

Women + The Church

There is a great deal of evidence of women's participation in the early church and the role they played in early Christianity.

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 it, the people whose company we enjoy, or the people who make us feel good. The undeserved gift of grace is offered to all, even our annoying neighbour, intolerant boss, or the shady local car mechanic.

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

discipling along the way.

She has sometimes portrayed the Christian journey as something of a sprint to glory, rather than a long endurance in the same direction with many failures along the way.

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

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

I Love The Church

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

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

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

There is nothing quite like her in all the world.

Searching For Identity

*“If I find in myself desires nothing in this world will satisfy. I can only conclude that I was not made for here.” |
C S Lewis*

Searching For Identity

I want to confess, at the outset, that as I was attempting to put down some of the thoughts I wanted to share relating to identity, my mind ran an internal commentary about myself. Thoughts such as, *“what will people think of me?”*, *“how will I be perceived?”*, *“I wonder if they’ll think ‘this’ thing or ‘that’ thing ”* ran on loop in my brain. I felt overwhelmed at the thought of showing up, convinced that I’m extremely flawed (and therefore inadequate to be sharing anything of value), anxious about my capacity to sufficiently convey and do justice to God’s truths, and wondering, perhaps, at whether I’m even the most articulate person in the world to be attempting to do so!

It struck me as really quite ironic that I was wrestling with my identity **as I prepared to write and share about identity!** I guess it seemed to prove, at least to me, that our identity, [our true identity](#) is something that we have to work hard at reminding ourselves of and something we all have struggled with or will struggle with throughout our lives.

I want to refer to a particular quote which I love – Colossians 1:13

“For He [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves.” | Colossians 1:13 (ESV)

How truly life-changing! In becoming [disciples of Jesus](#), we’ve also become subjects of his kingdom – living in the sphere where Jesus rules!

We Are Kingdom People!

I think this is the first important truth we need to know, believe and establish at our core when we start to think about our identity and who we are. Before we relate ourselves to anyone (or anything) else in our lives, we are first and foremost [kingdom people](#) and **Jesus is our king!**

Choosing to be a Christian has its origins in believing the things about Jesus, in an intellectual sense – who he is and what he came for – but there’s more to it than that. We are also choosing to surrender to his guidance and leadership in our life as a willing subject of God’s [designated king](#). Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth, he has first claim on our affections, he is the motivating force in our decisions and the final judge of our soul (Matthew 28:18-20, Isaiah 9:6, Luke 1:33, Acts 10:36, 1 Corinthians 15:27, Colossians 1:27, Romans 8:10, Ephesians 3:16, Acts 10:42, John 5:22. 2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:21, 1 Peter 2:25).

Perhaps we need to take a step back and consider the powerful force that enacted this transfer from the dominion of darkness. The motivating force in all of this was love – the love of an eternal God and the love of a righteous king, [who willingly died](#) for those who were still his enemies. While we were still in darkness, Jesus died for us. This is the meaning of ‘[saving grace](#)’ – undeserved, unmerited and entirely outworked without our help or contribution.

“Christianity is not about our disciplined pursuit of God but

about God's relentless pursuit of us – to the point of Jesus dying on a cross for us that we might become His friends. The inexhaustible God loves us so intensely that every time we turn to Him after wandering from His love for us, all heaven breaks out in a thunderous celebration (Luke 15:7)

Most of us believe this intellectually. This is the message of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Experiencing this infinite love in our hearts, however, is another matter. The sinister voices of the surrounding world and our pasts are powerful. They repeat the deeply-held, negative beliefs we may have learned in our families and cultures growing up:

- I am a mistake*
- I am a burden*
- I am stupid*
- I am worthless*
- I am not allowed to make mistakes*
- I must be approved of by certain people to feel ok*
- I don't have the right to experience joy and pleasure*
- I don't have the right to assert myself and say what I think and feel*
- I don't have a right to feel*
- I am value-based on my intelligence, wealth, and what I do, not for who I am.*

It is astounding how many deeply committed followers of Jesus would affirm that the preceding statements articulate how they truly feel about themselves. Like the prodigal son, they are content to relate to God as hired servants, rather than enjoy the full privileges of sons and daughters of our heavenly Father (Luke 15: 11-21)" – Peter Scazzero

"Whom the Son sets free is free indeed!" | John 8:36 (ESV)

Perhaps we are also more willing at times to relate to God as slaves still chained in the dominion of darkness than of kingdom people, set free and redeemed by the Son and the king!

The Process Of Discipleship

Discipleship – being people of the kingdom – is a process that moves us from being spiritually and emotionally immature children to being fully mature and developed adults – “*people dedicated to God, and capable and equipped for every good work.*” (2 Timothy 3:17, NET).

This process of discipleship is a principle-centered, character-based, “inside out” approach to developing our authentic self in Christ. It means to start first with ourselves; even more fundamentally, to start with the most inside part of self – our core – and to honestly analyse our paradigms, our character, and our motives and to realign those with the king we are serving, with the master we are following.

