

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

Majors And Minors | The Danger Of Extremism

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between [grace](#) and spiritual performance. Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness for all people; not on

the basis of their social status, their ethnicity, or their gender, but on the basis of God's generosity and undeserved grace (Mark 16:15, Luke 14:23).

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

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

Straining Out Gnats, Swallowing Camels*

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

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

The Pharisees 'majored in these minors', presuming that this kind of religiosity made them more spiritual and 'right with

God'. In reality, they were actually inverting the spiritual values that God was really interested in, like mercy, justice, and [faithfulness](#).

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

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

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

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

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

The Pharisees could recite the law by heart yet they couldn't have said what the heart of the law really was. They failed to see or understand Jesus had no interest in setting up rigid

religious and social guidelines for his followers. His focus instead was on majoring in the majors; the gospel and the significant agendas of the kingdom of God.

The Danger Of Extremes

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

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

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

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

Right now, the world is being sharply delineated. Nearly as quickly as the virus has spread, so too has the chatter and the differing opinions about both the cause and the cure. There is an ocean of information and propaganda, together with

an overabundance of access to information, some of it accurate and some of it not.

However, the most disturbing aspect of all this is the noticeable polarisation of people into two opposing groups; *them* and *us*. *And the church is not unaffected in this.*

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

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

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

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

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

Majoring In The Majors: The Gospel + Kingdom Of God

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

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

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

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

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

Therefore, we will also be on guard to avoid any kind of system that employs the use of 'formulas' and 'doctrines' to

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

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

What Does This Look Like In A Pandemic?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Keep Your Eyes On Jesus

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

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

"Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory" | 1 Peter 1:8, ESV

The Redemptive Power Of His Sacrifice

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

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

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

his redemptive sacrifice would live.

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

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

Believing And Becoming In Jesus

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

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

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

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

A Leap Of Faith

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

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

We look around us and see how things presently are, in this life, **and yet we believe that there is more** and that **we can be more**. This belief is underpinned by the [evidence of the risen Christ](#). Resurrection, the most unbelievable, incredible event to have possibly happened **has** happened. When Christians gather together for communion, we celebrate and witness to this remarkable event. The ramification for us as believers is not a small thing: the [same power](#) that raised Jesus from the dead now lives in us!

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

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

Jesus promised his followers that he would be with them, even to the end of the world. This is his promise to us. Sometimes

he will lead us through fire and across water, through deep valleys and up high mountains. There is no promise that the Christian life will always be easy but he promises he will never leave us or forsake us.

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

Faith Is Learning From History

We learn a lot from the story of Israel and their exodus from Egypt. When the children of Israel were delivered out of slavery, that moment only signaled the beginning of a journey of faith. And almost immediately, they were brought to the edge of the ocean, with churning water ahead of them and the enemy hard at their heels. There was no way forward and no way back. And then, suddenly, a miracle was performed and God parted the ocean before them – a way out – seemingly impossible but clearly visible. They had to make a decision of faith – to step into that path cut through the ocean and cross through to the other side. Moses, their leader, spoke boldly at this moment:

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

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

We have the story in Matthew 14:24-31 of Peter being called by Jesus to step out of the boat and onto the churning water. And we realise from reading this story that sometimes faith asks

us to step out of the boat, out of the place where it feels comfortable and relatively safe and into the dark and churning ocean. In those moments, too, we must not lower our gaze. Faith will keep us afloat, fear will sink us.

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

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

Keeping Our Eyes On Jesus

How do we keep our eyes on Jesus? How do we ‘follow him’ and keep him front and foremost in our minds, day by day?

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

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

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

“The word that saves is right here, as near as the tongue in your mouth, as close as the heart in your chest. It’s the

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

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

What Is A Disciple?

The word disciple occurs frequently throughout the Bible and [‘discipleship’](#) is something that the Bible references often. But what does the word *disciple* actually mean? And what does it mean to be a *disciple of Jesus*?

What Is A Disciple?

Our English language Bibles were translated from manuscripts written primarily in two languages; Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament). The translative history of the Bible is a fascinating journey, from an academic and historical perspective, and is well worth

exploring. You can [read more about the translation process here](#).

