

# **The Bible's Answers to Four Vital Questions about Christianity**

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Scripture quotations are mainly from the Revised Version, but sometimes Dr Gooding gives his own translations or paraphrases.

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## Introduction

When I was asked to give a series of lectures to discuss the basic facts of Christianity and their relevance in modern life, I chose to do that under four titles, each of them presenting an alternative:

Jesus Christ: Good or God?

The Resurrection: Myth or Fact?

The Bible: Man's Word or God's Word?

Conversion: Emotional Disturbance or Spiritual Regeneration?

You should notice at once that those alternatives are not mutually exclusive. We shall not find ourselves taking either one or the other. In fact, I dare say almost all of us shall find that we can heartily assent to the first part of each.

I presume that, whatever ideas we may have in the general sense of that term, we shall agree that Jesus was good.

Then if you give *myth* its technical meaning, and I want to use it in the technical sense here—a story that has spiritual significance and brings moral and spiritual help—then in that technical sense the resurrection is certainly a myth. It is a story that even today brings men and women powerful spiritual and moral help.

We shall all be obliged to agree that the Bible is man's word. When we study the Bible we find it was written in human language—Greek and Hebrew. If we study the various authors who wrote it, we see the marks of their own particular style. It was men who spoke and men who wrote the book we call the Bible.

And whatever we may think of conversion, nobody could possibly dispute that there is always some amount of emotional disturbance. It may be small with some, larger with others; but it is impossible for a person to go through conversion of any genuine depth without feeling considerable emotion.

But in these lectures I want us to face the other, further possibilities. It will be my contention that, while all these things that I have just mentioned are quite good, they are hopelessly inadequate to describe our Christian faith. If we would get a true view of Christianity, we must be prepared to go beyond the concept that Jesus was good, to the concept that Jesus was and is God. We shall be required to go further than believing that the resurrection is a myth—Christianity cannot stand unless the resurrection is an historic fact.

Similarly, with the other two. The Bible certainly is man's word, but in order to have a true view of Christianity we must go the next step and discover that the Bible is far more than man's word—it is the record of God's self-revelation to men. And conversion is not merely a

disturbance at the emotional level—it is the impact on a human heart and character of a spiritual power that comes from the outside; it comes from God. To lay all my cards on the table at once, that is the contention I shall be urging throughout all four lectures.

We shall therefore be considering the question: Is Christianity merely a philosophy, a religion, a myth thought up and devised by men and women to bolster their courage as they struggle with the vastness of the universe, and wanting to give themselves some kind of significance in a vast world that seems ever more overwhelming?

Is it merely a set of religious beliefs concocted to enforce their own moral judgment and bring some kind of power to bear on those other urges that they find within that are ever breaking out and blotting spoiling their copybook with ugly stains? Or is it far more than that? Did it in fact begin not with man at all, but with God? Is it a record of the supernatural and the miraculous? Is it the record of God interposing in our little world to reveal himself and to achieve a divine miracle of human regeneration? That is the question we shall be posing ourselves in these lectures.

The question is one that concerns far bigger things than merely academic theology. It is being forced on us very urgently by a whole range of moral considerations, particularly on those who hold responsible positions in the community. I submit to you that the cause behind our current moral problems is the fact that Western Europe has been slowly throwing overboard the basis upon which morality has been built for nearly two thousand years. It is a dream that some people entertain that we can live moral lives without necessarily having any absolute values, without any claim of authority behind those morals. The last one hundred and fifty years have seen the tremendous success of radical criticism of both the Old and New Testaments, motivated by rational philosophy.

Enamoured with the then-novel idea in Europe of physical evolution, scholars looked into the Old Testament to find evidence of religious evolution and thought they had found it. Then they told the world at large that what we thought was God's inspired book was nothing more than the record of our often feeble and often mistaken attempts to find God. As it was merely mankind's attempts at groping in the dark after God, it ceased then to have the authority it used to have.

That was roughly one hundred and fifty years ago, and it reached a peak of popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century. But further detailed study of our Old Testament history and the help of archaeology have shown that the idea of the evolution of religion in the Old Testament is a completely impossible idea. The facts of the Old Testament and of archaeology have been stubborn on this point. The idea that the evolution of religion can be demonstrated in the Old Testament has been proved by scholarship and the spade to be wrong.

While that is so, it is fair to say that the idea has by and large emptied Christianity of its supernatural elements, particularly in young people's minds. At best, it is merely the highest thoughts of religiously inclined people. Now we are reaping the harvest of that in the moral realm. If people no longer believe in the supernatural in Christianity, they have no absolute frame against which to put their lives. Christianity used to teach them that there is a God of absolute standards and a perfect law; that there will be a judgment of all mankind and that in Jesus Christ we have a demonstration of what God thinks and how human life ought to be

lived. Christianity offered to people who were struggling with their moral problems, not only good advice as to how to live but the possibility of obtaining spiritual power.

If you empty Christianity of the miraculous, you take away an absolute God, a final judgment, and Jesus Christ becomes just another religious leader whom we may regard or disregard as we please. There isn't any longer any salvation or any spiritual power to help us in our moral struggle.

Western Europe will have to learn that you cannot keep the end products of Christianity without having the beginnings of Christianity. You cannot keep Christian ethic if you jettison Christian doctrine. I want to emphasize that, lest some people should think I am merely indulging in some dry and arid theological debate that has little relevance to the days in which we live. Certainly, we who are in the academic trade may at times indulge in a lot of dry as dust investigations, but the things that we shall be discussing in these lectures are exceedingly practical.

## Jesus Christ

### *Good or God?*

May I remind you of the context in which this, the first of our four questions, is raised in the Bible. It is in the story of the young man who came to our Lord Jesus on one occasion with the idea of enquiring what he must do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17–22). He came very politely, as a young seriously minded man would have come to a Jewish rabbi, and said, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Our Lord stopped him at the very threshold and said to him, ‘Why do you call me good?’

I suppose the young man was flabbergasted for a moment, because he had only meant it as the normal courtesy, the normal honorific that was given to religious teachers. However, our Lord was not being awkward for the sake of being awkward! Because, if you enquire what you must do to inherit eternal life, the first thing you must do is to get the question of authority right. ‘Young man,’ he said, ‘you called me good, but in the absolute sense there is only one good, and that is God. Do you really mean I am God, or is your courtesy title an empty formality?’

