Jonathan Leeman

What If I Don't Feel Connected to My Church?

The church was born from the death and resurrection of Jesus and He continues to be the source and lifeblood of the church. Any life or energy a church possesses must flow from him, the risen King. Christ's rule – in the life of the church and in the hearts of its members – is absolute. Jesus is Lord.

If you're struggling to feel a sense of connection or belonging to your local church, we'd suggest there are two possible reasons for this:

1. Jesus is Lord of your heart, but unfortunately, he's not the Lord of the church you're part of. This is a difficult situation to be in but not without hope. Our suggestion is to pray about this and then engage in open and genuine conversation with the members of your church. Gently voice your concerns and suggest ways to encourage the church to 'return to its first love'.

One of the seven churches named in the book of Revelation, the church at Ephesus, faced a similar situation. They are commended by Jesus for being diligent in good works and for their perseverance, their intolerance of heresy, and their endurance of many hardships in his name; but they had lost their warmth and zeal for Jesus.

“Relationship had simply become religion and passion little more than cold orthodoxy. The first love which characterised the Ephesians was the zeal and ardor with which they embraced their salvation as they realised they loved Christ because he first loved them (1 John 4:19) and that it was, in fact, his love for them that had made them “alive together with Christ.” So overwhelmed were they by the joy that came from understanding their former state—dead in trespasses and sins—and their new life in Christ, that they exhibited the fruit of that joy (Ephesians 2:1-5). Because of God's great

love for the Ephesians, they were “made alive in Christ” and that new life was exhibited in the passion of gratitude.” | [Got Questions](#)

2. Jesus is Lord of the church you attend, but not the Lord of your heart. This is a more challenging situation and perhaps the place to start is where your Christian life first began: with the reality that *‘greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends’* (John 15:13).

Supreme love was demonstrated and made visible in Jesus’ death on the cross and it’s in this sacrifice that we also see the love of God, that *‘while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’* (Romans 5:8). Remind yourself that you are deeply loved and comprehend the fact that, in Jesus, you are forgiven and set free, fully reconciled and made right with God. You are His dearly loved child and a citizen of His kingdom, saved by grace through faith alone and not because of anything you have done. As Christians, we belong to God and He loves us with the love of a perfect Father (John 14:18, 1 John 3:1).

Give your heart entirely and with no hesitation to the King who died for you and everything else will flow from there.

If you’re struggling with your identity as a Christian or want to understand more about God’s work of grace in your life (and how that causes radical transformation), I would highly recommend reading the following two books: “What’s So Amazing About Grace” by Phillip Yancey and “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality” by Peter Scazzero.

The Christian life isn’t always easy and the next step isn’t always clear. Sometimes we need courage to take that step and sometimes we just need to stand still and watch God go to work for us.

A Glorious Reality: The Church of Christ And It's Local Expressions

"Picture, if you will, a globe with all the nations of the world mapped out on it. Now picture one little embassy of light. It's a gathering of Christians, gathered together in the name of their King, Jesus. Then the point of light divides itself into two, then four, then eight, and so it goes.

A new nation is growing, a nation set inside the nations. The new nation leaves the boundary lines on the map where they are, but it cannot be contained by the map's lines.

The line makers don't have the authority to stop these unworldly citizens. The points of light cross all boundaries, spreading everywhere like yeast through dough, or like stars appearing one by one as the night sky darkens.

These are the churches of Christ and their members. The world has never known anything like them." | Jonathan Leeman

A Christian Response To The Global Crisis

How we, as Christians, respond in times of crisis is not just vitally important for our own faith and for our witness of the gospel, it's important for the wellbeing of those around us, who may be struggling with doubts and fears in what is a very distressing and anxious time.

A Measured And Faithful Response

I want to speak plainly to a disturbing trend currently being observed amongst some, in response to the current pandemic facing the globe. It's a response that could almost be described as 'tone deaf'; that many seem to be unaware and unobservant to the fear and anxiety of the people around them and, unwittingly or not, are adding to that fear and uncertainty with ill-thought through posts or shares online. Or, even worse, they're well aware of the fear and are choosing to actively capitalise on it to promote apocalyptic predictions or outcomes. 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.

When people are struggling with an uncertain future, have recently lost employment or are concerned for the wellbeing of their loved ones, Christians have both a responsibility and a privilege to point the world's attention to the One who is still in control of all. Not only that, we can choose to positively redirect the conversation, using our confidence in the God of all the earth to comfort people's hearts and settle their fears.

