

# When Faith Hurts: Recognising Spiritual Abuse – Part 1

## The Spark That Lit The Flame

One of the contentious sparks that finally lit the flame we now know as the [Reformation](#) was the idea that the common person didn't need priests to mediate between them and God. At the time, the Church (the catholic Church – still the only established Church in the West) taught that grace was dispensed through the sacraments, which could only be administered by ordained clergy. Access to God was mediated through the priesthood, creating a system where spiritual life was filtered through human hands.

John Wycliffe (c 1328-1384), often called the Morning Star of the Reformation, had become outraged by what he considered the moral and political corruption among the priesthood and the spiritual abuse of the laity – the ordinary members of the church. He believed that the priests had elevated themselves so far above the laity so as to create a false barrier between God and people.

*Protesting* against the commonly accepted practices of the time, he contended that:

– Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity. Believers don't need a priest to confess sins, access God's grace, or receive salvation. Christ alone is sufficient.

– The Bible is the final and highest authority in matters of faith and practice, over and above church tradition or clerical interpretation – **sola scriptura**. I've written about traditions elsewhere so you can read more about that [here](#).

*Sola scriptura* – Latin for 'Scripture alone' doesn't mean that

traditions or rituals lack value or don't play a meaningful role in the life of faith, it simply means they don't supersede or replace the authority of Scripture – and where they conflict with it, Scripture always takes precedence.

John Wycliffe was not the first to make such an assertion regarding the sufficiency of Jesus or the primacy of Scripture. More than a thousand years earlier, Paul the Apostle took the Galatian church to task over their departing of the faith for what he called *a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all*.

Paul [warned against doctrines](#) that add human effort or tradition to Christ's finished work, emphasising that true faith is rooted in grace, not in adherence to rituals or human-imposed standards (Galatians 3:5-6, Ephesians 2:8). *The work of Christ is sufficient*, he reminded the Galatians.

He would no doubt have agreed with John Wycliffe, who – over 1,300 years later – maintained that any system *prioritising performance over grace, claiming exclusive access to truth, or defining salvation as a list of correct beliefs rather than trust in Christ*, not only distorts the gospel but also sows the seeds for communities rife with spiritual abuse.

## **What Is Spiritual Abuse?**

Spiritual abuse is when a person or system uses God, Scripture, or religious authority to control, manipulate, shame, or harm others. It distorts faith into a tool of domination rather than love and freedom.

The tragedy of spiritual abuse is that it often masquerades as faithfulness, couched in biblical language. Words like *'truth'*, *'spiritual concern'*, or *'loving correction'* are often employed, with the catchphrase *truth spoken in love* used as a cover for conversations that contain cloaked judgment, spiritual superiority, or subtle control.

While this phrase – *truth spoken in love* – does come from the Bible, when Paul uses it, he is encouraging believers to grow in maturity, shown in the way they demonstrate love (Ephesians 4:15), not as it's often twisted to mean:

*"I'm telling you you're deceived... but in love."*

*"I'm about to say something that's actually quite harsh... but only because I'm loving."*

*"I'm cutting you off... because I love you."*

## **Spiritually Abusive Systems Replicate Themselves**

Spiritually abusive people harm other people. However, spiritually abusive *systems* don't just harm individuals – they also *replicate themselves*.

In environments where fear, control, and rigid doctrine are normalised as "*truth*," people begin to internalise those patterns, often believing they are acting faithfully.

Over time, they adopt the same language, the same tactics, the same narrow lens – not out of malice, but because the culture has shaped them to see spiritual pressure as love, and manipulation as discipleship.

In this way, spiritually abusive cultures inevitably produce spiritually abusive people, many of whom genuinely believe they're helping others when they are, in fact, passing on the very harm they once received.

Of course, it's important to recognise that not every disagreement or correction is abusive. Sometimes, truth really does need to be spoken in love – with humility, gentleness, and a genuine desire for someone's good.

The difference lies in the posture of the heart and the impact

of the words: is the goal to restore, or to control? To build up, or to tear down? To *win*, or to *win to Christ*?