In the original language of the New Testament, the word *disciple* is translated from a Greek word, *mathētēs* (μαθητής), from *manthano*, meaning “to learn”. *Mathētēs* therefore means (unsurprisingly) *a learner, a pupil or a scholar*. More accurately though, it means to be a learner *in the style of an apprentice*, that is, someone who not only accepts the views of their teacher but is also practising the same so as to eventually become like their teacher (Matthew 10:24, Luke 6:40).

It’s a word that would have been in common use during ancient times and its meaning was applicable beyond a Christian or religious setting (ie as a disciple of Plato or Socrates). Although the word has several applications, in the widest sense it refers to those who accept the teachings of anyone, not only in belief but also in life and practice.

Who Is A Disciple Of Jesus?

When we come to the Bible, we see the word *disciple* used most often in the context of a follower of Jesus and sometimes of John the Baptist (Matthew 27:57, Luke 14:27, Matthew 11:1, John 3:25). Throughout the gospels, it’s the only name used for those who followed Jesus, and even those who had only been baptised with the baptism of John the Baptist (and hadn’t received the Holy Spirit) were called disciples (Acts 19:1-4).

It would be accurate to say that a disciple of Jesus was someone who [believed the teachings of Jesus](#), who surrendered to his leadership, and who endeavoured to imitate his life.

When we move into the early history of the church (found in the book called the Acts of the Apostles), we see these disciples began to be called *Christians* (from the Greek word Χριστιανός (*Christianos*), meaning “follower of Christ”) (Acts

11:26).

The Acts Of The Apostles

The book of the Acts of the Apostles provides a unique glimpse into the story of the early Christians, and to a time when these disciples of Jesus took their faith and began boldly proclaiming it to the world. In Acts, we are observing the very birth of Christianity – the movement which recognised and preached a resurrected Jesus as the promised saviour and king of the world.

The Book of Acts opens with this introductory paragraph by its author, Luke, also one of the four Gospel writers and one of Jesus' 12 closest disciples:

“Dear Theophilus, in the first volume of this book I wrote on everything that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he said goodbye to the Apostles, the ones he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven. After his death, he presented himself alive to them in many different settings over a period of forty days. In face-to-face meetings, he talked to them about things concerning the kingdom of God.” | Acts 1:1-4, MSG

The book's narrative describes the disciples as first-hand witnesses to the resurrected Jesus; witnesses to the astonishing truth of the Gospel message, and how they took that Good News to the world, beginning first in Jerusalem, then moving throughout Judea and eventually to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8).

The interactive map below shows the power of their witness to the gospel message, demonstrating not just areas where professing Christians are the majority of the population, nor where Christianity has been declared the national religion, but also the true extent of the global spread of the gospel since the first century. It's a powerful, visual reminder of

God's promise to save people "from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9)

What Was The Good News?

Peter the Apostle, when making his speech to the Jews in Jerusalem after the day of Pentecost, summarised the Good News in this way:

"Jesus the Nazarene, a man thoroughly accredited by God to you – the miracles and wonders and signs that God did through him are common knowledge – this Jesus, following [the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God](#), was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. But God untied the death ropes and [raised him up](#). Death was no match for him...All Israel, then, know this: There's no longer room for doubt – God made him Master and Messiah, this Jesus whom you killed on a cross. Change your life. Turn to God and [be baptised](#), each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is targeted to you and your children, but also to all who are far away–whomever, in fact, our Master God invites." | Acts 2:26-40, MSG

Peter is attesting to the validity of Jesus of Nazareth, as God's appointed saviour and king. He is witnessing to the truth of the resurrected Jesus and the confirmation of his true identity as Son of God. And he is urging his listeners to believe this truth, to surrender their lives to Jesus and receive God's promise of forgiveness of sins and the hope of life, even after death. In short, he is urging them to become disciples of Jesus, followers and imitators of the Christ. He is urging them to become Christians!

The number of people who heard his message and believed his words on that day was incredible! The book of Acts tells us

that over 3000 people [were baptised](#). And not only that, every day their number grew as God added those who were saved. (Acts 2:47)

“That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptised and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, [the life together](#), the common meal, and the prayers.” | Acts 2:41-42, MSG

The Teachings Of Jesus: The Gospel Of Good News

Peter was, in reality, only reconfirming the teachings of Jesus; that of the Good News of salvation for humanity and truth of the kingdom of God; God’s rightful rule and sovereignty over all the earth ([Matthew 16:27](#), [Luke 21:26-27](#), [James 2:5](#), [1 Corinthians 2:9](#), [Numbers 14:21](#), [Psalm 22:27](#), [Habakkuk 2:14](#)).

