

The Incarnation Of The Word

In the beginning, the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God.

Religion // Cruciformity

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

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

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

The act of *binding to* – of *religio* – is an act of faithfulness to something or someone, to which one is bound as if by a pledge or duty. It's similar to when someone makes an *oath of*

allegiance to their country, effectively *binding themselves* to that country and pledging to respect, uphold and obey its laws.

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps our family's beliefs eventually became our own; their set of doctrines were absorbed as ours, and we found ourselves one day 'a Christian, attending church', without giving too

much thought to the process by which we got there. We accepted, without question, someone else's *religion*, as we might accept an old, hand-me-down sweater, thinking to make it our own.

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

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

While being a Christian is certainly communal, and while Christians tend to believe mostly all the same fundamental creeds, and while the creeds and practices of Christianity can be taught and preached and are, in many ways, intrinsically invaluable to religion, *true religion* is the *individual and deeply personal matter of an individual's binding to the person of Christ*.

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

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

"Don't think of worship in terms of attending a church service, singing praise and worship songs or honouring the name of Jesus. The meaning of worship touches much larger

questions. Namely, worship is all about who has the authority over our lives. Who will have our submission? Who will be given first place? Who will win our love, allegiance and devotion? True worship is absolute committal, surrender and submission to God.” | Frank Viola, Insurgence

Counterfeit Religion

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

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

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

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

Anything apart from ‘binding to the cross of Jesus’ results in toxic faith – *religion* that has gone wrong, leading to dependence on others’ approval and not God’s. Anything that

adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and binds us to human systems of belief or worship, and not to God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is

ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.” – Abraham Heschel

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

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

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

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

Journey To Cruciformity

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

grace in your life.

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

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

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

Jesus taught his disciples that following him meant that one had to be willing to *“pick up their cross daily”* (Luke 9:23; 14:27). Cruciformity is, in essence, *conformity to the cross*; a life that is shaped by the narrative of the cross.

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

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

is constantly affirmed and expressed by a transformed life.

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

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

“A person who lives by the indwelling life of Christ through the Holy Spirit is a person who is under Law. But it is not the Law of Moses. Nor is it a Law that some preacher created from his own personal standards. No, the Law I’m referring to is ‘the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:3). This Law is like the law of gravity; it’s a constant force or power. You and I have an indwelling Lord. The Law of God has been written on our hearts because Jesus Christ lives within us by his Spirit. This is the promise of the new covenant. Spiritual people (religious people)(italics, ours) are those who live by the Lord’s life that indwells them. They know by instinct what the will of God is (1 John 2:27). Where the Spirit leads them, they yield to it (for the most part) – no matter what the cost. And life and peace are the results (Romans 8:6). The external Law, then, is no longer an outward thing full of dead letters and cold commands. It has been transferred into the indwelling life of Christ. To live by Christ is our highest calling as people of the insurgence.” | Frank Viola, Insurgence

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

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

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

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

By affirming the biblical narrative, that we are saved by grace through faith alone, we begin a journey towards a deeper understanding of *who God is*, which only grows as our Christian life progresses. Our theology is, perhaps then, best described as an expedition of discovery, rather than a destination at which we arrive. We discern more and more about the heart and mind of the Creator as our life progresses. This knowing and experiencing – this [walking with God](#) – renews us day by day to become more like the crucified Lord we follow.

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

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

Theology, *true theology* – thinking about God – will be seen and witnessed in *cruciformity* (Galatians 5:22-23); a life

pointed in pursuit of Jesus and utterly and completely *bound to him*.

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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

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)