Why the fuss? Well, because our Lord said that for him the very painful and necessary course would be that he should sell all his goods and give them to the poor and come and follow our Lord. That was a drastic method! And when our Lord spoke his diagnosis, the young man must have perceived the wisdom of the question. Is Jesus Christ just good—someone to come to for advice? If he is no more than good, then if you should happen to disagree with him you could salve your conscience by saying he is only one man among many. But if Jesus Christ is God and you disagree with him, then you must do as the young man did—turn your back and walk away from God. If a man turns his back on God and walks away, I don’t know that we can measure in human terms the distance to which he will eventually go. I do know that Jesus Christ said that it would spell eternal disaster.

It is an exceedingly practical problem. At the risk of sounding just a little bit rough and crude, I would like now to insist that we have the courage to face this. It is not enough for us, in common courtesy, to think of Jesus Christ as a good man. That is hopelessly inadequate. If he made the claim to be God and he is not God, then he is no longer good. If he is God, then we insult him and must demonstrate how feeble our understanding is, if we are content merely to call him good.

I hope to proceed by first of all pointing out some evidence that Jesus Christ did actually claim to be God. And then, secondly, to put before you evidence (it will probably be well known but worth repeating) that Jesus Christ is who he claimed to be.

## Did Jesus Christ claim to be God?

I feel it worthwhile to spend some time in submitting evidence that Jesus Christ did really claim to be God. If you have read anything of modern form criticism and biblical studies, you will know that there is a powerful school of theology which lies behind almost all our divinity schools and teacher training colleges, and therefore infiltrates at all levels of education and into most of our pulpits. It teaches that Jesus Christ never did make any such claim at all; when we read statements in the Gospels that would seem to suggest that he claimed to be God, these are but the halo that the early church painted and then hung around his memory. One famous scholar has even suggested that Jesus Christ of Nazareth never spoke of himself as the Son of God, nor even as the Son of Man, but always spoke of the Son of Man and the Son of God in the third person. They are definite and emphatic that it was the early church, without any authority or permission from Jesus himself, that hung this halo of theirs round his memory.

They say it was quite an easy thing for Orientals to do. The oriental world was full of people who were prepared to call their fellow men 'gods' of one kind and another, if they were particularly good or famous and the early Christians, being Orientals, fell easily into this idiom. Because they thought Jesus was a superb leader and teacher, they dignified him with this title of God, though they wouldn't have meant what we moderns and Westerners mean by it.

To some people that sounds a very plausible story. But on that score, let me just point out that the early church was composed first of all of Jews. And while Jews were oriental, they were vastly different from many of the other oriental races, and certainly from the Greeks. Jews just did not happily and easily call their fellow men 'God'. For centuries the Jewish nation had stood for *monotheism*—there was but one God. Any approach at making graven images or worshipping a fellow human or creature brought the most violent reaction from any Jew.

You may remember the fuss that Antiochus Epiphanes and some of the early Roman emperors ran into when they brought their military standards into Jerusalem or into the temple. Down in their very marrow the Jews felt an awful horror of rendering divine honours to anyone but the one solitary God. And yet the men who started Christianity were Jews. I submit to you; it is a fantastic notion to charge those men with making a halo of divinity to put round the head of Jesus Christ.

But somebody says, 'There were Greeks in the church; are they not responsible for this?' Let me point out that the early church, both Jews and Greeks, said things about our Lord Jesus that no Greek had ever said about anybody. The Greeks certainly had a multitude of gods, demigods and heroes. If Alexander had wanted it they would have been quite happy to deify him and accord him divine honours (tongue-in-cheek, perhaps). They didn't mind; if you wanted to be a god you could be! If you were particularly good, they thought it a nice compliment to call you a god.

However, Greeks did not normally say about their most exalted heroes the kind of thing they said about Jesus Christ. You will remember what to many is a strange phrase that the early church used. The Christians talked about being 'in Christ'; a most peculiar expression if you have never met it before. But everywhere in the Christian letters you will find them

talking of their personal conversion and their present experience of God as being 'in Christ' (see, for example, Rom 8:1). Did you ever hear any Greek talking about being 'in Plato', or 'in Socrates', or even 'in Hercules' or 'in Zeus'? Nobody did, because the kind of thing that even the Greek Christians were talking about was something absolutely new. It implied a Jesus Christ who had risen from the dead, who was more than human. It implied the possibility that humans still living can be in spiritual contact with, and in some sense united to and enclosed by, this super-personality. For Jews as well as Greeks and Greeks as well as Jews to have talked like that of a person who was in their own lifetime, who had worked a plane in a carpenter's shop, is an extraordinary phenomenon (to say the least). This is no ordinary way of Greek thinking.

Then there are others who have recently come to the more reasonable view and they say that Jesus Christ did claim to be God, but he did not mean it in any other sense than that we all are sons of God. Once again that view will hardly bear inspection, so let us think of some of the things that Jesus Christ did and said.

### **He left a ceremony by which his followers would remember him**

Quite apart from the biblical records, it is a fact that before any part of the New Testament was written Christians were meeting together, particularly on the first day of the week to celebrate the Lord's Supper, when they took bread and wine. The earliest records show them doing that kind of thing. It was a sacred meal, the significance of which is clear and none disagrees. It was an observance instituted by Jesus while he was still on earth whereby his disciples should commemorate him. The significance of the bread was that he gave his body for them, the significance of the wine and its cup was that he shed his blood for them. And here we find an interesting thing; he shed his blood 'for the remission of sins' (Matt 26:28).

In making that kind of claim it must surely be evident that our Lord wasn't saying that he was a son of God as everyone else is a son of God. Whatever you think of the claim, it marked him out as unique. He is claiming a solitary and unique position of being a sacrifice for the sins of the world. And not, I may add, a sacrifice that his fellow-humans have seen fit to offer to God, but a God-appointed sacrifice. A sacrifice which his disciples saw no earthly need of at the time, yet it was the very basis and beginnings of Christianity. Our Lord wrote no writing, but he left a ceremony.