I think a lot of us struggle with having a clear sense of who we are, and our Christian life is often theory rather than practice, layering over our core, rather than challenging ourselves to examine what lies at the heart of us. This process of layering – creating and developing a false self over the top of core emotional truths – ensures that we remain entrapped and enslaved to ‘the old man’, rather than liberated in Jesus as a [new creation](#).

It takes courage to decide to live differently, to follow Jesus into the unknown and to be committed to emotional and spiritual reality. It takes courage to define ourselves by how God sees us – deeply loved, despite our flaws and to live from that basis of [grace](#) in our Christian discipleship.

“Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is an illusion.” | Brennan Manning

I’d really like to encourage us all, but especially those of you who might be really struggling with identity right now in

your life, to give real attention to developing your authentic self in Jesus.

1. Pay attention to your interior (the “heart of you”) in silence and solitude.
2. Find trusted companions to help you along the way.
3. Move out of your comfort zone.
4. Pray for courage.

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are God’s children. Our existence is now framed by Christ’s life – who is [a life-giving Spirit](#) (Romans 8:16).

Here are some core, emotional truths that we can believe and take deep into our hearts, as much-loved children of God: We are created in God’s own image (Genesis 1:27), the crowning glory of His creative work (Psalm 8:5). We are incredibly unique and known intimately by God (Psalm 139:13-16) and we are more valuable to Him than many sparrows (Matthew 10:31). Even when we have travelled far from His spirituality (Romans 3:23), He loved the world so much He sent His son to die for us (John 3:16). While we were still ‘at enmity’ with Him, He reached out to reconcile us back to Him (Romans 5:8-10). His grace, not our sin, has the final word in our position before Him (Romans 5:20). Those who step into His grace are saved (Romans 10:13), we are born-again (1 Peter 1:3), adopted as God’s children and positioned as His heirs (Ephesians 1:5, 1 John 3:2, Romans 8:16-17). **We belong to God and He loves us with the love of a perfect Father** (John 14:18, 1 John 3:1).

“...This is my [Paul’s] prayer. That God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ and the all-glorious Father, will give you spiritual wisdom and the insight to know more of Him: that you may receive that inner illumination of the Spirit which will make you realise how great is the hope to which He is calling you—the magnificence and splendour of the inheritance promised to Christians—and how tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God. That power is the same

divine power which was demonstrated in Christ when He raised him from the dead and gave him the place of supreme honour in Heaven—a place that is infinitely superior to any conceivable command, authority, power or control, and which carries with it a name far beyond any name that could ever be used in this world or the world to come.” | Ephesians 1:18-21, JB Phillips

If you are struggling with your identity as a disciple 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.

This article was first published on 27 April 2020

Beneath The Skin

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

What’s beneath the skin of our collective Christian identity?

Has Christianity lost touch with its original radical and beating heart? Are we so enamored with the power and prestige of this present world that we have forgotten our own history?

Are we, the church, so entertained by the lights and sounds, by the choreographed music, by the dimly lit stages and

almond-milk-lattes-after-service that we've forgotten the ancient truths our early Christian brethren lived and died for?

Have we become mere spectators to our own Christian faith?

The Birth Of 'The Jesus Movement'

The modern western church lives a comfortable existence. She wants for nothing.

With both resources and freedom in worship and expression of faith, the church looks remarkably different today than she did in her fraught, early days. Birthed during the reign of Tiberius Caesar Augustus (14 AD – 37 AD), "the Jesus movement" initially attracted little attention from the Romans; assumed to be merely an offshoot of Judaism. Yet it soon became clear that this movement was more than a Judaistic sidenote, that it could not be contained nor extinguished and that it threatened the authority of Caesar himself.

Christians everywhere preached the news of Jesus, not just as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but as Lord, Saviour, and King; over and above Caesar. Unlike the Jewish community, who lived and worshipped largely by themselves, Christians were active evangelists, eager to share the good news about Jesus with all who would listen.

The first century was a spiritual explosion; fueled by the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The preaching of the gospel found its most fruitful response amongst Gentiles – pagans – who would have formerly given allegiance to Caesar and embraced a belief in many deities. Now, these new converts rejected their pagan gods and confessed belief in one God – the God of Israel, giving their allegiance to Jesus, His appointed Saviour and designated King. They were convinced by the witnesses who spoke boldly of

Jesus' resurrection, particularly the compelling evidence of men like Paul the Apostle, also later called '*the apostle to the Gentiles*', who had seen the risen Christ for himself.

People responded, literally, in their thousands, and Rome realised it had a real problem on its hands.

"By the end of the second century, the new faith was on its way to becoming the most forceful and compelling movement within the empire." (Bruce L Shelley)

By simply living in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, giving him their allegiance, they had effectively rejected Caesar, a pagan ruler, and broken from the tradition of emperor worship.

This worship of the emperor, which, by AD249 had been made universal and compulsory for every nation in the Roman Empire, was primarily a test of political loyalty. Those who would not swear allegiance to Caesar and acknowledge him and each successor to the title with the words "Lord of the Earth, Invincible Power, Glory, Honour, Blessed, Great, Worthy Art Thou To Inherit The Kingdom." were branded revolutionaries and traitors of the empire.