## **The Cure For Spiritual Abuse**

And this leads us to the cure for spiritual abuse, which is, I believe, a Jesus-centric mindset. While sound theology matters – I’m the first to advocate for deep, serious, personal and corporate engagement with Scripture, a robust and living theology will spring from *understanding and experiencing who God is and what He has done for us, in Jesus*, not simply by giving agreement to a statement or creed of ‘theological beliefs’.

Like a concentric circle spreading outward, Jesus himself is the core from which every part of the Christian life flows. He is not just the centrepiece of our theology, but the source and shape of our entire faith – the origin of our love, the measure of our truth, the heartbeat of our worship. *He is our life*.

When Jesus is at the centre, everything else falls into place: doctrine aligns with grace, leadership reflects humility, spiritual communities become places that are safe, and mercy and judgment kiss one another.

But when something else takes the centre – a system, a doctrine, a leader, a fear – the circles become distorted, and what flows outward can easily become controlling or harmful.

Spiritual health begins not with getting all the answers right, but with keeping Jesus – who will lead us in all truth – at the core.

## **How Do I Know If I’m Being Spiritually Abusive?**

Most people who perpetuate spiritual abuse don’t *think* they’re

being abusive. They believe they're protecting truth, upholding righteousness, or caring for souls. But underneath that often sits pride, fear, or a deeply ingrained belief that control equals faithfulness.

How can we tell the difference? How do we know if we've slipped from '*contending earnestly for the faith*' to controlling others in the name of faith, or defending doctrine at the cost of love?

### **1. We frame disagreement as deception.**

We view disagreement with someone over theology as them *leaving the faith, being deceived or falling away*. For us, unity might look like uniformity, yet they are not the same thing. The Bible speaks of a universal, visible and invisible Church that is wildly diverse in how its members look, think or worship. Yet, within all this difference, its people are deeply connected in love and purpose, through mutual respect and, as touched on above, through the core central faith in Jesus Christ.

Uniformity, on the other hand, silences diversity in the name of truth and is often about control and fear of difference or 'mess', preferring the idea of enforcing group-think at all costs.

### **2. We speak with absolutes, black and whites, and hyper-literals.**

We see the landscape of the Bible as black and white without nuance or the possibility of alternative interpretations to ours. Passages are applied absolutely and literally, often without consideration for context or in the light of grace.

People will try to say the Bible is black and white on every subject but it's not, not by half. There's plenty of grey, and bold, glorious colour too. There's space for openness and conversation and listening and learning and for seeing things

from different angles. While there are significant core doctrines that its not possible to differ on and still be called *Christian* (for example, the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus), there are plenty of second and third-tier theological positions that are fascinating to discuss, interesting to pull apart, and which definitely, absolutely do not define *whether someone is saved or not*. *Eschatology* – theology that deals with *the end times* – is one such topic.

### **3. We equate someone's worth or standing before God with their beliefs or behaviour**

We treat people differently, depending on whether their theology aligns with ours. Rather than seeing every person in the image of God, we may consciously or unconsciously categorise them as '*in*' or '*out*', '*friend*' or '*foe*', and, as is common in some closed conservative communities, kindness, closeness, or blessing may be withheld – *shunning* – from those who we deem to have gone astray. We view this withdrawing as a *sad but necessary discipline*.

### **4. We think we are always right.**

We may feel the need to constantly correct others, believing that our interpretation of Scripture isn't just valid but that it's the *only* valid one. When someone doesn't share our interpretation, we may consider them to be lacking understanding, spiritually shallow, or simply deceived, rather than considering that we could, in fact, be wrong.

Assuming our interpretation is the only valid one shuts down meaningful dialogue and puts us in the place of ultimate authority—where only God belongs. It leaves no room for learning, growth, or the Spirit's work in others. This mindset *turns faith into arrogance, not conviction*, and risks dividing the body of Christ over pride rather than truth.

# How Do I Know If A Spiritual Community Is Spiritually Abusive?

The signs and red flags of a spiritually abusive community are the same as those you'd see in an individual – only magnified and reinforced through groupthink, tradition, or fear. Over time, they become woven into [the fabric of the culture itself](#), forming an entrenched and often intractable environment that is difficult to shift or challenge.

In spiritually abusive communities, there is a **certainty over humility** that defines the culture. Opposing or dissenting views or doubts are discouraged and questioning the status quo is seen as disobedience.