Let's test our modern reactions to this. If some religiously minded friend of yours came to your house and suggested that every now and again you should get together and hold a meal in memory of him, take bread and drink wine because he was giving himself for your sins, what would you do? Call a doctor; suggest that he get in touch with a psychiatrist? Should he be the most eminent ecclesiastical dignitary, the holiest man that we genuinely respected, if anyone talked like that we should say he has gone too far and shows signs of incipient religious mania. And so we must decide about Jesus Christ; is he a maniac or is his claim true? Whatever we decide, at the moment my point is that *his claim to be the Son of God is unique.*



### **He pronounced forgiveness of sins**

He did and said many other such things. As a young man of thirty-two he startled his contemporaries by saying that there is going to be a resurrection at the last day and at the final judgment God has committed all judgment to him. He told them that, to meet that judgment successfully, they must come and put their faith in him. At the resurrection to life or damnation he would be there. He could give eternal life now to those who would receive it (John 5:22–24). I ask again, what would you make of a young man who stood beside you and made those claims? Wouldn't you at first blush and say what his contemporaries said, 'This is taking things too far, we know your father and mother.' One day he absolutely shook his contemporaries when with authority he pronounced forgiveness of sins over a paralytic man who had been brought in.

And again, to show that he was not acting as any rabbi or priest would have in those days, let me quote the furore among the priests and theologians on that occasion. They had been used to pronouncing forgiveness in the name of God over penitent people. But the idea that somebody who was not even in the priestly order of his day should, on his own initiative and on his own authority, pronounce forgiveness on a fellow human being, it was so utterly preposterous as to be blasphemous and they felt they had enough moral spine to make their protest.

### **Facing up to the evidence**

It is altogether inadequate to dismiss these very difficult pieces of early evidence and come to a view that Jesus Christ was no more than an ordinary religious leader. It may seem for a time to make Christianity more acceptable with the scientific world that doesn't care much for miracles, but to do so is to be plain dishonest (if you will allow me that strong phrase) with the evidence.

We shall have to do one of two things with Jesus Christ. We shall either have to accept his claims with all their implications, or we shall have to pick up our stones and throw them in our turn. It is perhaps a regrettable thing nowadays that we have grown more tolerant in religious matters. None of us would like to see the evil days of the rack and the stake; but if a person can stand by and listen to a fellow-man claiming to be God, thus leading away the faith and trust of his fellow-men and women, and doesn't make a protest, then there is something morally wrong with that person. To be prepared to be courteous to Jesus Christ and allow him to get away with blasphemies that you don't believe, is surely a sign of some very loose thinking somewhere.

The Jews of his day saw the point and they crucified him. They didn't crucify him because they disliked his ethic. Any scholarly Jew will tell you today that the ethic that Jesus Christ preached was not astoundingly new. The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, can mostly be quoted in the Talmud and other rabbinical authority. That wasn't what enraged the Jews and led them to put him on a cross. They picked up their stones and eventually crucified him because, as they put it, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God' (John 10:33)—*it was his claim to divinity.*

## What evidence is there that *his* claim was true?

Let us think now in the closing part of the lecture what evidence there may be that his claim was true. I can only very rapidly skim over some of the evidence. I do so in the hope that I may stimulate some of you to go back to the evidence with an adult mind.

My own experience with my agnostic and atheistic friends very frequently runs like this. We get talking and I sooner or later go straight to the question of our Lord's divinity.

My friends will reply, 'I don't think we can be certain on those things at all. We don't know what God is; how could we have any concept of what a Son of God would be?'

My reply would be, 'Have you ever read the evidence?'

'Yes, of course,' they say.

'What I mean is, in your adult days have you seriously gone through those parts of the Bible that are written on this topic?'

'What parts are you referring to?'

And I say, 'Take the Fourth Gospel in the New Testament for instance. It was written with a very specific aim. At the end it says, "These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" – and then, the next step, "and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).'

And I will say, 'Have you ever read that Gospel and said, "This is what Christianity has to say and, if there is a God, this is God's book. If Jesus Christ is God's Son, then this is God's attempt to get through to me. Let me make the experiment"?''

The reply I so often get is, 'We read Mark at school.'

It's surprising how there are so many people whose investigation of Christianity finished with Mark at school!

If I must hastily go through some of the evidence, it is to provoke us to go back to it first-hand. If there is a God behind this evidence, then we must give him a chance to show us that it is true. Having investigated the evidence ourselves, if we can honestly say that God has not shown us anything, let the responsibility be on God.

### The evidence of Old Testament prophecy

I would appeal to what Christ and the early Gospel writers appealed to. I know it is a bit old fashioned these days, but I quote this piece of evidence unblushingly. Luke the historian, though a Greek, found it entirely convincing. It is the evidence of the build-up of Old Testament prophecy that indicated that Christ should come, he should die and suffer for our sins, he should rise again, and following his resurrection there should start a tremendous evangelical movement. Our Lord himself appealed to this. He made the claim that the Old Testament was given by God and invited his contemporaries to compare himself with that evidence. It is an undeniable fact that you don't first have to grant the inspiration of Scripture; historically the Old Testament existed before Jesus Christ. Therefore, we have a problem on our hands of how to account for this strangely remarkable, consistent foreshadowing of what actually happened to Jesus of Nazareth.

## **The evidence of his miracles**

Then there were our Lord's miracles. Do what we will with the evidence, it is impossible to completely extricate the miraculous from the historical record. More important than the sheer miracles is the meaning of those miracles, for they were signs. Miracles by themselves do not necessarily prove the divinity of anybody.

If scientists were to land one of their moon rockets in the jungles of the Congo, the Pygmy peoples might think that the astronauts were some sort of supernatural angels! But what if somebody came to us claiming to be the son and heir to a rich Duke and tried to prove it by pulling out of his pocket reams and reams of banknotes, we should reserve our opinion because it doesn't necessarily follow. There have been other rich men beside this Duke. If, on the other hand, somebody came claiming to be his son and heir but was never at the right end of many £5 notes, we should begin to wonder!

And so it is when we come to miracles. They don't necessarily prove anything by themselves, but if a man claimed to be God's Son and there weren't any miracles we should lift our eyebrows a little.