The Spread Of Faith And Conviction

Had the Christians been willing to simply formally verbalise that 'Caesar is Lord', they could have continued worshipping Jesus as much as they wanted...but the Christians would not compromise.

What was beneath the skin?

There are several reasons that the Christian faith experienced such a remarkable spread, despite persecution.

Firstly, the witnesses to the resurrection were clearly possessed by a burning, unshakeable conviction as to the

reality of who Jesus was and what had been accomplished in his death and resurrection. They knew that this good news had the power to transform the lives of men and women, that finally humanity had been redeemed, and that they themselves were the recipients of immeasurable grace. They simply could not keep the news to themselves and their unswerving belief, despite every obstacle (including the threat of death or actual death) could not deter them.

Secondly, the practical outworking of the Christian faith, demonstrated in acts of love, was astonishing and quite unheard of in Roman times. It was their most defining feature, remarked upon by the pagans with grudging admiration.

It found its expression in care for the poor, widows and orphans, for those brethren who had been imprisoned or condemned, and particularly for brethren, who due to poverty, could not afford an honourable burial. The early church would often provide services for such persons, believing care in death as well as life was an active expression of love for those made in the image of God.

“Atheism (ie the Christian faith) has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the godless Galileans’ care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them” | Emperor Julian, (332-63)

As Jesus had promised, by demonstrating this kind of love, sacrificial and all-encompassing, all people knew that these believers were part of ‘the Jesus movement’. Just as *they* had been loved, they now displayed that same kind of love for each other and others, proving without a doubt that they were disciples of the Christ.

The Price Of Prestige

The early church flourished as a separate identity from the empire for a brief few centuries, with the struggle between Christian worship and Caesar worship defining the first 300 years of church history. Many martyrs went to their deaths, refusing to recant their faith in Jesus and give allegiance to Caesar.

Yet the church was to face a far more insidious threat in the centuries that followed; more dangerous than persecution, poverty or martyrdom. Power and prestige came to the church in the form of open favour from Rome's pagan Emperor, Constantine.

Formerly outlawed and persecuted, the Christian church now experienced a sudden reversal in fortune. But Constantine, represented as the ideal Christian ruler and ushering in a new age of salvation for the church, still retained much of his pagan origins.

What was beneath the skin?

The advantages for the church were real enough but there was a price to pay. Constantine ruled Christian bishops as he did his civil servants and demanded unconditional obedience to official pronouncements, even when they interfered with purely church matters. There were also masses that now streamed into the officially favoured church. Prior to Constantine's conversion, the church consisted of convinced believers. Now many came who were politically ambitious, religiously disinterested and still half-rooted in paganism. This threatened to produce not only shallowness and permeation by pagan superstitions but also the secularisation and misuse of religion for political purposes." | Bruce L Shelley

Did the church ever recover from this melding of state and

faith, this union of empire and religion? Did she ever break loose from the seductive grasp of the pagan Caesar, no longer enemy, but sponsor and friend, and return to her first love?

Did she find again the burning conviction that Jesus alone was Lord and King over all the earth and her allegiance was to him?

At times, perhaps.

But, equally, at times, she has colluded with the powers of this world, exchanging her birthright for what amounted to a mess of pottage.

She has had, in many stages of her historical past, a reputation of being alive but *beneath the skin*, she was dying. "*Wake up*", her Lord and King has implored "*and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.*"

Faithful individuals remained; arguably, the heart and soul of the church herself, but often enough, the official church sacrificed such individuals in order to appease the empire, in order to maintain control, to the detriment of humanity's salvation.

What lay beneath the skin?

The Church Of Our Times

What of the church today?

What lies beneath her skin?

Behind the powerful vocals from a vast and blue-lit stage, beneath the skinny jeans with tastefully ripped knees, between the cleverly worded messages from the pulpit, is there still a radical and beating heart?

After asking Jesus into their hearts, do Christians still ask

Jesus into their lives? The church may profess to still love Jesus *but would she die for him?*

Still. In every time and in every place, there has always been a movement, a people; the invisible church. A generation that does not lose hope in the church it sees but instead endeavours to become the church it dreams of.

As in times past, the message of good news continues to be enacted in the lives of ordinary people and in circumstances that are familiar and relatable to us all; stories of mothers and fathers, children and parents, wealthy people, and those in poverty, in bustling market places and domestic households. This collective community of faith – the church – will look different throughout time and throughout culture, yet the ancient truths remain embedded within the lives of those faithful to the message of good news.

The skin is just the outward appearance. How the church has looked, from the outside, has changed many times during the centuries. Her skin is unimportant.

But what lies *beneath the skin* is vitally important. Is there more to the church today than simply a hip social media account or a buzzing Sunday service? Is there an emphasis on substance over reputation? Is she still to be found among the simple, the humble, those deemed by this world to be foolish and irrelevant?

