

# In The Shadow Of The Empire

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Christianity in the first century was a spiritual explosion, fueled by the reality of the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. 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. They preached Jesus everywhere, not just as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, but as Lord, Saviour, and King; over and above Caesar.

Initially planted in the soil of Jerusalem, the gospel message soon spread rapidly beyond Israel; throughout Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the Mediterranean world. In as little as just over 10 years after Jesus' resurrection, Christianity had already reached as far as Rome itself. As Jesus had promised, his disciples were to be his witnesses, even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, Acts 2:41-47).

The area of [Asia Minor](#) was a huge melting pot of ethnicities and also one of the [first areas to flourish with converts to the new religion of Christianity](#). It was also part of the expansive [Roman Empire](#), at the height of its glory, and was therefore subject to Roman law and Roman customs.

Living in the shadow of the Empire would prove a difficult tension for Christians to navigate. No longer [giving allegiance to Caesar](#) as 'Lord of the earth' but instead confessing that this title belonged to Jesus Christ, how were they to behave as people *in the world but not of it*?

As *citizens of heaven*, did the laws of Rome no longer apply to them?

And, as *people of the kingdom*, how were they to live out the values of the kingdom in the society around them? Were they justified in using force to make *the kingdoms of this world the kingdom of the Lord and Christ*?

These are all important questions, not just for those in the first-century church but for every generation of Christians who have come after them.

How should Christians conduct themselves, living in the shadow of the Empire?

## **A Letter From Peter, An Apostle Of Jesus Christ**

The importance of the way a Christian behaves so as to be a credible witness for the gospel is a significant principle emphasised throughout the New Testament. It's a [theme picked up by Peter the Apostle](#) in his first letter to the early churches (1 Peter 1-5).

Discouraged by the persecution they were suffering because of their faith, Peter writes to the early churches throughout Asia Minor to encourage them and to provide wisdom and counsel in their response to the pressures around them and in their life of Christian witness.

### **Keep Your Conduct Honourable**

Firstly, Peter urges them, *keep your conduct honourable*. They are holy people, [called out of darkness](#) into God's marvellous light. Walking in the light means [walking humbly alongside God](#), doing justly and loving kindness. Deceit, malice, hypocrisy, slander, drunkenness, sensual living; these are all fruitless deeds of darkness (Ephesians 5:11) and Peter encourages the church to choose differently, to live exemplary lives in their neighborhoods so that their actions will refute pagan prejudices (1 Peter 2:11-12).

They had been [born again](#), by the living and imperishable Word of God, new creations guarded through faith for a salvation that would one day be revealed to all. Demonstrating lives that paralleled what they preached would witness to the truly supernatural power of the gospel and its ability to effect transformation.

## **Respect And Submit To Authority**

For the Lord's sake, Christians were to show respect to all people and, particularly, to those in authority. They were to be model citizens, subject to every human institution (1 Peter 2:13). As Jesus the master had made clear during his earthly ministry, *render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's*.

Their allegiance to Jesus wasn't an excuse to engage in illegal behaviours, disrespect of their masters, or dishonour of the Emperor or his delegates. *Pay your taxes, submit to the laws of the land, pray for those who have the rule over you*.

They were to treat their service to the Emperor, their master (if they were a slave), and indeed each other as service rendered to the King himself.

The Christian life wouldn't always bring blessing, and the persecution and suffering they were currently experiencing were proof of this reality. Yet Peter encourages them to look to the example of Jesus himself, who demonstrated that the kingdom of heaven advances not through power and might, but through missions of mercy, kindness, and humility and, ultimately, through suffering.

The greatest suffering of all brought about the greatest victory for all (1 Peter 4:13-14).

## **Love Earnestly And Do Good**

They were to love each other earnestly. This was the defining mark of those who belonged to the King and it was how the

world was to know they were his disciples.

Given to hospitality, they were to love with open hearts and generous lives. They were to live bright and unafraid: remembering that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. They were to entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while continuing to doing good to all and especially to those of the household of faith (1 Peter 1:22, Galatians 6:10). *Love and do good to others just as Jesus has loved you. By this, all people will know you are his disciples.*

Early Christianity found particular expression through philanthropy; 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. The early Christian insistence on caring for those *made in the image of God* transformed the ancient world.