And more important is the meaning of those miracles. Our Lord's miracles normally preached a sermon. He gave bread miraculously to the crowd—on one or two occasions only—in order to press the lesson that he himself was spiritual bread. He was God's Son and human life can never be content without a personal relationship with God. He handed to people an experiment that they could make; if they wanted to know that a certain object was a piece of bread that will feed them, they must eat it and so must we.

## **He claimed to be 'the light of the world'**

Our Lord claimed to be the light of the world and he did a miracle of opening a blind man's eyes. It was to challenge us to make a similar experiment and it is at this level that we are best to follow our enquiries, rather than with academic argument. How can I find out if Jesus is, in some special sense, the light of the world? Well, let me come and live with him! Surely if he is the light we shall begin to see things that we didn't see before.

I throw down the challenge to us all, particularly to those who may not be convinced Christians. If we would see whether or not Jesus is the light of the world, let's live with his Sermon on the Mount for a while, deliberately focusing our minds on what he said about moral affairs. Let's see whether or not we discover that we are sinners, as he said we were. Let's live with him and see if what he says about forgiveness and about his own sacrifice makes sense.

## **He claimed to be able to put us in touch with God**

Finally, when our Lord was here he said that there is a practical experiment that a person may make to find out whether what he said was true or not, whether he came from God or not. 'If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority' (John 7:17). Christ claimed to be able to put us in touch with God. Obviously, whatever meaning we give to the term, if a man gets in touch with God he is bound to know it.

What if I said to you that I could take you and put you in touch with some electricity?

And you say, 'I am sceptical about the existence of electricity. I have never seen it; I have no concept of what electricity is.'

I say, 'Never mind, come here.' If I take the cover off your light switch and put your finger on one of the leads you will know whether there is electricity or not! Whether you had any concept of electricity prior to that doesn't make any difference, nor even whether you can explain what happened afterwards (if you are still alive).

And our Lord made this point. Religion is not some difficult and obscure thing that only the most learned philosophers and scholars have any hope of understanding. The experiment is exceedingly practical and personal. Jesus said, 'Come to me, learn from me, and I will put you in touch with God.' You cannot be put in touch with God and fail to know it.

Are we willing to make the experiment? Are we willing to say, in all honesty of heart, 'God, if Jesus Christ is your Son and you have written this book, the Bible, about him, then I am willing for the consequences. Show me whether he is your Son or not.' Jesus Christ guarantees that he will put you in touch with God. If he doesn't, when we have honestly made that experiment (but not until then), we may write off his claims as mere bombast and deception.

### **We are all biased**

I would just like to point out that none of us will come to this or any other of our topics with an unbiased mind. Let me admit to you at once that I am exceedingly biased. I do claim, in all humility, that it works; Jesus Christ is the light and he exposes. He can put a person in touch with God. Therefore, I am biased, but so is everybody else!

You may ask, 'If Jesus Christ was and is the Son of God, how is it that so many of his learned and responsible contemporaries failed to see this? Doesn't it damn Christianity right from the beginning that the educated people and the responsible political leaders voted solidly against Christ?'

Well, the Christian historians do tell us that fact bluntly. Caiaphas, Annas, Pilate and Herod voted solidly against him and if you consult Luke the historian he will mention on our Lord's side such disreputable characters as the convicted malefactor; comparatively obscure people as the centurion; and only one or two of the upper class, like Joseph of Arimathaea the councillor.

But the historians will also tell us that these people came to Jesus Christ with a different bias. If Jesus were the Son of God, Annas and Caiaphas would have had to get off their thrones and install Christ. Herod had a terrible skeleton in the cupboard, so he really couldn't afford to have it that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Disreputable character as the dying thief was, he came with a different bias; he came as a man who knew he was a moral outcast and a sinner. Judged by his very failing contemporaries, but condemned rightly, he knew he was a sinner about to pass from this life to the next.

If we should see ourselves like that—men and women who by any standard are sinners; men and women who have but a short time here before we are plunged into the infinite; men and women who have in their conscience a haunting sense that there is a God of very high

and unalterable moral standards—we would come to Jesus Christ and to this question with a completely different bias.

Unlike all others who offer advice, Jesus Christ is the only man who has ever stood by our side and claimed to be God's Son and to have died for our sins. It is a big problem to settle, but you may be certain that you will never have to settle it more than once. Nobody else in history has ever looked you or me in the eye and said, 'You are a sinner and I am your creator come to suffer and die for you.' If we are sinners with any sense of the moral seriousness of that position, we shall come to this practical question, whether Jesus is or is not the Son of God, with a very different bias and with a sense of urgency.

## The Resurrection

### *Myth or Fact?*

The two alternatives that we have set ourselves to discuss in this lecture concern the resurrection of our Lord Jesus—whether it is myth or a fact of history.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I would like to remind us that those who hold the view that the resurrection is a myth use that term *myth* in a very responsible and meaningful way, and we must take them seriously. They do not imply an innocent, irresponsible fairy-story. They mean a story that conveys profound and universal truth relating to the origin of life, its purpose and its destiny. This is truth that shall give us encouragement to hope for a destiny that is worthwhile, a destiny that will have a practical effect upon a person's morals and ethics here in this life.

The famous Greek philosopher Plato used myths in this fashion. When he had got as far as one can go by unaided reason in his dialogues he then included myths aimed at buttressing the conclusions of reason with suitable spiritual and moral power. To call the resurrection a myth, therefore, means that the resurrection is a story that conveys a universal truth. It expresses what is practically a universal instinct in the human heart. After death human personality survives, which, if it is true, has obvious implications for the way we live here on earth.

But if we were to push this definition of myth a little bit further we should find the reason why we are forced to a decision as to whether the resurrection of our Lord Jesus is to be regarded as merely a myth, or whether we are not obliged to take it far further than that and regard it as a historical fact.

A myth, while it conveys universal truth, can happily regard its details as quite untrue and unhistorical. Let me take an example of this situation. The defeat of Napoleon by Wellington at Waterloo is a historic fact. We should not call it a myth, for while it is a historic fact it has no lessons to teach. It conveys no universal truth. If it had any lessons to teach, it was only to the military strategists and Wellington's methods are long since out-dated and irrelevant.