There is **control disguised as care**. Spiritually abusive communities often blur or erase healthy boundaries, becoming overly involved in members' personal lives.

**Scripture is misused**, not only taken out of context, but applied selectively, as and when it suits the agenda of those in control. The Bible becomes less a story of redemption and more a tool for behaviour management. In these settings, Scripture is no longer a living word that points people to Jesus – it becomes *a system of proof-texts* used to maintain power.

In Spiritually abusive communities, **acceptance depends on total agreement or compliance**, with any wrestling with faith or theology discouraged, dismissed, or defined as rebellion, weakness, or a lack of spiritual maturity. Doubt isn't treated as part of the journey – it's treated as a threat to the group's stability. As a result, people learn to suppress questions, keep quiet about struggles, and conform outwardly just to stay connected.

In spiritually abusive communities, there is often a **hyper-focus on *behaving* rather than *becoming***. The church, in

reality, is a messy but vital gathering of flawed, sinning humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God – asking questions, voicing doubts, stumbling forward in faith. When behaviour modification becomes the primary marker of spiritual maturity, it produces only superficially ‘good’ people who learn to hide their deepest fears and darkest sins.

Yet the church must be the place where those hidden things can be brought into the light – not met with shame, but healed with grace, love, and truth that restores rather than condemns.

## **How Do I Know If I’m Being or Have Been Spiritually Abused?**

Whether in a community or relationship, the signs of spiritual abuse are often subtle.

You might feel confused, fearful, or disconnected from God – as though you need permission to be close to Him. You might suppress questions to stay accepted. You might feel like your worth depends on performance or belief alignment. You might experience distancing and withdrawal upon asking uncomfortable questions or sharing truly where you’re at.

These are warning signs. Spiritual abuse isn’t always overt – sometimes it whispers insidiously, hidden in invisible codes and unspoken expectations.

The spirit of the Reformation was that *Christ alone is sufficient* – the one mediator between God and humanity. We are made right with God through Jesus Christ, not through traditions, systems, sacramentally dispensed grace, or the mediation of others.

At its core, spiritual abuse distorts the relationship a person has with God. It inserts human authority where there should be direct access, making people feel as though they



need permission, mediation, or perfect obedience to be accepted by Him. Instead of creating space where people can personally draw close to God, spiritual abuse places leaders, systems, or expectations in the way – creating unnecessary barriers to genuine, intimate relationship with God and laying ‘burdens on people which are too heavy to bear’.

If this resonates with you – if you’ve felt the weight of silence, shame, or misplaced authority in the name of faith – know that healing is possible. In Part 2, I’ll explore what that looks like: how Christ heals what systems distort, and how to rebuild a faith rooted in freedom, not fear.

*“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” – 2 Corinthians 3:17, NIV*

## **What Should I Do If I’m In A Spiritually Abusive Community?**

*Leave.*

Systemic spiritual abuse is dangerous, deceptive, and, ultimately, destructive. These environments distort your view of God, damage your sense of self, and normalise control under the guise of faith. Even if you don’t feel personally harmed, staying means you risk becoming complicit – reinforcing harmful systems, silencing questions, and modelling that this version of “faith” is acceptable for the next generation.

You don’t have to stay in a place just because it calls itself ‘*the faith*’, ‘*the truth*’, or ‘*the way*’. There’s only one way, truth and life, and his name is Jesus. Leaving a toxic or spiritually abusive system is not leaving Jesus. *In fact, it may be the most faithful thing you can do.*

You might have doubts about taking such an extreme course of action and wonder, can a spiritually abusive system be *rehabilitated* or should it be *burnt to the ground*?

It depends. Reform is possible, but rare and unlikely. More often than not, if the roots are rotten, the system needs to die, not just be repainted.

When power is centralised and unquestionable, when protecting the institution matters more than healing the people, when spiritual control is baked deep into the DNA, *then it's time to light the match.*

In Part 2, I'll explore what recovery from spiritual abuse looks like – how faith can heal, how trust can be slowly rebuilt, and what it takes to reimagine church through the lens of grace.

I'll also touch on what it might mean for a healthy person to remain within a broken system, and the bare minimum that would need to be in place for that to be a wise choice moving forward. Look for 'When Faith Heals | Recovering From Spiritual Abuse – Part 2' coming soon.