## **In The World But Not Of It**

*“The Christian ideal is not freedom from work, but strength to do it; not freedom from temptation, but power to overcome it; not freedom from suffering, but joy in an abiding sense of the Father’s love; not absence from the world, but grace to make the world better for our presence; not holy lives driven from the world, and living apart from it, but holy lives spent in the world and leavening it.” – Ellicott’s Commentary For English Readers.*

Like our early Christian brethren, we too continue to live in the shadow of the Empire. We too must wrestle with issues of allegiance, to show submission to those institutions and ordinances which have authority over us, yet not be conformed

to this world in the process.

We may think this requires us to limit our interaction with the people around us or remove ourselves 'from the world', but this isn't what scripture is concerned with. It's the ruler of this world who is our enemy, not those who are enslaved to him; those who, like us, have also been made in the image of God. They, too, desperately need the presence of Jesus in their lives, whether they know it or not and our Christian witness in this current world is vitally important.

Jesus' prayer for his disciples was not that God would take them out of the world but that He would protect them from the evil one. We must not be conformed to the image of the ruler of this world, nor choose his way, a path that only leads back to darkness (John 12:31, 1 John 1:5-7). Jesus prayed for the protection of his followers, knowing we are left in this world for a specific purpose; to witness to the power of his saving name. *"You are the salt of the earth,"* he said, *"you are the light of the world"*.

Our commission is to live and work, to love and forgive, to mourn, trust, despair and hope [alongside and together with](#) our unbelieving neighbours and friends, all the while telling of the faithfulness of a good God and the hope found in the gospel message.

Our lives – our everyday, mundane, messy, uncomfortable, terrifying, joyful, and thoroughly human lives will be the greatest witness of all to the hope that lies within us.

How we conduct ourselves, as we live in the shadow of the Empire, is still just as relevant and important today as it was for our first-century brethren.

As Christians, we're now citizens of a spiritual city whose builder and maker is God, people of a heavenly kingdom, living out the values and ideals of [that kingdom](#) in this earthly life.

Yet we're also still literal citizens of the countries we live in. We still retain all the privileges that citizenship affords, together with the responsibilities it holds. *Because we have given our primary allegiance to Jesus and, for the Lord's sake, we're to continue to submit to the laws and ordinances of the countries in which we live.*

Christians have a greater not lesser responsibility to do good and model appropriate citizenship. We don't get a leave pass to flout the regulations and laws passed by those in authority, just because we're 'not of this world.' *"It is God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules."* (1 Peter 2:13-17)

Yet, there must be a disclaimer at this point. We also have a responsibility – a greater responsibility, it can be argued – to model the values of the [kingdom of heaven](#). This responsibility often highlights issues of injustice, prejudice or inequality which may exist both within the church and without, issues to which God is adamantly opposed and therefore we also should be opposed.

The Atlantic slave trade, which operated between the 15th and 19th centuries, might never have been abolished, had it not been for the public agitation of those who spoke vocally against a legally sanctioned practice and campaigned tirelessly for its elimination.

Two distinct laws passed in Nazi Germany provided the legal framework for the systematic persecution and resulting genocide of millions of Jews, demonstrating that sometimes doing what is lawful isn't the same as doing what is right.

And in our own country of Australia between 1910 and 1970, at least 100,000 Aboriginal children were forcibly removed – stolen – from their parents and families as a result of

various government policies, leaving a legacy of loss and trauma that persists today. The pain inflicted on an entire people through separation and forced assimilation was enabled by governmental law, regardless of the reality that it was morally repugnant to do so.

*As Christians, the law cannot be our ultimate moral guide. Slavery was lawful. The holocaust was legal. Segregation and apartheid were legally sanctioned. Many of today's laws are created to protect corporations rather than people. Simply put, the law does not dictate our ethics. God does. | Craig Greenfield*

[God's values have the final word in our actions](#) and this may mean, at some point, our choices or actions put us in conflict with the culture around us or the laws of the country in which we live. *We submit, until, for conscience sake, we can no longer submit* (Acts 5:29, Exodus 1:7).