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” | Mathew 4:23, NIV

“Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled,” He said, “and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the gospel!” | Mark 1:14, BSB

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed.” | Isaiah 61:1, NLT

“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but

sinners.” | Matthew 9:13, ESV

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” | Luke 17:20-21, NKJV

How Do I Become A Disciple?

Becoming a Christian and becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ **is the same thing**; we just don't really use the word disciple much anymore. The basis for us to become Christians remains the same as for those in the first century, who were Jesus' followers. So what is it that makes us a *disciple of Jesus*? What is it that makes us a *Christian*?

We need to look no further than Peter's words to the people at Jerusalem (Acts 2:22-42):

- We must believe that Jesus was **God-sent and God-endorsed, as the appointed saviour and king of the world**. We acknowledge that Jesus came as one of us, [like us in every way](#), so that he could defeat sin and death on our behalf (1 John 4:14, Galatians 4:4, John 3:16, Hebrews 2:14-17, Romans 5:12).
- We must believe that Jesus **died for the sins of the world** and was [raised to life, never to die again](#) (1 John 2:2, John 4:42, 1 John 3:5, Acts 2:32, Acts 3:15, 1 Corinthians 6:14, Romans 8:11).
- We must be **convicted of our sin, acknowledging our need for God's forgiveness and recognising that [the name of Jesus](#) is the only name under heaven by which humanity [can be saved](#)** (Ecclesiastes 7:20, 1 John 1:9-10, Romans 3:23, James 1:15 Acts 4:12, 1 Timothy 2:5).

- We must believe in the teachings of Jesus and **surrender to his [guidance and leadership in our life](#)**, not only as an apprentice to a teacher, but 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).
- We must **follow [the example of Jesus and be baptised](#)**, as directed in Mark 16:16. Baptism is God's arrangement for a person to gain a clean conscience based on their faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We choose to end one kind of life and begin another and the way of demonstrating that choice is to be baptised 'for the repentance of our sins'. The Bible compares baptism to burial, 'dying' to our past course of life and beginning a new one as a Christian, dedicated to God and saved through Jesus (Matthew 3:15, Matthew 10:28, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Colossians 2:12, Mark 16:16, Matthew 28:19-20, Ephesians 4:4-6).

Written about 300 years after the birth of Christ, [the Apostles' Creed](#) summarises foundational Christian beliefs taught by the early church and is a bold declaration of our faith in Jesus Christ. It particularly affirms the teachings regarding Jesus, that of his virgin birth, his crucifixion, his death, and his subsequent resurrection; core elements of the gospel of good news. It is a primary statement of faith shared by Christians around the world, uniting them in common union with the work achieved in and through Jesus.

Not Just A Disciple Of Jesus But Family

Of God

Welcome to the family! When God puts you in Jesus, He also puts you [in community](#). When you believe and are baptised, you become a disciple of Jesus – a Christian – but not only that, you also become a valued member of God’s family (1 Corinthians 12:27, Galatians 4:7, Romans 8:17, Galatians 3:26, 1 John 3:1-2, Ephesians 2:18-19, Ephesians 3:14-19). Becoming a Christian means you join a great cloud of faithful witnesses to the truth of the resurrected Christ (Hebrews 12:1), as believers of the message of Good News and disciples of Christ the King.

“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.” | [Romans 10:10, NIV](#)

<https://vimeo.com/113801439>

The Gospel Of Good News

When we think of the gospel, we can tend to think of it in only ‘New Testament’ terms. We might be of the impression that the gospel was something that came about around the time of Jesus and subsequently spread throughout the world by his followers. While this is somewhat true, upon more extensive reading we learn that the message of good news is much older than we thought. Yes, it concerns Jesus but it was preached long before his actual birth. In reality, it’s a message as old as time itself and its inception stretches right back to the garden of Eden. And it’s a message of good news and hope

for all people!

A Little Background On The Word “Gospel”

“Good news” is the English translation of the Koine Greek word ‘euangélion’ (εὐαγγέλιον) (εὖ eû “good” + ἄγγελος ángelos “messenger”). In Old English, it was translated as ‘gōdspel’ (gōd “good” + spel “news”). The Old English term was retained as ‘gospel’ in Middle English Bible translations and has subsequently been carried forward into Modern English translations.