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## By One Man

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

I like the Apostle Paul.

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

He doesn't shy away from telling it how it was; the reality that his zeal for God had been seriously misplaced early on,

and that he had been a violent persecutor and destroyer of the very faith he was now thankful to call his own.

He doesn't downplay the facts of his former life; that not only had he been zealous for the traditions of his fathers, he had also been considered an 'up and coming' amongst his peers, his upward trajectory in Judaism eclipsing many of those his own age (Galatians 1:13).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"The narratives of Genesis focus on conflict and resolution.*

*God's purpose from the beginning is to have His presence fill the earth; humans are to image God and subdue the earth, i.e., bring about order and fruitfulness in creation (Genesis 1–2). Conflict enters the story when humans rebel against God (Genesis 3). Shalom is shattered, and the earth is cursed. Further degeneration takes place (Genesis 4–6) until God brings judgment and mercy (Genesis 6–9). Humans then attempt to restore God's presence (Genesis 11) before God launches His own initiative to re-establish His presence on Earth (the covenant). Genesis 1–11, then, is the founding story of humanity, ending in crisis. These narratives give a real and true assessment of God's initial purposes and the human plight. Genesis 12–50 is the founding story of the nation with whom the covenant is eventually made at Sinai. The covenant establishes the relationship to Abraham and his descendants, provides the structure for living in God's presence, and lays the foundation for God's presence to be established on earth." | [BioLogos](#)*

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

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

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

of the power that Sin gives death.

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

## **By One: Life In Christ**

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

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

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

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

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

In fact, this hero's [redemptive work](#) *on behalf of humanity* would be deeply connected to *his own humanity*. He had to be

human, like us, in order to make atonement for the sin of humanity (Isaiah 53:6, Hebrews 2:17)

As a human, he would still feel keenly the pull of Sin's seductive promise, the desire and temptation, as *the first Adam* had, to undertake this battle on his own terms. He would wrestle with the terrifying but necessary reality of confronting death up close; not just any kind of death but the painful and humiliating death of a traitor.

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

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

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

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

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

Scripture could not be any clearer that the victory over Sin

and death was going to be God's, accomplished through the sending of His Son, the Word-Made-Flesh. Sent in the likeness of all of humanity, but in whom dwelt all the fullness of God, only the Son of God would be able to overcome and defeat our greatest enemy.

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

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

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

## **Deeper Magic**

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

*At that moment they heard from behind them a loud noise—a great cracking, deafening noise as if a giant had broken a giant's plate...The Stone Table was broken into two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan. "Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?" "Yes!" said a great voice from behind their backs. "It is more magic." They looked round. There, shining in the sunrise, larger than they had seen him before, shaking his mane (for it had apparently grown again) stood Aslan himself. "Oh, Aslan!" cried both the children, staring*



*up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad... "But what does it all mean?" asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer. "It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward." | C S Lewis*

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

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

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

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

*"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even **Christ has been raised**. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are*

*still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.” | 1 Corinthians 15:17, NIV*

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus didn't just overcome death, his death also made reparation for all the sins of the world. Sin, in its

entirety, was dealt with, once and for always\*\* (Romans 6:10). His resurrection was both proof and promise that the war against Sin had been waged and won. Death has lost its power. Those in Christ *will live*, no longer be held by death but merely passing through it. They too, like him, will be raised to life, never again to experience death.

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

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

It's no wonder Paul concludes his thoughts on this subject with these inspiring words: *“In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!* (Romans 8:7-39, CEV).

This is indeed good, good news!

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

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

**A large part of the inspiration for this article came from the**

worship song 'This My Soul' By The Gray Havens. It's truly worth a listen and captures Paul's sentiments from Romans 5 and 6 perfectly. This song is one of my personal favourites.

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## The Parallels In Communion

*"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." | 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17, ESV*

### We Who Are Many Are One

Paul the Apostle's words, here in Corinthians, reference the deep and powerful truth which is embedded in the Christian ordinance of communion. The truth that, in taking the cup and sharing the bread, we are fully participating in Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus is the common element that binds believers together and his sacrifice is what makes the new resurrection life possible for every person who believes in his saving name.