Or does the church sit alongside the culture of celebrity and, in an age of consumer-driven interests, is she more engrossed in giving people what they *want* rather than what they *need*.

The early believers weren't just Sunday Christians, whose most active participation in their Christian faith was simply attending a weekly service. They didn't just turn up for one hour in the week; they shared their entire lives with each other, week in and week out.

They didn't *go to church, they were church.*

They ate and worshipped together, they divided their resources and distributed to whoever had need. They *"ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people"*. They evangelised and disciplined, their conviction deeply rooted in and flowing from this focused centre; that *"one man died for everyone."* They knew that what this meant for humanity was dramatic and life-changing; effectively turning the world upside down.

Believers were added to their fellowship through baptism, *"buried with Jesus into death"*, and bound together in unity through communion, Jesus' *"death and resurrection"*. They became people of the kingdom, joined together in the fellowship of the King, the risen Christ, whose kingdom is over and above all other powers in this world.

Beneath The Skin

It's imperative for the church as she now progresses into the 21st century that she reclaims this identity and the authority that is deeply rooted in and connected to Jesus, her risen king. It's vital that Jesus is truly first in her affections and that his will and sovereign rule supersedes all. It's crucial that she rediscovers the transforming power that gave her life and empowers her still.

Beneath her skin, there must be a depth to her character, a sense of resourcefulness and humility, sacrifice and love. She must resolve to *authentically and completely* represent Jesus to the world, not just the parts of him that are palatable. She won't be satisfied to merely speak *of Jesus* but be compelled to lead humanity *to him*, to not just sing *of Jesus* but to baptise and disciple *in his name*. Strength and dignity are the garments she chooses to clothe herself with, and wisdom and kindness the teachings that spring from her lips.

Her form is unimportant: she knows that outward beauty can be deceitful and that it is the heart of her, the burning devotion and the fearless and uncompromising intention to live according to the teachings of Jesus, that will cause praise to rise up to God in Heaven.

The greatest hope for the church in our time and place is that we will see a passionate and stirring revival. That Christians, no matter their denomination or creed, will be emboldened to return to the foot of the cross and give their lives anew to the resurrected king. That collectively, we, the church, the 'woman of valour' for whom he died, will shine brightly in a darkened and impoverished world through our most basic and guiding principle: that is, to incarnate Christ.

That *beneath our collective skin* is a radical and beating heart still.

"So come, move, let justice roll on like a river; let worship turn into revival. Lord, lead us back to you." | insp. Amos 5:24

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

People Of The Kingdom

[Deciding to become a Christian](#) has its origins in believing the things about Jesus, certainly, in an intellectual sense; who he is and what he came for – but there's more to it than that. We are also choosing to surrender to his guidance and leadership in our life as a willing subject of God's designated king.

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 (Matthew 28:18-20, Isaiah 9:6, Luke 1:33, Acts 10:36, 1 Corinthians 15:27, Colossians 1:27, Romans 8:10, Ephesians 3:16, Acts 10:42, John 5:22. 2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:21, 1 Peter 2:25).

Becoming a Christian is, therefore, primarily a matter of the heart; a reorienting of our life and decisions in line with our allegiance to the king.

The People Of The Kingdom

An intrinsic part of our identity as Christians is to recognise that we have given our allegiance to the king and that we have been transferred into his kingdom (Colossians 1:13). This kingdom's advancement, day by day in the lives of those who surrender to King Jesus, is demonstrated in a kingdom community that we call 'the church'. **The 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)

Yet, for many Christians, the 'kingdom of God' is something that takes place solely in the future. Jesus' words *"the kingdom is near"* (Luke 17:20-21) are understood to mean, in reality, "the kingdom is coming at some later time, that time being hundreds or even thousands of years away". The idea of 'the kingdom' is as a future hope for faithful Christians, only realised at the return of Jesus, and not as a present reality. Entrance to this 'kingdom' (in the future) is by believing in Jesus now, receiving the forgiveness of sins in baptism, and then living a morally faithful life; and this is commonly described and preached as 'the gospel of good news' (in its entirety). In other words, *"I am a sinner. I need saving. I believe Jesus came to save me. In Jesus, I am forgiven (I hope! – one can never be too sure) and I hope to*

be in 'the kingdom', at some point in the future (again, all going well)."

Yet the kingdom of God – the sovereignty and rule of God – has always existed and will always exist (Psalm 47:7, 1 Chronicles 29:11, Exodus 15:18, Psalm 103:19). 'The kingdom' existed in the past, it exists now and it will exist in the future. Our hope, as Christians, is not just some distant, far-off expectation but a reality that exists right now as we choose to yield to Jesus' rule and live 'kingdom lives' under his dominion. Believing in Jesus and being baptised doesn't just grant us forgiveness of sins; through God's grace, we also receive an entirely new identity; our small, individual stories becoming part of the much bigger story that is being told. We become kingdom people right now! (Matthew 13:38, Philippians 3:20-21, Ephesians 2:19).