On the other hand, Aesop's *Fables* may be regarded as a very humble form of myth. Nobody has ever dreamed that the details of Aesop's fables are historic facts. Animals don't speak, as Aesop's fables say they do. And yet, while the details of these fables are not historic fact, they do convey universal truths that all people will readily recognize.

Those who are inclined to the view that the resurrection is a myth feel it a far bigger and more important thing that it should be a myth rather than a historic fact. They say that the resurrection is conveying a universal truth and it does not matter if the details are not historic

fact. If we wanted to establish the reliability of the claim that Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo we could turn to the instrument of historical criticism, and the more we applied the canon of historical criticism the more we should become convinced that it was a fact of history. Wellington did defeat Napoleon.

But you can't establish the truth of a myth by historical criticism. If you were trying to back home the truth of one of Aesop's fables, it is no good applying historical criticism to prove that there was a lion or a fox who actually on a certain day of the week in a particular year made the remarks that Aesop said they made. That would be absurd! Historical criticism has got nothing to do with establishing the truth of a myth.

I suppose you are beginning to see that there is a very deep cavern between the traditional Christian view that the resurrection is a fact and the view held in more modern times by Christian theologians that the resurrection is a myth.

The myth theory would tell us that the truth of the resurrection is completely unaffected by the question whether the details recorded for us in the Gospels did actually happen. They would say that you cannot enforce the truth of the resurrection by employing the normal tools of historical criticism. It doesn't really matter if the records in the Gospels disagree with one another, the resurrection is still true. They will go so far as to say that the resurrection would still be true even if the body of Jesus Christ were still in Joseph's grave. Some of us cannot sit so lightly to the historic facts.

### **Christ's resurrection is no mere myth**

I want now to demonstrate why I think that the view that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a myth is utterly inadequate. On strictly rational grounds it is untenable. Let me first of all observe that the myth is altogether an inadequate instrument to convey the lessons it would wish to convey. Aesop's fables can talk to us about the way we behave, about the results that come to certain ways of behaving because we have seen those results with our own eyes. And Aesop's fables merely sum up what we have found in our own experience. But when it comes to the resurrection—whether humans do live on beyond the grave, whether there is a glorious destiny for mankind in another world, whether there is a judgment to come, whether sin will bring suffering in the world to come for the impenitent—these things are beyond our experience to prove or disprove.

If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a fact, then you will not prove the resurrection by myth. If you were trying to make instinct for survival come to bear upon the way a person lives, he or she may very readily say, 'Yes, there is an almost universal instinct in the human heart that whispers that they will survive death, but how will you prove to me that that instinct is anything more than wishful thinking?'

Take a motorcar for example. If it could feel and think and talk, it would feel the throbbing of its pistons within and the urge that sends its wheels spinning. The car says to itself, 'I have such an urge to move and go that I am sure that this urge will go on for ever.' Silly car! You have only to smash the plugs and crack the cylinder and the urge will stop. There is no thereafter for that car.

A person has every right to question this universal instinct. 'How do I know', he may ask, 'that when I lie in my coffin the instinct won't have disappeared?' And if on the basis of myth you urge that there is a life to come in which there will be a moral judgment and a person will have to answer for his sins in this life, modern man will say, 'But how do you know that the conscience that pursues you and makes you think that there is to be a judgment in the life to come is anything more than Freud's *super ego*?' And what shall we say if the resurrection is merely a myth? It has no authority whatsoever and no certain evidence upon which we may build.

### **The Apostles believed it was true**

We must come now to more important matters. Those who hold that the resurrection is merely a myth must first of all face the undeniable fact that the Christian apostles did not regard it as a myth. We did not invent this myth, so if we would be true to history we must go back to the men who invented the story (if they did invent it) and find out what they intended.

We have the word of the Apostle Peter; used, I admit, in a slightly different connection, but it applies here equally well—'We did not follow cleverly devised myths' (2 Pet 1:16). *Myth* is the very word he uses. The ancient Oriental and Greek world was very used to the idea of myths. They understood perfectly well what you were doing when you told a story that wasn't true in its detail but was meant to carry a universal truth. Everybody knew what was meant by a myth and Peter says explicitly, 'We did not follow cleverly devised myths.' When Peter spoke of the resurrection he intended it as a literal fact of history.

So did Paul. Writing at one stage to Christians at Corinth, he was obliged to go over in some great detail what he actually meant when he talked of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the course of his remarks he makes this observation:

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. (1 Cor 15:14-15)

If the resurrection is not a fact, the apostles were deliberate liars. It is idle for us in this century to turn round and say, 'If the Apostle Paul were here nowadays he would re-phrase the whole thing and no longer insist that the resurrection is a literal fact of history. He would re-state it in modern idiom as a myth.' That is being most arbitrary. The Apostle Paul and his fellow-Christians were frequently persecuted for teaching that Jesus Christ had risen bodily from the dead.

The Pharisees, who were in part responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, did believe in the resurrection, in the sense that *resurrection* is a survival of a person's spirit. But it was a totally different matter when the early apostles preached that the literal body of the Lord Jesus Christ, which had been pierced with literal spears and nails and put in a tomb, had risen again. If they had merely meant it in the sense of a myth, why did they not take the trouble to explain this more carefully and avoid the confusion of thought and the persecution that followed on their insistence that Jesus Christ was risen again?



There is a difficulty. We may content ourselves with the idea of a myth if we think in terms of the survival of personality or the continuance of a person's spirit; but when we come to the resurrection as stated in the New Testament that is not what is implied. By resurrection the early Christians meant—and they stated it explicitly—not that the spirit or the personality of Jesus Christ had survived the crucifixion, but that the literal body had come out of the tomb in which it was laid. *Resurrection for those early Christians meant the resurrection of the body.*

It is plain idle nonsense, therefore, to say that it doesn't matter whether the body of Jesus of Nazareth really came out of the tomb or not. It is putting one's head into the sands of wishful thinking to say that anyone can still believe in the Christian doctrine of resurrection even if the body of Jesus Christ is still in the tomb. If Jesus Christ is still in the grave of Joseph of Arimathaea, then let us be courageous and fling our Christianity—all of it—out of the window. Let us not descend to explanations that do not fit the facts and which can merely bring contempt upon Christianity from a modern scientifically minded world.