This participation together in drinking wine and breaking bread is a compelling witness to the 'common union' believers share in the blood and body of Christ, the sharing in his sin-conquering death and his life-giving resurrection. There is nothing more powerful or significant for a church community than remembering the very thing which gave the church its birth and which binds each member together as part of 'the whole'.

For this reason, sharing communion is not just about remembering the death of Jesus, including the anguish,

surrender, and sacrifice but also about celebrating his resurrection; the vanquishing of sin and the victory over death, won for every person who associates with his name. The new creation was born from his sacrifice and confirmed by his resurrected life, of which we are now all a part, bound together by the life-giving spirit of Jesus himself.

Sharing communion together as believers is primarily a time for celebration, for thanksgiving and praise, for “by his blood and in his name, in his freedom we are free!”

In celebrating this ordinance together, believers are not just connected to Jesus but to each other. It’s significant that Jesus associates the institution of communion – which speaks of his sacrifice and death, motivated by love – with the importance of his followers showing his love by **loving one another**.

During the meal (Matthew 26:17–30, Mark 14:12–26, Luke 22:7–39, and John 13:1–17:26), Jesus takes the bread and shares it with his disciples, telling them that it is symbolic of his body, soon to be broken for them in death. He shares the cup of wine, telling them it is a symbol of his blood, poured out for the forgiveness of their sins.

He gently tells his disciples that he will only be with them a little longer, referencing, of course, his impending betrayal and crucifixion. He then gives them a ‘new commandment’, to live by once he is gone:

*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” – John 13:34-35, ESV*

Jesus first instituted the ordinance of communion, by which his followers would remember him, during his last meal on earth with his closest disciples, but this meal had its roots

in a much deeper, incredibly powerful story of deliverance and freedom.

## A Story Of Deliverance

The institution of communion had its origins in an ancient Jewish festive meal known as 'Passover. Celebrated annually, it commemorated the deliverance of the nation of Israel from bondage in Egypt.

The early chapters of the book of Exodus tell of the origins and background of the Passover (Exodus 1-12). Forcibly enslaved upon the accession of a new Pharaoh to the Egyptian throne, the people of Israel were subjected to cruelty, forced labour, and intolerable work and living conditions. In an effort to cull their numbers, Pharaoh had issued a directive of neonaticide for any male baby born. As soon as the baby was delivered, he was to be killed by the attending midwives. It was a terrible time for the people of Israel – cruelly mistreated and living in hopelessness, with no means to save themselves.

With heavy burdens bitterly borne, they desperately lifted their voices heavenward. God heard their cries for rescue and remembers his promises to their patriarchs [Abraham](#), Isaac, and Jacob, long ago (Exodus 2:24).

*“And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...” – Exodus 3:7-9*

God stepped into their misery and suffering and promises to deliver them out of the affliction of Egypt. Through a series of plagues, demonstrating His almighty power, and the final dramatic death of Egypt's own firstborn, God exercises His

powerful arm of redemption and leads his people out of slavery to freedom and their promised land.

On the night of their leaving, the Israelites prepared unleavened bread and lamb, roasted over the fire. The lamb's blood was brushed on the lintel and two doorposts of every Israelite home. When the Angel of Death went throughout Egypt, killing the firstborn, he would see the blood and 'pass over' that house, sparing all those who were inside.

The night of Passover marked the end of slavery and brought deliverance and the beginning of the people of Israel's journey towards the promised land. Through death and sacrifice, came new life and hope.

The types that can be seen in this event for a Christian's new life are clear. It's no coincidence that Jesus uses this commemorative Passover meal, already 1,500 years old by this time and full of ancient symbology and meaning, to bring his disciples' attention to his own impending death, through which their rescue from 'slavery to sin' will be achieved.

## **Parallels In Leaving Egypt**

Paul the Apostle observes that the events of Israel's exodus and subsequent journey through the wilderness towards the promised land are parallels of a Christian's new life in Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:1-13). He uses Egypt as a metaphor for sin and spiritual darkness and the exodus as an example of the freedom Christians experience in being rescued from the dominion of darkness (Colossians 1:13).