Five Things That Make A Kingdom

Kingdom = King + Rule + Realm + Law + Land. Here are some thoughts about the idea of 'kingdom' in the Bible:

1. A **kingdom** is a people governed by a KING. The king is God; He has always been king, ruling firstly through *theocracy*, then by *monarchy* and now through *christocracy*. The kingdom of God, therefore, has gone through many phases, one of which was the phase exhibited during the time of Israel's monarchy. A reasonable chunk of the Old Testament is dedicated to the telling of this story. You can [read more about this in the article 'Jesus, King Of The World'](#).

2. The king must **RULE** over the **kingdom**. In biblical language, this is always firstly redemptive, and then secondly by governing.

3. There has to be **PEOPLE** for there to be a **kingdom**. In the Old Testament (OT), this was the nation/**kingdom of Israel**. But Israel, like a tree, has deep roots and grafted-in branches, seen in the New Testament (NT) to be the church (which does not replace Israel but expands it) (Romans 11:1-28).

4. A **kingdom** must have a governing LAW. In OT times, this was achieved through the Torah, also known as the Law of Moses. When Jesus (God's perfect king) arrived, he didn't destroy this law but fulfilled it completely, and by his life, death and resurrection, a greater law came into being – the Law of Cruciformity; loving as Jesus loved. Jesus stated that the entire law of the new covenant, the law which governs people of the kingdom, is summarised in these words "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love others as much as you love yourself." (Matthew 22:37-40, CEB)

5. A **kingdom** must have a LAND. Land is big in the OT and moving into the NT, we see the 'tree of the kingdom' expanding to (eventually) encompass the whole world (Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:3-32). In the past, this has been, at various phases, in literal places like the Garden of Eden or the land of Israel. But right now, 'the land' is wherever 'the church' (the community of kingdom people) takes up physical space. Wherever kingdom people reside, God, in Jesus, rules. One day, this kingdom will fill all the earth and God's rule and glory will be seen in all things – as He intended from the beginning (Numbers 14:21, Habakkuk 2:14, Matthew 6:10, Revelation 21: 1, 4)

This reality – that church people are kingdom people – is one of the most ***exciting and empowering aspects of a Christian's existence in this life*** – we are living for the king! So why don't we talk much about kingdom living or being kingdom people? And why don't we speak more often of the church as the kingdom community?

Soteriology: "Small-Story" Gospel

Well, here's what I think the reason might be. For many Christians, the gospel of "the good news of the kingdom of God" (which, incidentally, is what Jesus came preaching!) has unfortunately been reduced to simply a system of personal salvation and sin management. It has become a **gospel of**

soteriology alone; a doctrine of salvation which has somehow become disconnected from the larger big-story **gospel of ecclesiology**; **theology about the nature and structure of the church**.

The truth is; when we are saved by Jesus, God also brings us into family and puts us in community! The gospel is not just about our own personal salvation but includes larger theological implications of ecclesiology – that Christian people, gathered together, are church people, who are kingdom people!

“The movement that has long called itself “Evangelical” is in fact better labelled “Soterian.” That is, we have thought we were talking about “the gospel” when in fact we were concentrating on “salvation.” | Scot McKnight

If we have a small-story gospel understanding, our trajectory as a Christian may go something like this: we (individually) repent, we (individually) are then baptised...and then life gets kind of weird for a lot of Christians. We're saved – but what now?

At this point, Christians can become obsessed with getting other unbelievers 'over the line' (saved!) but still aren't really sure what to do with them after that. Our Christian lives seem mostly about sin management (ourselves or for others) and we can tend to also be a little self-absorbed in this. All we know of 'gospel' is that we're sinners who need saving. Others are sinners who need saving. 'Christian living' (gospel living) is only about being, firstly, saved from sin and then executing a moral life thereafter.

Christianity can take a sudden and exhausting turn into the territory of works-based living, eventually leading to [church burnout](#) and, for many Christians, [the question of whether church-going is even relevant anymore](#).

Don't get me wrong. **Sin is absolutely a problem for us, as is mortality.** It is the thing that separates us from a whole relationship with God and absolutely needs addressing in our individual lives as well as in the collective human experience (Isaiah 59:2, Isaiah 53:6, Acts 3:19, Galatians 5:19-21, Romans 5: 12-21, Hebrews 7:25).

But the problem with thinking the gospel is only about personal salvation or forgiveness of sins is that we fail to recognise we are being invited into something much bigger than just a solution for our own individual stories. When we receive the good news of the gospel, our little stories are actually becoming intertwined and woven into God's larger kingdom story. We are supposed to begin experiencing life, personally and collectively, as people of the kingdom, connected to something that extends far into eternity. The fascinating reality of the gospel is that *"we are invited into a story that is bigger than our culture, bigger even than our own imaginations, and yet we get to experience it and tell that story to others with the particularity of our own moment and place in time"* (Rachel Held Evans).