For Christians, times of trouble, in this particular case, the far-reaching effects of Covid-19, are, firstly, an opportunity to test and prove our own conviction; that there is One God and Father who rules over all things (Psalm 103:19, Daniel 2:21, Ephesians 4:6). We have confidence that the Father has an ongoing rescue plan for humanity and that He has given authority over to His Holy Son, Jesus Christ, who holds all things in his hand (John 3:35, Matthew 11:27). It can be difficult in times of crisis to remain convicted of this, but we must continue to have confidence in God's promises and in the power and authority vested in the name of Jesus. We

acknowledge that, as Christians, we are not immune to these troubles and our prayer is not that we would be removed from this but that we would be protected from evil (John 17:15). It is our Christian ideals, infact, that enable us to see purpose in our suffering and recognise the joy which can overcome all troubles, even the love of an everlasting Father.

“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.

Secondly, such crises are an opportunity to witness to the reality of a transformative gospel being outworked in our lives. We are to show good to all, as and where we are able (Galatians 6:10). 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).

Trust in God’s sovereignty is not to be made dependent on

human expectation of a particular timetable or outcome. For the present, it is enough that God's rule is expressed in and through His Spirit. | James D G Dunn

He Is A Good, Good Father

It is our commission, as Christians, 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. He is the One who rescues the poor who cries for help and the fatherless, who have none to assist them (Job 29:12). He sees the grief and anxiety of the afflicted and upholds the cause of the poor and the oppressed (Psalm 82:3). We need to reaffirm and speak this truth to each other and to the world! Christians are intended to be the light of the world, bringing hope to those who have none, especially in times of crisis and trouble.

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden." – Matthew 5:14, BSB

As Christians, we are emboldened to stand together now in faithful response, banishing exaggerated fear and pleading the cause of those who are afflicted and defenceless in this crisis. We need to pray, to worship and to continue to 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).

If you are feeling anxious or fearful about the current situation, I want to encourage you to lay your burdens at Jesus' feet and to share that anxiousness with him. If you want prayers for you or with you, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

We have hope, as Christians, that God is actively working to restore all things to Himself and that one day soon, the earth will be filled with His glory and all tears will be wiped away (Habakkuk 2:14, Revelation 21:4). It's our responsibility and privilege to share this hope with the world and comfort their hearts in times of trouble.

“But for you who obey me, my saving power will rise on you like the sun and bring healing like the sun's rays. You will be as free and happy as calves let out of a stall.” – Malachi 4:2, GNT

Let's pray for our communities, our country, and for the world, that God will bring healing, peace, and restoration to our lives, if it is His will and that this incredibly strange situation might provide opportunity to impact hearts for good, for His glory and His kingdom.

Finally, “Have courage, and be kind...” | Cinderella

Keep Your Eyes On Jesus

We're [called to a radical life](#).

This is a life in which we're called to follow someone we've never seen. We've heard about him but we've never seen him with our own eyes. We've 'believed the report', the good message about who Jesus is and why he came, and our hearts have been convicted to follow him. And even though we haven't seen him, we love him.

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that

is inexpressible and filled with glory" | 1 Peter 1:8, ESV

The Redemptive Power Of His Sacrifice

We have come to realise that, without Jesus, we are nothing more than 'dead men walking'.

We're reminded of the story of the serpent placed on the pole during Israel's wilderness wanderings (Numbers 21). Their criticism of God and His way brought a plague of poisonous snakes throughout the camp. Moses was told to place a copper snake on a pole for all to see and anyone who fixed their gaze on that serpent on the pole would be healed and live.

A snake on a pole has come to represent medicinal healing throughout the medical world today and we can, of course, see the redemptive symbol in this story for our Christian lives. The bronze serpent is the clearest type of the saving work of Jesus. Jesus himself used this symbol to appeal to the people in his day (John 3:14). Like the serpent, Jesus was to be raised on a stake for all to see, and all those who looked to his redemptive sacrifice would live.

We fix our gaze on Jesus, crucified, believing in the power contained in his name, and though we are dying, yet we live! Death no longer has the final say.

*"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ."
| 1 Corinthians 15:-20-23, NIV*

Believing And Becoming In Jesus

Our Christian life starts the moment we turn our eyes to Jesus and [acknowledge him](#) as Lord of our heart and our life. But our gaze must never leave him.