We are faced then with a tremendous either/or. *Either* Jesus Christ rose from the grave and he is the Son of God; there is a life beyond the grave for all men, a glorious destiny for those whom God saves and a coming day of judgment when the impenitent shall meet the due reward of their deeds, *or* Jesus Christ is not risen from the grave and we must discard Christianity as being less than a myth and nothing but a fairy-story.

## **Evidence for Christ's resurrection**

I wish to devote the second half of this lecture to a discussion of some of the evidence. I cannot possibly hope to cover all of it, but I shall be offering the evidence, as I understand it, given by the early Christian writers themselves. My hope is that some of you will go back to the records yourselves. Although I am a committed Christian, I must confess my constant surprise as to how the simple naturally told stories of the resurrection have within them the answers to so many of the critical theories that have been presented in subsequent centuries.

### **Some introductory words first on the matter of evidence**

We must be careful, if we would be fair, to keep a tight rein on our prejudices and bias. Right at the very beginning we shall meet the challenge of whether we are going to believe that miracle is possible, or to dismiss everything that has the slightest flavour of being a miracle. In other words, we must ask ourselves how prejudiced we are on this matter.

If any of us is certain, for reasons that I couldn't begin to imagine, that miracles cannot possibly happen, then we may close the discussion at once, for in the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have the biggest miracle of all time. I must confess I grow a little impatient sometimes with people who bring up the miracles of Genesis 1 as difficulties in the way of accepting Christianity. Doubtless they are sincere, but my impatience springs from this. The difficulties of Genesis 1 are nothing to be compared with the difficulties of the resurrection! If, therefore, we wish to decide whether Christianity is true, it is far quicker to start with the resurrection than with Genesis. If the resurrection has happened, then Jesus Christ is God's Son and what he has to say about the early chapters of Genesis is more powerful evidence

than anything we could possibly have. If Jesus Christ is not risen, he is not the Son of God and Christianity is false; so we need not trouble ourselves about the miracles of Genesis 1.

### **What, then, about miracles?**

I submit to you that the only scientific approach here is to come with reasonable caution and yet with open minds. After all, the normal way of approaching scientific matters (not that I am a scientist) is first of all to examine the evidence.

I am told, for instance, that in geophysics, evidence was discovered that out in space there is a magnetic field that has no mass. As far as I understand physics, that is an extraordinary phenomenon. Ordinarily you can't have a magnetic field without having some mass for the magnetic field to be round and yet the evidence has piled up that this phenomenon is there. No scientist worthy of the name would say, 'I don't believe you can have a magnetic field without mass and therefore I am not prepared to examine the evidence.' The true scientist would say, 'Let me see what the evidence is. If it proves paltry, let us dismiss the thing; if there is undeniable evidence, then we shall have to reconstruct our theory.'

The same process is necessary when we come to consider this greatest of miracles. Let us not start with the idea that miracles are impossible but, rather, examine the evidence.

### **A word about the men who circulated the story**

We have every right to examine their character and to assess what the worth of their evidence is likely to be as we pass our judgments on the type of men they were. Here I submit that we are dealing with men who were thoroughly honest. I mean by that, that they were not the kind of men who would deliberately and knowingly set about a story that was not true but a concocted fraud. These men may have been silly (and some saintly men have indeed been silly), they may have been credulous, but I think we must allow that they were not deliberate deceivers. The gospel they preached exhorted men to holy living and to telling the truth. They did, in fact, succeed (this is a matter of history) in turning thousands of their contemporaries from the Greek standards of living, that held truth at a minimum and thought lying was rather clever, to the Christian standard of telling the truth. With their insistence on truth it would have been a very difficult thing to explain if they built this religion on the foundation of a something that they knew to be a fraud.

They watched their converts lose their lives because they believed that Jesus was risen from the dead. Do you think they would have stood by, knowing that they had deliberately deceived them and concocted a story they knew was untrue? They had sold that story to their contemporaries and were prepared to stand by and watch them being executed? That, surely, is an impossible view. What they have told us we can know for certain; they really believed it had happened.

But, as I say, holy, saintly men can be mistaken. They can sometimes be silly and neurotic. Let us therefore consider some of the many hypotheses that have been put forward to explain their stories of the resurrection.

### **Some people have said that Jesus Christ didn't really die**

Having swooned because of his intense suffering, he was put in the grave for dead, but the cool of the grave revived him. Mustering some strength, he crawled out and appeared to some of his friends in a ghastly state that made them think he was a ghost come back from the dead. Eventually he crept off somewhere and died, nobody knows where. But he lived long enough to set abroad the superstition that he was risen from the dead. However, Mark in his Gospel tells us that Joseph of Arimathaea went to Pilate to beg the body for burial. Pilate was surprised, so he summoned the centurion who was in charge of the execution squad and enquired whether he was already dead. When he learned from the centurion that the body was dead, he gave the corpse to Joseph (15:45).

We must ask ourselves, is that story an invention of the early Christians, or does it sound like a story that would really happen? Pilate was a Roman governor, a military general. Do you think he would have disposed of the body irresponsibly? Or do you think the story rings true, that he would first of all have questioned the centurion in charge of the execution squad and made perfectly certain that that body was dead? Being a Roman general and a Roman governor, he would have done precisely what Mark said he did.

And if, for some unaccountable reason, our Lord had been put half dead in the tomb, is it likely that a man who had been crucified, with a spear stuck through his side, scourged, wrapped round with a hundredweight of spices, would have had enough strength to get up, undo the wrappings and push aside that great stone that was laid at the mouth of the cave? The story is foolish; let me dismiss that one at once.

### **Did the early Christians sincerely believe that Jesus had risen from the dead?**

Being slightly neurotic, wishing heartily that Jesus Christ would rise again and believing strongly in their hearts that he would, were they eventually the victims of hallucinations that made them think he was alive? In all good faith they mistook visions for fact. But then the records tell us that not merely did some individuals see Jesus Christ after his resurrection, but Paul claims before his contemporaries that over five hundred men saw him at the same time, more than half of whom are still living (1 Cor 15:6). He issues an open invitation that, if they wished, they should visit those people and hear their story. It is not likely that five hundred were all neurotic at once.