"The good news is as epic as it gets, with universal theological implications, and yet the Bible tells it from the perspective of fishermen and farmers, pregnant ladies and squirmy kids. This story about the nature of God and God's relationship to humanity smells like mud and manger hay and tastes like salt and wine...It is the biggest story and the smallest story all at once – the great quest for the One Ring and the quiet friendship of Frodo and Sam." | Rachel Held Evans

When we become a Christian, we become a kingdom person, living in a fellowship with other kingdom people. 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. It's the Fellowship of the King! (1

John 1:3, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 1:9)

A New Day In An Old Story

While our individual salvation is absolutely bound up in what we have come to describe as the gospel, the good news that was preached in the first century had its roots in a much older, much larger story, that of the long-promised king and saviour of the world. The power of Jesus' sacrifice and the wonder of [his resurrection](#) form the foundation of a Christian's faith and hope but it is the fact that Jesus is **the Christ** ("the anointed one"), that is at the heart of the gospel (2 Timothy 2:8). Our forgiveness and redemption sits inside this much larger gospel message – that of the rule and dominion of the king. Recognising the gospel as "the good news of the kingdom of God" (which, in the gospel of Matthew is also called the kingdom of heaven) helps correct our gospel theology and realign it to the larger story that's being told. **You are part of a much bigger story than your personal salvation alone!**

Author Scot McKnight argues that Western Christians conceive 'the kingdom' too individualistically.

In both the Old and New Testaments, God's kingdom is defined in terms of God's people. This reality means that one may not put the kingdom and the church in antithesis. On the contrary, "you can't be kingdom people without being church people". McKnight, in fact, claims that "there is no kingdom now outside the church" and that "there is no kingdom mission that is not church mission" (The King Jesus Gospel pages 79, 87, 96). Kingdom living consists, then, of the church being the church – "liv[ing]" together "as a fellowship under King Jesus" (p.99). | Scot McKnight

"When Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, he was preaching much more than personal salvation for the individual. He was preaching "a new day in an old story – the

story of God the King – and God as king in King Jesus. The one gospel is about Jesus the lord, the king the messiah and the saviour. This is the story that alone makes sense of Jesus' choice of the word kingdom to explain the mission of God to the world." (Scot McKnight)

"Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." | Matthew 11:11, NASB

"From then on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" | Matthew 4:17, NIV

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, Repent and believe in the good news! | Mark 1:15, NIV

"Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst." | Luke 17:20-21, NASB

The Significance Of "The Kingdom"

"To grasp the significance of the message of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus, we can also resort to a statistical analysis. The term *basileia* (kingdom) occurs 162 times in the New Testament and 121 of those are in the Synoptic Gospels where the preaching of Jesus is recorded. The formula "kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven" occurs 104 times in the Gospels. This message is not only the inaugural message of Jesus and the focus of His great Sermon on the Mount, it is

his final message. “After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). The gospel of the kingdom includes the necessity of salvation since the very message begins with the call for repentance, but it goes beyond the call to salvation and includes the demand for kingdom-focused living. **It insists that we are saved for a purpose.**” – SBC Life

‘Kingdom redemption’ is the work of God, through Jesus, and by virtue of his sin-solving cross and new-life creating resurrection, unleashed to those who are needy because of their sins. Any kind of “redemptive” activity that does not deal with sin, that does not find strength in the cross, that does not see the primary agent as Jesus, and that does not see it all as God’s new creation life unleashed is not kingdom redemption, even if it is liberating and good and for the common good. | Scot McKnight

The kingdom of God is more than social justice or personal salvation. ‘The kingdom’ is the promise of God from the beginning to fill the earth with Himself and to rule justly in the hearts and lives of all humanity. It includes the promise of total reconciliation with humanity; only made possible in Jesus (Ephesians 1:11-12, 1 Timothy 1:16-17, 2 Timothy 4:18, 1 Peter 4:11, Romans 11:36, Revelation 1:16).

And if we want to know how Jesus understands the collective Christian life – ‘church life’ – the place to begin is with what he called the kingdom of God. When we think of the church – the one body of Christ, the community of believers, we need to understand how this connects in tangible, relatable ways to the ‘kingdom of God’ and how we see this illustrated in the people of the kingdom today. A true and full telling of the gospel must include the reality of the church, not as individuals gathered together in a building but as a kingdom of people – priests, rulers and images bearers on behalf of

the King – King Jesus.

“For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” | Colossians 1:13, ESV

Author’s Note: This article should in no way be taken to imply that ‘the kingdom of God’ is merely spiritual. Jesus’ context was, clearly, the nation of Israel and historical implications are at work for these people who had been chosen to be God’s witnesses. The idea of ‘the kingdom of God’ was certainly consistent with the Jewish hope of a saviour and the arrival of the one who would be the ‘consolation of Israel’. The prophet Isaiah speaks poetically about the one who would bring peace, justice and righteousness again to Israel. This national hero would be from David’s royal line and Isaiah predicted that his kingdom would have no end.