## **The Covid-19 Pandemic**

For Christians, times of trouble are opportunities to test and prove our own conviction; that there is One God who rules over all things and that we remain confident that He continues to do so, even through trouble and difficulty ([Psalm 103:19](#), [Daniel 2:21](#), [Ephesians 4:6](#)).

While the early Christians faced very different times of trouble than we do today, comparable only perhaps by how we choose to respond, our faithful response is no less necessary than theirs.

The ongoing crisis of Covid-19 is a troubling and anxious time. The most recent reports regarding the virus are particularly concerning, causing fear for many people, especially the elderly and vulnerable in our communities. Whilst we shouldn't be ambivalent about what's going on around the globe, we also need to be measured in our response and

very careful not to be contributing to or escalating the level of panic that people may be experiencing.

It's extremely disturbing that Christians would contribute to misinformation regarding both the virus and associated treatment options, particularly in the social domain. Many, in reality, are unlikely to be qualified to actually comment from a medical perspective, yet this doesn't seem to prevent them from offering advice, suggestions, criticisms, or conjecture on the subject.

Verified medical information shared in responsible ways is helpful; unfactual, fear-inducing conspiracy theories are not. By all means, discuss the situation with those around you but choose to do so in responsible ways, with a view to banishing exaggerated fear.

Neither is it appropriate for Christians to participate in acts of disrespect or civil disobedience of those in authority, whilst current regulations don't directly contradict God's directives. We ought to instead continue to pray for wisdom and guidance in our own personal choices as well as for those in the difficult situation of accessing risks and making decisions on behalf of our nation.

Christians also have both a responsibility and a privilege to point the world's attention to the One who is still in control of all. We can choose to positively redirect the conversation, to comfort people's hearts and try to settle their fears, whilst still acknowledging the gravity of the current pandemic and assist in supporting practical measures to combat it.

There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God (Romans 13:1). We are to seek their welfare, to speak evil of no one, to respect the government and be law-abiding. If it is possible, as far as it depends on us, we're to live at peace with everyone. (Titus 3:1-2, Jeremiah 29:7, Romans 12:18).



We need to continue to pray, worship and connect in all the ways that are possible to us right now. Most of all, we need to continue to point the people of the world to Jesus, who told his much-loved followers: “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. Trust in God and trust in me also” ([John 14:1](#)).

## Convictions + Conduct

Our convictions and conduct go hand in hand. What we say and what we do must show itself to be in agreement.

*“We don’t believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.” | Dallas Willard*

If we believe that God is King of all the earth and remains sovereign still, then we must act in such a way that confirms this truth to the watching world.

We are to be thankful for those in authority and especially at a time like this, those in healthcare, who risk their own lives to treat and save others ([1 Timothy 2:2](#)). We need to remember to pray for them and assist where we can.

We ought to show responsibility in following the direction of the government and officials, acknowledging measured concern for the situation we all find ourselves in and abiding by recommendations for the good of everyone ([1 Peter 2:13](#)). Now, more than ever, is the time to show consideration and restraint and to lead the world by example. It is not the time (or ever!) for Christians to display greed or selfishness but to consider those who are our neighbour and to love them, as ourselves ([Romans 13:8-10](#)).

And, particularly, it is vitally important to consider those who are weak and vulnerable amongst our communities, who have always found a special place in God’s heart ([James 1:27](#); [Psalm](#)

[68:5](#)).

*We have opportunity right now, to remind the world of a good, good God, who is actively seeking to overthrow the effects of sin in the world and restore humanity to full relationship with Himself.*

Even here, in times that seem very dark, God is still busy making all things new.

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I first wrote about [the Christian response to the pandemic](#) over a year ago, when things had really started to impact our communities. We've seen a lot happen around the world in that time and, recently, it seemed as if Australia had finally gotten a handle on things and life might be returning to normal.