But moreover, the evidence is exceedingly strong that the early Christians were not expecting Jesus Christ to rise. I think of Luke's evidence. He and others say that, on that first day of the week, the women came to the sepulchre with ointments to embalm the body. The story is natural; it is a very likely thing that women would want to do. The fact that they came to embalm the body shows clearly that they were not expecting the body to rise.

It is true that, if people are really expecting something to happen, at times they will think they have seen it happen. A search party in the desert looking for somebody who is lost, hoping against hope to see him, will be liable after some hours of strain to keep on seeing that person (or at least to think they see him). But it was the last thing the early Christians expected to see; the women were coming to embalm the body permanently.

Somebody will say, 'But later on, when they had time to think, the early Christians got over their initial disappointment by the invention of the story of the resurrection.'

This is an argument commonly put forward by orthodox Jews, for instance. They say that Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but he died. Therefore, their faith was shaken. Presently they thought of a way of reviving their faith and they said, 'Our Lord did not set up a kingdom on earth, but he rose again in a spiritual sense and has set up a spiritual kingdom.' In other words, the whole doctrine of the resurrection was an afterthought by Christians.

Luke's evidence again cuts across that. He tells us that, when the women came to the sepulchre, the angel said, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you. . . while he was still in Galilee' (Luke 24:5-6). The claim is that the story of the resurrection was not an afterthought invented by Christians; Christ himself stated it before he died. If it didn't come true, then Jesus Christ has been found untrue.

'Your theory contradicts the first theory,' you say. 'If Jesus Christ said he was going to die and rise again, then the disciples must have been expecting him to rise.'

Luke tells us the answer again. They were not expecting Jesus Christ to rise, even though he had said he would. And that was for a very good reason. Luke tells a story (24:13-35). One day two disciples were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus when a stranger drew near. The stranger was in fact our risen Lord but they did not recognize him; he was the last person on earth that they were expecting to see. When he enquired what was troubling them, they replied, 'We had been expecting that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, but he was crucified and this is the third day since these things were done. And moreover certain women of our company have brought us tales that he has risen again, but they did not see him.' These two men were obviously unconvinced by such stories. And though they repeated the words our Lord had frequently used ('the third day I will rise again'), the penny still did not drop. Why not?

The answer is seen in what the stranger did.

'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (vv. 25-27)

The reason why the early Christians were not expecting Jesus Christ to rise was because they had never expected him to die in the first place. Their concept of Messiah was the common one of their day. They expected Jesus Christ to raise a great army, capture the kingdom and ascend the throne. A person who claimed to be the Messiah and let himself be defeated and lose his life on a cross—that was a contradiction in terms to a Jew. And to say he had risen again wouldn't necessarily have got rid of the difficulty. It was no good talking to a Jew about the resurrection until you first proved that the Messiah was destined to first suffer and die.

Which was precisely what the stranger did on the Emmaus road. He took the Old Testament and he said, 'Have you not noticed how the Old Testament said that Messiah will first die before he enters into his glory?' That came as a revelation to them. But there it was,

the Old Testament does say that the Messiah would first die (Isaiah 53). Convinced that the Old Testament says that Messiah should first die, their minds were open now to begin to think. If Messiah has died, how will he reach his glory? Is there a chance that those tales that the women brought were true? And they came to recognize that the stranger was, in fact, the Messiah risen from the dead.

We shall want to know how they recognized him. Somebody is sure to say, 'Given the fact that the Old Testament said that the Messiah would die and rise again, could some unprincipled rogue have gone around masquerading as Jesus Christ of Nazareth, dressing up like him, copying his mannerisms? He could have passed himself off to these innocent early Christians as being the risen Messiah, backing home his claim with these Old Testament prophecies.' Yes, that does raise an important question. How did these early Christians become sure that the figure that stood beside them was Jesus Christ and not an imposter?

Luke's evidence seems simple on the face of it, but the more one considers the matter it becomes exceedingly powerful. He went in for a meal with them and, as he broke the bread, they knew him. It was a simple act of breaking the bread at a meal. A tiny little detail that an imposter would not have thought up; but the disciples were very interested in the way Jesus of Nazareth broke bread. If the stories are true, there had been that famous afternoon when he had taken bread in the desert and, to their astonishment, it had multiplied in his hands and the crowds had been fed. Every attention of those disciples would have been fastened on those hands as the bread had multiplied itself in them.

There had been that sacred occasion of the Last Supper when Jesus had taken bread, broken it and said, 'Take, eat, this is my body.' Whatever they understood, or did not understand, they must have perceived that there was something big here. In fact, by breaking that bread our Lord was symbolizing his own sacrifice. He loved those men and loved the world, and he was going to give his body in sacrifice for them. They recognized this stranger in their room as he broke bread. It was one of those small yet utterly inimitable things about Jesus Christ that it was beyond the power of an imposter to reproduce.

But someone will say, 'Surely there is another explanation? The disciples got together, thought of their Lord and the wonderful way he had symbolized his sacrifice for them, and by psychic power they conjured up his image until it seemed to have objective reality.' But again that won't fit the facts. When he came into the room where they had gathered together, they did in fact think he was a spirit. But he said, 'Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have' (Luke 24:39). He asked for food and ate it with them. Peter repeats that in his gospel preaching, 'We ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead' (Acts 10:41).

If people are together in a huddle and they have had a holy experience such as will provoke visions, one of the surest ways to test them and test the vision is to suggest that somebody goes out and gets a cup of tea. That will slice through the holy atmosphere at once! And that is precisely what Jesus did. He said, 'Have you anything here to eat?'

### **The rise of Christianity**

Have you noticed another thing in the evidence? From about that time there began a great movement from Jerusalem that we have come to know as Christianity. It was begun by Jews

as a tremendous evangelical movement. Seeing it is such a colossal movement that exists still, we must try and find some cause for this event.

Why did it break out then? Until that point the Jews had not been particularly evangelical. There had never been any movement comparable with Christianity breaking out of Judaism. Why now? The disciples say it started when the risen Lord himself made them see the point of the Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah should first die and then rise again and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name. This was an absolutely new thing. Before that the Jews had a moral code, the Ten Commandments. It had brought great respect from the Gentile world, but the law of Moses never moved anybody to become an evangelist.