The Christian life is one of transformation; of more than just believing, but of becoming, where the impossible is possible. We are able to become more than conquerors through him who loved us.

“What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will He not also, along with him, graciously give us all things. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” | Romans 8:31-32, 37, ESV

We are learning to follow where Jesus has gone already and we are learning, day by day, to trust him as our good shepherd.

A Leap Of Faith

Living the Christian life is often stepping out into the unknown. It's often an exercise in surrender, trust, and faith.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” | Hebrews 11:1-3, ESV

We look around us and see how things presently are, in this life, **and yet we believe that there is more** and that **we can be more**. This belief is underpinned by the [evidence of the risen](#)

[Christ](#). Resurrection, the most unbelievable, incredible event to have possibly happened **has** happened. When Christians gather together for communion, we celebrate and witness to this remarkable event. The ramification for us as believers is not a small thing: the [same power](#) that raised Jesus from the dead now lives in us!

“I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God’s power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God’s right hand in the heavenly realms.” | Ephesians 1:19-20, NLT

“And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit, who lives in you.” | Romans 8:11, BSB

Jesus promised his followers that he would be with them, even to the end of the world. This is his promise to us. Sometimes he will lead us through fire and across water, through deep valleys and up high mountains. There is no promise that the Christian life will always be easy but he promises he will never leave us or forsake us.

Some of you may be feeling the heat of those flames. Or perhaps you feel like your feet are sinking and you’re going to drown. Raise your eyes and fix them on Jesus! He goes before us, he stands beside us, every day of this Christian life.

Faith Is Learning From History

We learn a lot from the story of Israel and their exodus from Egypt. When the children of Israel were delivered out of slavery, that moment only signaled the beginning of a journey of faith. And almost immediately, they were brought to the

edge of the ocean, with churning water ahead of them and the enemy hard at their heels. There was no way forward and no way back. And then, suddenly, a miracle was performed and God parted the ocean before them – a way out – seemingly impossible but clearly visible. They had to make a decision of faith – to step into that path cut through the ocean and cross through to the other side. Moses, their leader, spoke boldly at this moment:

“Don’t be afraid, stand firm and watch God do His work for you.”

Some of us may be in that moment right now, afraid of what is behind us and unable to see a path ahead of us. Sometimes, the step of faith involves standing still and watching God go to work for us. Sometimes, faith asks us to step out into the unknown.

We have the story in Matthew 14:24-31 of Peter being called by Jesus to step out of the boat and onto the churning water. And we realise from reading this story that sometimes faith asks us to step out of the boat, out of the place where it feels comfortable and relatively safe and into the dark and churning ocean. In those moments, too, we must not lower our gaze. Faith will keep us afloat, fear will sink us.

We must look for Jesus and keep looking for Jesus. He is the good shepherd, who laid his life down for the sheep, and, like the Psalmist, we can confidently say,

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” | Psalm 23:4

Keeping Our Eyes On Jesus

How do we keep our eyes on Jesus? How do we ‘follow him’ and

keep him front and foremost in our minds, day by day?

We need to make him real! We need to learn about him, discover what kind of leader he is, read about his character, his personality, his emotions. We need to talk to him, tell him our struggles and our fears. We need to ask for his courage to be ours. We need to invest in **relationship** with him; deep and personal and transformational.

We need to be reminded and convicted in our hearts that he is not just our personal saviour and friend, but [the resurrected King](#), in whom all power rests and with whom all things are possible!

When we come together as church, we are reminded that the church was born from the sacrifice of a man who, while we were yet sinners, died for us. Who, for the joy that was before him, endured the cross. And whose resurrection assures us that the best is still yet to come.

“The word that saves is right here, as near as the tongue in your mouth, as close as the heart in your chest. It’s the word of faith that welcomes God to go to work and set things right for us. This is the core of our preaching. Say the welcoming word to God – “Jesus is my Master” -embracing, body and soul, God’s work of doing in us what He did in raising Jesus from the dead. That’s it. You’re not “doing” anything; you’re simply calling out to God, trusting Him to do it for you. That’s salvation. With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right out loud: “God has set everything right between Him and me!” Scripture reassures us, “No one who trusts God like this – heart and soul – will ever regret it.” | Romans 10-10-13, MSG

The Christian life isn't always easy and the next step isn't always clear. Sometimes we need courage to make that step and sometimes we just need to stand still and watch God go to work for us.