The **first parallel** to note is that of slavery. Just as the people of Israel were completely enslaved to the Egyptian Pharaoh, we are all slaves to sin, born so at birth and only confirmed throughout our lives by our sinful deeds (Romans 5:12, John 8:34). Yet God provided a deliverer, as He did for Israel, and the blood of this deliverer gives [salvation from](#)

[death](#), which we are promised no longer has any hold over us (John 11:25. 1 Corinthians 15:55).

The **second parallel** is, of course, the sacrificial lamb. It is John the Baptist who first introduces Jesus as 'the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). Isaiah, a prophet in Old Testament writings, also prophesied of one who would come to bear the sins of the world and that he would be 'led like a lamb to the slaughter' (Isaiah 53:7). The final book in the Bible, Revelation, confirms that Jesus was indeed the Lamb of God 'slain from the foundation of the world' (1 Peter 1:19, Revelation 13:8).

The theme of a sacrificial lamb has been constant throughout scripture (Genesis 3:21, Genesis 22:8, Numbers 9:12, Ezra 6:19, 2 Chronicles 35:11) and always intended to point forward to Jesus, who would be the ultimate sacrifice for all those who wanted to escape their inherent slavery to sin and death.

The **third parallel** is the deliverer himself. God raised up Moses, a natural-born Israelite to lead His people from Egypt. Adopted into Pharaoh's court as a baby and growing up under the very nose of the ruler of his people, Moses was not an outsider or a stranger but a man just like the people whom he would rescue and lead to freedom. The people of Israel were *his* people and their suffering was intimately connected with the suffering of *his* family.

One of the prophecies concerning Jesus was that he would be 'called out of Egypt'. This reveals the deeper truth about [Jesus' connection to the people he would come to save](#).

*"And he [Joseph] rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet [Hosea 11:1], "Out of Egypt I called my son."  
| Matthew 2:14-15, ESV*



Jesus' redemptive work on behalf of humanity was deeply connected to his own humanity. Although he was the Son of God, and radiant with his Father's glory, he participated in every way in all the experiences of what it means to be human. His ability to sympathise with us and to reconcile on our behalf springs from a complete understanding of what it is like to be human; with all our doubts, fears, temptations, and failures, without ever failing himself. He understood humans because he was human.

A **fourth parallel** exists in connection with the Passover and Exodus – that is, the crossing of the Red Sea. Paul the Apostle calls this crossing being 'baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea' (1 Corinthians 10:1) and comments that the Israelites all drank the same spiritual drink, which was Christ.

*"For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ." | 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, ESV*

Like the people of Israel, every person who desires to follow Jesus and 'drink from that spiritual rock' must first pass through the water of baptism, 'under the cloud and through the sea'. The journey only truly begins on the other side of the ocean.

These parallels in the exodus story to our own Christian salvation are remarkable. They demonstrate the absolute power of God to achieve His purpose and that His plan of salvation has been in motion from the beginning of the world. God is on the move and God has always been on the move!

Paul reminds his readers that "all these things [that occurred

to Israel] happened to them as examples for us” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Their defeats, joys, sufferings and victories were experienced as people who were ‘God’s witnesses’ (Isaiah 43:10) and from their stories, we can draw powerful truths about what God has done and is still doing for us.

The fact is, God moved heaven and earth to rescue His people Israel and He has done nothing less than this for us, through the sending of His son, while we were still ‘in Egypt’.

*“But God proves His love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” | Romans 5:8, ESV*

Through something as simple as bread and wine, Christians are reminded of God’s promise of deliverance and of their forgiveness and freedom gifted through Jesus’ sacrifice. It is a tangible witness to the transforming power of [the Gospel](#) in people’s lives and the faithfulness of an eternal God.

[Disciples of Jesus](#) – Christians – have continued to celebrate this new covenant since that time, through the participation together of *communion*, the eating of bread and the drinking of wine ‘in remembrance of Jesus’.

*“All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men’s trespasses against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ: Be reconciled to God....” | 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, BSB*

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**If the story of the Exodus has resonated with you; if you**

recognise that you are 'in Egypt', in slavery to sin and subject to the power of death and you want rescue, I implore you on behalf of Christ – be saved! (2 Corinthians 5:20) God had so much love for the world that He gave His one and only Son, for everyone, and that includes you! The Gospel is Good News for every person and I believe God is still making a move, doing exciting things right here in the Northern Rivers! I'd love to help you be reconciled to Him! (If you're unsure whether the Christian life is for you and just want to chat it over, with no pressure or expectation, I'd love to hear from you too). [Follow the link](#) to get in touch.