I confess, I've not personally felt any real sense of fear throughout this situation until very recently, when the various mutant strains became more contagious and seemingly more virulent. The recent restrictions in Sydney give cause for concern and Covid-19 now feels very much on our doorstep. I had to intentionally take time this week to remind myself of my faith, my conviction that God is sovereign still and that the wind and waves still know His name. Through it all, my eyes must remain on Him.

At the same time as this was occurring, three events impacted me personally and I felt compelled to again write about the situation.

One was several shares in one week on social media of what can only be described as 'doomsday' commentaries; fear-inducing and based in theory, not fact.

The second was the illegal, unmasked gathering/protest that occurred in Sydney, which was also shared on social media (whether to criticise or congratulate I couldn't say for sure,

although it did appear to me to be in support of the protest).

The third was two different statements from Christian pastors within a denomination stating this: that if you chose to vaccinate, you weren't faithful, and, that if you didn't choose to vaccinate, you weren't faithful. In my opinion, this kind of religious pressure, criticism or coercion about a very personal choice is completely irresponsible and amounts to spiritual abuse, especially from those in a pastoral position.

I was reminded again of the relevance and importance of the Christian faith in our world, to provide hope, comfort, and assistance to those who are struggling, fearful, or angry. And I was reminded of the example left for us in God's Word, which seems to have an answer for every situation, of those in the early church who lived in the shadow of the Empire and navigated the same tensions with faithfulness and steadfast hope. We can learn a lot from them.

Pictured: Sculpture of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, Emperor of Rome 24 January AD41 – 13 October AD54

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## Radical Social Change: A Letter To Philemon

*"Injustice: unfairness, unjust act, Unfair: not equitable or honest, not impartial or according to rules, society: organised and interdependent community, system and organisation of this"* – The Australian Oxford Dictionary, Third Edition

The issue of social injustice\* has always been one that is close to my heart. It's something that I like to talk to my kids about often, to try to impress upon them just how fortunate they are in many aspects of their life. They live in a modern, western country and are possessors of freedoms and

rights still not available to many other peoples of the world. My daughters, particularly, have liberties still not accessible to many other [girls and women](#). And on the delicate subject of race, my children haven't had to endure the criticism or racial bigotry experienced by those who clearly display the truth of their indigenous ancestry by the colour of their skin (and who have been and are still being treated unjustly because of it).

Historically, social injustice has often been tolerated or, even worse, promoted on the basis of prejudice and [erroneously applied religious doctrine](#). Religious intolerance has fuelled many of this world's wars and God has been made the "scapegoat" for much of what is the worst of humanity.

One only needs to look, for example, at the [founding document](#) of the devoutly Christian American nation, the Declaration of Independence, to see that what people say and what people do are often two quite different things.

The statement in the second paragraph, **"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness"** did not prelude American citizens from denying those same rights to thousands of men and women during the infamous period of slavery, based simply on the colour of their skin.

Mistreatment of slaves was further bolstered by their ignorant and prejudicial application of Bible passages. It took nearly 250 years for the official practice of human trafficking and slavery to be abolished in America and yet the affects of slavery are still felt and are at work today in many parts of America, and indeed the world.

Social injustice, however, is not just an American problem, or a historical problem. It's a world problem, manifested in many

different ways, and is still a very relevant conversation for modern times.

*“Over and over again, in the history of the world, man has made life into chaos.” – Oswald Chambers*

## **What Does God Have To Say About Social Injustice?**

God, the creator of all, made all equal. The only difference commented on in Genesis, at the creation of humanity, was our genders – both uniquely special and individually reflective of God’s glory. We’re told throughout the Bible that God makes no distinction between people based on their social status (Jeremiah 22:3), their ethnicity (Acts 10: 34-35), or their gender (Galatians 3:28).

In fact, we’re told that God is just, fair, and completely impartial (Deuteronomy 10:17, Romans 2:11). He despises mistreatment, discrimination or prejudicial treatment:

*“Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” | Isaiah 1:17 (ESV)*

*“This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other’” | Zechariah 7:9-10 (NIV)*

*“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.” | John 7:24 (NIV)*

This impartiality is thrown into sharp relief against the story found in the letter to Philemon.