Incidentally, our modern word, evangelise or evangelist comes from the original Greek and carries the same meaning – one who preaches or tells good news, a ‘messenger of good’. The writers of the gospels are sometimes known as the Four Evangelists, for this reason.

The message of ‘good news’ is taught throughout the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and it’s certainly no coincidence that these books are collectively known as The Gospels.

But What Is The Good News?

The Gospel is described as “the good news of the Kingdom of God and the things which concern Jesus Christ”. Jesus himself preached about the coming kingdom of God, together with John the Baptist. Later, men like Paul the Apostle and Peter continued the message of good news

“Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God.” – Mark 1:14, KJV

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ . . . And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom . . .” – Matthew 4:17, 23, NIV, KJV

“But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptised.” – Acts 8:12, HCSB

“For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” – Acts 28:30-31, NIV

In The Beginning...

[God's purpose](#), from the beginning was to populate earth with people He could call His family, who were like him in every way. God created humans with this in mind and established the principle of **free choice**. He wanted us to **choose** Him, to **want** to be like Him. This kind of living, that reflects a desire to honour God and manifest His character to the world is what God calls the beginning of the kingdom of His son ([Colossians 1:13](#)).

Unfortunately, when given the choice, humanity chose wrong. We acted in a way completely foreign to God's character. Motivated by pride and selfishness and driven by impatience, we chose to “make ourselves like God” on our terms, not His. This choice, the first act of sin in the world, brought about its awful consequence – mortality, and being driven from God's presence in shame and disappointment. This is the story of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the garden of Eden.

Jesus Is The Good News

Yet God didn't give up. His desire to be at one with us, to complete His purpose with humanity, was so intrinsic that He immediately put in place a plan to bridge that ravine, to heal the breach between Himself and His creation. He did not allow His purpose to be compromised by our choice. This extraordinary plan was revealed in [His son, Jesus](#).

“Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” – 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, BSB

The saving acts of God, due to the work of Jesus on the cross and Jesus' resurrection from the dead, bring reconciliation (“atonement”) between people and God and it is a message of hope for the whole world (Luke 14:15-24). Through Jesus, we have forgiveness of sins and the blessing of God's grace.

The Message Isn't New

It would be easy to assume that the gospel was introduced by Jesus during his earthly ministry. Yet, this message isn't new at all – it's much older than that and, in fact, Revelation 14:6 calls it ‘the eternal gospel’, “proclaimed to all those who dwell on earth.”

In Galatians 3:8, we read the following: “Scripture foresaw that God would justify the [Gentiles](#) by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” Here, Paul is referencing a time in Abraham's life, [shortly after he left Ur](#), when God blessed him and told him the purpose He had with him.

“I will bless those who bless you, but I will put a curse on anyone who puts a curse on you. Everyone on earth will be blessed because of you.” – Genesis 12:3, CEV

This blessing is further clarified by the words of Peter the Apostle in Act 3:28, where he was addressing the Jews, Abraham's descendants. He tells them, “You are the children of

the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in your descendants shall **all the families of the earth be blessed**. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to **bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.**" (Act 3:25-26)

Jesus Christ himself revealed that the Kingdom of God has been prepared for us for far longer than we can imagine.

"Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." – Matthew 25:34, ESV

God's plan of blessing has been in place since the beginning. It was made known to Abraham and he was promised a descendant who would fulfill God's promise of blessing for the world, first to the Jewish people and then, to all peoples of the world. In this way, Abraham was able to look forward in faithful anticipation of the future when the saviour would be born, to fulfill the promise of blessing made to him. Jesus confirms this, when speaking to the Jews (who doubted he was the one who had been promised).

"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." – John 8:56, NIV

Our Purpose Is God's Purpose

Our purpose and the reason for our creation is to be part of God's family. The good news is that through Jesus, we can be! We can become part of God's family and part of His kingdom community right now, saved through the work of Jesus. Not only that, we can look forward to a future that is full of hope and blessing, trusting in God's promise that has been established from the beginning of the world.

God has great plans for you, if you choose to accept them. The gospel message is one of hope and blessing and **everyone** is invited to take part.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” – Jeremiah 29:11, NIV