Jesus was born to be king, destined to inherit the ancient throne of David, his royal ancestor, and to rule wisely and well, not just over Israel but over the whole world. Not only was he the descendant of David and therefore the legitimate heir to the throne of Israel, he was also the Son of God and therefore the promised saviour of the world. The confluence of these two important aspects is no coincidence and we can only be astonished at how God chose to bring all these things together to achieve His purpose.

God has in no way forgotten his promises to individuals or to groups of people and implicit in that are literal promises to the people of Israel that still await fulfilment (Isaiah 52:7-9, Luke 2:25, Acts 26:6).

“And he shall set up a banner for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.” Isaiah 11:12, NASB

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” – Micah 5:2, NIV

“Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” – John 4:42, NIV

There are many layers to God’s great story, which finally converge in Jesus. “Jesus is all of Israel’s major leaders and more, he’s a new Moses and especially a new David and a new Solomon and a new servant and a new son of man and whole new redemptive order. His name – *Yeshua* – means ‘he will save his people from their sins’ (Matthew 1:21). The story is that in Jesus God now rules and God’s kind of ruling is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, and reconciling.” (Scot McKnight)

Shod With The Gospel Of Peace

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will inherit the earth.” | Matthew 5:9 (ESV)

The Spiritual Warrior

In Ephesians 6, the Apostle Paul gives a striking description of a person known as the spiritual warrior, a follower of Jesus who has been powerfully equipped for warfare by the armour of God Himself. The elements or pieces of armour which make up ‘the whole armour’ are of God – it is His strength which believers are armed with and protected by (Ephesians 6:10-17, cp Isaiah 59:17). Paul confirms in Ephesians that we are to view the battle that we are all fighting, as believers,

as a spiritual one, and that what we do in this warfare has eternal significance.

There are six pieces of armour that make up this warrior's protective battle gear:

- The Belt of Truth
- The Breastplate of Righteousness
- Shoes of the Gospel of Peace
- Shield of Faith
- Helmet of Salvation
- Sword of the Spirit.

In this article, I'd like to focus on the third item, the shoes of the 'gospel of peace'. To be 'shod with peace' may initially seem like a strange inclusion in the armour of someone who is prepared for battle. What would peace and warfare have to do with each other? Surely these two terms are mutually exclusive? But first, I want to start by sharing a couple of passages from Paul's letter to the church at Rome:

*“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Carefully consider what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible on your part, **live at peace** with everyone.” | Romans 12:17-18 (ESV)*

*“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of **righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us **pursue what makes for peace** and for mutual upbuilding.” | Romans 14:17-19 (ESV)*

Living And Working For Peace

In his letters, Paul encourages the believers in Rome to 'live at peace with everyone, if it is possible on your part' (Romans 12:8). He encourages them to "pursue what leads to peace" (Romans 14:9) and confirms that the "kingdom of God is

not meat and drink but righteousness and peace”.

Jesus gave his famous discourse on the mount during his earthly ministry, also known as the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), where he too affirmed that those that ‘*work for peace*’ will be the children of God (Matthew 5:9). As members of [his one body](#), it’s his peace that is to rule our hearts (Colossians 3:15).

And God, as we know, is in the peacemaking business.

So it seems contradictory that Jesus, given the title of ‘Prince of Peace’ long before his birth (Isaiah 9:6), should say these words:

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. “ ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.” | Jesus, Matthew 10: 34 (NIV)

Luke’s gospel repeats the refrain:

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three.” | Jesus, Luke 12:51 (ESV)

Initially, the commission to be peacemakers, to live at peace with everyone, together with Paul’s statement that the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace, seems to be at odds with Jesus’ own words and even with Paul’s later language of *warfare* found in Ephesians. So I think it’s helpful to consider the definition of what ‘peace’ is before we can understand how we are to ‘work for peace’ or be ‘peacemakers’.

Peacekeeping Is Not Peacemaking

We can often speak about ‘keeping the peace’ and believe that

this is the same as peacemaking. Yet peace – true peace – is defined as *‘a state or period in which there is no war or a war has ended.’*

Choosing not to act in violent ways towards another party whom one may be ‘at war with’ **doesn’t equate to peace**. Just because we don’t acknowledge the reality of hostilities doesn’t mean they don’t exist. For example, distrust, hostility and enmity still continued during the Cold War, even though a shot was never fired. Tension was still felt and expressed by both parties and mutual distrust and enmity were still very real. And it was still known as a “war”, despite there not being any actual physical warfare. Some might like to think that ‘peace’ was achieved, or at least a more acceptable sense of peace than physical war, but this was simply pseudo-peace, a type of peacekeeping but certainly not peacemaking.

God didn’t settle for peacekeeping! In sending Jesus, He entered directly into the hostilities between Himself and humanity and brought about the cessation of war. True peace only comes when true reconciliation is achieved – that is, the ending of hostilities and the restoration of relationship.

This is why the gospel is styled **the gospel of peace** – not because it makes Christians nice, agreeable or compliant people. The gospel of peace doesn’t make us nice – it [makes us new](#)! It restores our relationship with God and gives us a new identity as children of God. We are no longer enemies but friends with our Creator. This truth, this [realignment of identity](#), this cessation of hostilities, becomes one of the first weapons in the arsenal of our spiritual battle.