Keen to learn more about the book of Exodus? Head on over to [The Bible Project](#) website (click the link) where you'll find a couple of great overview videos.

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## Toxic Faith

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

It seems hard to believe that people who have answered Jesus' call to a life of freedom could so easily lose the sense of joy and relief they first felt. It's difficult to understand why Christians who have been made free and 'alive in Christ' would choose to return to a kind of spirituality that slowly imprisons the mind and poisons the soul. How does a message that speaks clearly of God's love – a life of salvation in Jesus by His grace – become perverted and distorted, becoming instead a culture of performance-driven expectations, demanded by an unfair and intolerant God?

*"God didn't go to all the trouble of sending His Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again." | John 3:17, MSG*

Yet for many Christians, this is exactly where they find themselves. It may be early into their Christian journey or many years later, but somewhere along the way, their perception of Christianity becomes misshapen and their sense of peace, fulfillment, and relief dissipates.

Religious life becomes exhausting; they feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained and trapped. They may begin to judge themselves or others around them by what they do, what they wear, what they say. They become consumed by rules, preoccupied with fault and blame, and heavily focused on performance – their own or others'. Something that was meant to empower them and set them free has rendered them powerless – they are stuck, with no way forward and no way out.

The simple truth of being 'saved by grace through faith alone' has been turned on its head, becoming 'the gospel of acceptance with God through performance'. Their simple faith in Jesus as the only source of life and acceptance with God has become toxic. Or perhaps, sadly, they never had that simple faith to begin with.

## **Toxic Faith**

Toxic faith is a destructive and dangerous relationship with a religious system, not with God, that allows this system to control a person's life in the name of God. It is a system where another gospel is preached – not one of freedom and liberty and acceptance through grace, but one, in reality, of enslavement to rituals and rules.

Seeking God's approval on the basis of your own religious behaviour is toxic faith. Anything that adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching. A true and meaningful relationship with God can never be sustained on this basis.

This deconstruction of faith is not just a problem that modern

Christians struggle with. The first-century church at Galatia also dealt with this issue and the damage caused by this 'false gospel' is catalogued throughout the letter written by Paul to the Galatians.

The tone of Paul's opening words is one of incredulity at the situation in which the Galatians find themselves.

*"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all." | Galatians 1:6, NIV*

The Greek word used here for 'desert' means 'to defect'; and it's a defection, not from a denomination or doctrine, but from 'Him who called you by grace'. It's a severing of the real and personal relationship a Christian has with God. And it's a distortion of the gospel Paul first preached to them, Christ's gospel, of forgiveness of sins by grace – by Jesus' performance – and not by their own. In fact, Paul says, it's really no gospel at all.

Paul takes the issue the Galatians are dealing with very seriously. When a spiritual life of grace and rest is replaced with a life of imposed works, it's a hugely serious issue.

But what was happening in Galatia for Paul to be so up-in-arms? What induced him to tackle the situation with such passion, to the point of stating the following words, not once but twice?:

*"Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach **a gospel other than the one we preached to you**, let them be **under God's curse!** As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you **a gospel other than what you accepted**, let them be **under God's curse!**" | Galatians 1: 8-9, NIV*

## Law Versus Grace

Paul had been converted from a life steeped in [religious tradition](#) and law, a life that gave him privilege, prestige, and power. He had used that power to persecute the church of God, systematically destroying it, until one day He was confronted by the risen Jesus, and a message that was radically different to everything he thought he knew.

Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a personal saviour offering life and freedom through the saving work of Jesus. Paul discovered that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and, in fact, was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God's promises.

Paul learned of the **true gospel** – that of being 'saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, lest any man should boast' (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This is the gospel that He originally preached to the Galatians and which they had gladly received. Yet, it is with dismay that he hears that religious leaders of the old school had come into the church, reintroducing old ways, law-keeping, and an abundance of religious rules and regulations. One of these religious rules was the rite of circumcision, which they were insisting Christians should undertake. Circumcision, in that time, was the ultimate act of external religious performance, and was being promoted as added 'proof of spirituality'.