Philemon, squeezed between the epistle to Titus and the letter to the Hebrews, is often overlooked and under-read. But it is a truly astonishing and socially radical exposition of exactly how God views all men and women. It tackles the serious and often difficult shift in thinking that is required and shows that belief in and love of God must affect our relationships with others in positive ways and with complete impartiality.

Sometimes, these effects are profound and far-reaching, as in the case of Philemon.

## Who Was Philemon?

Philemon was a wealthy, Christian slave owner, living in Colosse, a city which is now in modern Turkey. The area of Asia Minor was a huge melting pot of ethnicities and also one of the [first areas to flourish with converts to the new religion of Christianity](#). Overlaying this was the fact that this area was part of the hugely expansive [Roman Empire](#), at the height of its glory and, as such, was subject to Roman law and Roman customs.

In many cities in the Roman Empire, up to [30% of the population were slaves](#). They undertook the bulk of the work required to keep the empire running and were considered to be the legal property of their owners. There were some rules against cruelty, but we would recognise them as the equivalent of 'animal rights', certainly not as human rights. Owners, like Philemon, essentially had the right to treat slaves however they wanted.

## Who Was Onesimus?

Typically, a slave would take on the religion of his or her master and Onesimus, the subject of the letter to Philemon, was one such slave. Having converted to Christianity, he then, at some point, fled his master's household and travelled hundreds of miles to where Paul was, the heart of the empire

itself, to Rome. Rome differed from Greek city-states in that freed slaves were allowed to become citizens and perhaps this was Onesimus' objective in seeking out Rome.

The testimony of a slave could not be accepted in a Roman Court and they had no rights at all under the law. A master could punish a slave, however he wanted, and punishments included branding, scourging, torture or death. The punishment for a runaway slave was often branding in the forehead and the deliberate breaking of bones or joints.

This was Onesimus' expected fate, under Roman law, and Philemon had every right, as a master and Roman citizen, to enforce such punishment.

## **Jesus Changes Our Culture**

Paul's letter, however, is full of warm entreaty on behalf of Onesimus. He reminds Philemon that God's rule of love transcends any man-made law and that, in Jesus, both slave and master are equal. They are considered brothers, both children of a Heavenly Father. Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon, not as just a slave, but as family.

Paul tells Philemon to add any debt owed by Onesimus to his own account but, in fact, considers it a favour to be done for Jesus. Paul is more than confident of Philemon's response and gives much emphasis to "this faith we hold in common...and that people recognise Christ in all of it".

The remarkable transformative power of the Gospel spills from the words in this letter – showing the dramatic ripple effect a response to God has in our personal lives. It challenges everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It compels us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. **It compels us to do better and be better, simply because Jesus is.**

The Gospel of Good News often causes radical upheaval in our own lives as it forces our practices and beliefs to fall into line with the ideals of a true, loving, and socially just God.

*“He’s already made it plain how to live, what to do, what GOD is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple. Do what is fair and just to your neighbour, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.” | Micah 6:8 (The Message)*

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**\*In this article, “social injustice” is used in conjunction with the dictionary definitions noted at the beginning. Social injustice can be considered to fall into two categories, which are often inter-connected. These categories are defined as ‘Inter-Social Treatment’ and ‘Unequal Government Regulation’. “Inter-Social Treatment involves unequal treatment of a group(s) of people within the local and regional scale. The basis for this unequal treatment is usually due to a personal belief about that group(s): Unequal Government Regulations are laws and regulations that purposefully or otherwise, discriminate a group(s) from the same opportunities and resources, based on differences that are unique to that group(s)”**

**(cited: <https://www.pachamama.org/social-justice/social-justice-issues>) Examples may include: unfair labour practices, racial, gender, age or ethnicity discrimination, inequality of health care or education based on certain criteria and to the worst degree, systematic genocide based on certain criteria.**

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# 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*