*“But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For **he is our peace**, who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, **thereby bringing the hostility to an end**. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off*

[Gentiles!] and peace to those who were near [Jews!]; for through him we have access in one Spirit to the Father.” | Ephesians 2:13-18

We are ready to set forth, preaching that same peace to the world and I believe this is why it is styled as ‘shoes’ or ‘to be shod’ with the gospel of peace. Our first move of ‘forward motion’ after becoming Christians is framed by the gospel of peace and [reconciliation that we have received](#). We stand in and on this truth. This is the peace that Jesus spoke of leaving his disciples with, where, as it’s recorded in John’s gospel, he says, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”* (John 14:27) It is the supreme and unwavering peace of knowing that we are **friends with God**.

The Sword Of Division

So what exactly did Jesus mean when he said he didn’t come to bring peace but a sword? Well, I think this is an acknowledgement that our human life is indelibly tied to the spiritual war that was set in motion in the beginning.

God made humans in His image, to be in close, harmonious relationship with Him, as His family, and to be His perfect image-bearers on this earth. But the first humans, Adam and Eve, sinned and in doing so, caused damage and disruption to the relationship between God and humanity. They were no longer able to be God’s perfect image-bearers, as He had purposed for them, and were consequently subject to mortality, becoming slaves to sin. Since then, humans have been engaged in a lifelong battle against the ‘ruler of the dominion of darkness – sin’. We and every other human have been fighting the enemy within ourselves and others – sin – since that time (Romans 5-7).

This uncomfortable truth – that sin rules in this world and that we must reject sin if we are to follow Jesus – will bring disturbance in our natural relationships. The gospel of peace asks those who receive it to choose to behave in counter-cultural ways and this will often set believers against the ‘powers that be’. Believers have been transferred out of this dominion of sin and darkness and now serve, with thankfulness, King Jesus. The Word of God, incarnated in [the perfect king](#) and image-bearer, Jesus – is *“sharper than any sword, piercing even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.”* It discerns the thoughts and intentions at the deepest level of each one of us, seeking to transform and renew our hearts if we allow it (Colossians 1: 13; Hebrew 4:2, Romans 12:2).

Sometimes, despite our best efforts to be peacemakers, the attainment of peace in our families or wider relationships is not attained. This is the sword that Jesus spoke of, the division that would come between those who choose to follow King Jesus and those who persist in serving the ruler of this world. Yet it’s important to remember in all of this that it is a *spiritual battle*. We are not at war with people but with sin.

“We are not fighting against humans. We are fighting against forces and authorities and against rulers of darkness and powers in the spiritual world.” | Ephesians 6:12 (CEV)

How Do We Make Peace?

We must behave in the same way as God, who was so concerned for peace that He sent His Son *“to guide our feet into the path of peace”* (Luke 1:79, Isaiah 2:4). If our Father is a peacemaker, then we will be too!

“First, pray for those who you may be at odds with or who persecute you (Matthew 5:44). Pray by acknowledging God’s sovereign rule and pray that your enemy might acknowledge that

too.

Then, in Matthew 5:47, Jesus gives the other specific example of peacemaking – love – in this text: “If you salute [greet] only your brethren, what more are you doing than others?” In other words, if there is a rupture in one of your relationships, or if there is someone who opposes you, don’t nurse that grudge. Don’t feed the animosity by ignoring and avoiding that person. That is the natural thing to do – just cross the street so that you don’t have to greet them. But that is not the impulse of [the Spirit](#) of a peacemaking God, who sacrificed His Son to reconcile us to Himself and to each other.

Peacemaking tries to build bridges to people – it does not want the animosity to remain. It wants reconciliation. It wants harmony. And so it tries to show what may be the only courtesy the enemy will tolerate, namely, a greeting. The peacemaker looks the enemy right in the eye and says, “Good morning, John.” And he says it with a longing for peace in his heart, not with a phony gloss of politeness to cover his anger.” – [Desiring God](#)

A peacemaker – a child of the gospel – is someone who longs for peace and works for peace but who also acknowledges that some barriers may simply not be able to be overcome. [Allegiance to the king](#) is always of primary importance. Jesus’ blessing pronounced upon those who would be ‘persecuted for the sake of righteousness’ demonstrates that the goal of peace is clearly subordinated to the goal of righteousness. James later supports this in his letter to believers, where he says, “The wisdom from above is **first pure, then peaceable.**” (James 3:17)

Finally, in conclusion, I believe it’s an important detail that being ‘shod with the gospel of peace’ is listed directly after putting on ‘the breastplate of righteousness’, the piece of armour which protects the vital organs, particularly the

heart. Before we set out anywhere to 'negotiate reconciliation' (either personal or as ambassadors of the Prince of Peace), we need to examine our hearts, testing our motives and ensuring our heart is safely guarded against personal deception or impure motives.

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." | Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)

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 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, in fact, 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