*'Yes', they would have said 'faith in Jesus is important and you absolutely must have it. But it's **not enough**. In order to find positive standing with God, you must also be circumcised'.*

In other words, there was a group in Galatia propounding the

idea that right standing with God depends on what Jesus did **plus** additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken. This is completely in opposition to the message of the cross, that salvation comes through Jesus' performance, not our own:

*"For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." | 1 Corinthians 1:17-18, ESV*

*"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." | 1 Peter 2:24, NIV*

This 'different gospel' was a serious perversion of God's gift of grace and a not-so-subtle manipulation of the relationship between the individual and God. No wonder Paul was furious.

*"Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily." | Galatians 2:21, MSG*

## **The Collision Of Grace And Spiritual Performance**

The word of God is living and active, and, like a powerful sword, it cuts right through [to the heart](#), judging the thoughts and purposes contained therein. It can be used as an instrument of grace, by reminding us of God's love and showing us how to bring order and purpose to our lives.

In the wrong hands, however, or wrongfully used, the word of

God can be used in ungraceful ways, as a means of shaming others into performing someone else's agenda, in the name of God. In the hands of performance-based people, it can be used as a weapon in order to pressure people into acting differently or to get rid of them if they do not. It can be used to lay burdens on men 'too difficult to bear'.

*"Woe to you experts in religious law as well! You load people down with burdens difficult to bear, yet you yourselves refuse to touch the burdens with even one of your fingers!" | Jesus, Luke 11:46, NET Bible*

The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between grace and spiritual performance. The conflicts the Pharisees initiated with Jesus 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.

The Pharisees 'majored on minors' because precise details of religious life were their passion, but in doing so, they were actually inverting spiritual values. They made uncompromising stands on matters of no particular spiritual importance, while issues of greatest significance were minimised.

Jesus called them 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*



Jesus, in contrast, set out the essential way that a person finds [right standing with God](#):

*“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” | John 14:6, BSB*

*“I am the gate. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture.” | John 10:9, NIV*

*“Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies.” | John 11:25, NIV*

*“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be [saved](#).”  
| Acts 4:12, ESV*

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.

Christians must not be drawn to extremes in a misguided zeal for religious purity but pay attention to the essentials that Jesus so patiently explained. We must be on guard to avoid systems that employ the use of 'formulas' and 'doctrines' to press good people of faith into conformity with a system instead of conformity to Christ. Particularly, we must be on the lookout for cultures that promote or enable power posturing, performance preoccupation, unspoken rules, and a lack of balance.

*“God's steward, an overseer (leader) must be above reproach – not self-absorbed, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not greedy for money. Instead, he*

*must be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it was taught, so that by sound teaching he will be able to encourage others and refute those who contradict this message. For many are rebellious and full of empty talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced.” | Titus 17-10*

*“Leaders are given to the church to protect the flock from legalists, who push religious performance as the means of right standing or favour with God. In Paul’s letter to Titus, he says that the rebellious men **must be silenced**. Unfortunately, in many churches, not only are the leaders not protecting the flock against those who push religious performance, they are the pushers and in bondage to performance themselves.” | Johnson & VanVonderen*

Jesus had no interest in setting up rigid religious and social guidelines for his followers. He chose instead to major on the significant agendas of the kingdom of God. Paul confirms Jesus’ way of living in his final words to the Galatians:

*“For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate. Can’t you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do – submit to circumcision, reject circumcision. It is what God is doing, and He is creating something totally new, a free life! All who walk by this standard are the true Israel of God – His chosen people. Peace and mercy on them!” | Galatians 6:14-16, MSG*

*“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” | John 8:32, NIV*

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**Toxic:** 'Mid 17th century: from medieval Latin toxicus 'poisoned', from Latin toxicum 'poison', from Greek toxikon (pharmakon) '(poison for) arrows', from toxon 'bow'. (Oxford Dictionary). 'Containing or being poisonous material especially when capable of causing death or serious debilitation' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). **Faith:** 'Great trust or confidence in something or someone.' (Cambridge Dictionary)