When the apostles went around to start Christianity you will notice that it was not the Christian ethic that they preached. The golden rule, 'Do unto others as you would be done by', was not what turned over the Roman world and started Christianity. It was not ethics or a message of being good that sent the apostles through the Roman world inflamed with zeal to convert their fellow human beings. What was it that sent them? They had found solid reasons for knowing that their sins were forgiven and they had a story to tell their fellow men and women which would bring personal forgiveness and certainty of eternal life that could be known on earth here and now. It was not primarily a message of being good; they had found an answer to sin because Jesus had died and risen.

The missionary movement didn't start before; it didn't even start in the days when Jesus was alive on earth. There was no gospel to preach then. It wasn't until he had both died and risen that there was any message to preach. But once the significance of that death and resurrection dawned upon them, it proved a tremendous dynamo of energy that flung them round the Roman world to tell people this extraordinary news.

That is why I deliver these lectures. This is not a dry academic subject. *If Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, then he is the Son of God as he claimed to be.* And the first and biggest upshot of all this is that his claim to have died for our sins is true. Now that he has risen we may have personal forgiveness of sin and be sure of it now, in value of the sacrifice he has offered. This is *the* answer to human sin. If it is true, it is the most personal thing we have ever heard of.

I would like to go on piling up the evidence, but time forbids. As a parting thrust allow me just to direct your attention to the evidence that John gives us and to remind you that his evidence is in two forms.

### **The evidence of the grave-clothes**

John tells us that when he and Peter went to the tomb they discovered the grave-clothes there and when they went in the significance of it all began to dawn upon them. They found the grave-clothes lying out at length and the napkin that had been around the head still in its place, rolled up in the manner of a turban. And they began to think.

Those grave-clothes become significant the more one thinks about it. How had the body come through? There is the Christian explanation, of course—resurrection had taken place and the body had come right through the grave clothes and left them there. If there was no

resurrection we are in the presence of the most ghastly fraud that was ever perpetrated on mankind. Somebody with obvious intent to deliberately deceive had gone to the grave in the cool of that morning, unwound the clothes round the body, pulled the body out and deliberately wound the clothes back again together with the turban. If you do not believe in a resurrection you must find somebody in history that would have perpetrated such an evil crime and you must find an answer to the question, 'Why did the authorities not hunt that person to the death, and make him expose where he had put the body?'

### **The evidence of Mary and Thomas**

There is another piece of evidence. Mary was at the tomb at the time. When the disciples went home she stayed because of that womanly instinct that surely all of us have observed. There is something in a woman's heart that will not let her let go of somebody she has loved. Many a mother still has in her dressing table drawer a little lock of hair. It is her son's hair, when he was two. The son has grown up now and is a big man (perhaps with no hair anymore!) but she won't let that little lock of hair go. You may call it sentiment or what you wish, but it is that inner feminine psychology that clings.

It is that human psychology that has built shrines around religious figures. Why did the early Christians not make a shrine of the tomb in the garden? You will find the answer in Mary's story. It wasn't logical argument that made her let go of the tomb; it wasn't deduction from the evidence in the grave clothes. Her story is that she let go of the tomb because in the garden she met the living Christ that satisfied her heart with all its emotions.

It is a remarkable fact that those oriental men and women never once made a shrine of that tomb. They seem to have completely forgotten it. It was decadent Christianity that started making pilgrimages to a tomb where Jesus Christ was no longer present.

Someone will say, 'That is all very well, but it's ages ago. If Jesus Christ is alive and showed himself to the people of his day, then let him do the same for me. God knows I am honest. I am willing to believe that Jesus Christ is risen, that he is the Son of God, and I am willing to commit my life entirely to him—if God will only give me the evidence. Let Jesus Christ come and appear to me now, as he did to those early Christians, and I will believe. But if he won't, I shall go off with the impression that he can't.'

Fair comment, but it is not being made for the first time. Thomas said precisely the same thing; 'Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe' (John 20:25). His challenge was heard and answered. But as Christ answered he made this remark, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (v. 29). When we think of it, seeing is not the best method of evidence. If the Lord Jesus appeared here in person half of us would say it was merely a ghost or a figment of the imagination. If seeing were the only proof, then our blind friends are forever lost for they have no evidence.

But another piece of evidence that convinced Thomas is available to us. When Jesus appeared to him we are told that he repeated Thomas's statement word for word. As far as we know, Thomas never handled him or put his finger into his side. The astounding

revelation, that the risen Christ had been by his side when he made his challenge, bit deep into Thomas's conscience.

I close this lecture with a challenge to any who are not yet Christians. I have submitted historical evidence and there is much more that I haven't said. But there is a quicker route than even historical evidence. If Jesus Christ is risen, then he is here. If you wish to know that, then make an experiment. What evidence would prove to you that Jesus Christ is risen? Challenge him to show you! Do you dare to give him an 'open cheque', so to speak? He claims to be able to give you eternal life and introduce you to God.

Say honestly and deliberately, 'Jesus Christ, if you are risen I am prepared for all the consequences. I am prepared to receive you as my God and my Lord and I want the eternal life that you claim you can give. Convince me that you are—make yourself known.'

I can do no more than to challenge you to honestly make that experiment. If it works you will have need of no other evidence. If it does not work there is no other evidence to be had.



## The Bible

### *Man's Word or God's Word?*

The alternative that we shall discuss in this lecture is not strictly an either/or. We shall all agree that the Bible is the word of men; men spoke it, men wrote it. If we examine the style in which they wrote, we should find that their individual characteristics come through. So, not only did men speak and write, their own personalities coloured what they spoke and wrote.

But we must go further. In addition to being the word of men, is the Bible the word of God, and in what sense?

### **The Bible and the evolution of religion**

For centuries the church has given the answer with one voice; the Bible is undoubtedly the authoritative word of God. However, as you well know, it has become very popular in this last century or so to believe that that view of the Bible has been outmoded, and what we have is the word of men and women in their efforts to record their own searching after God. Even if God had been pleased to make himself known to them, they understood very imperfectly what he was trying to say; and what they understood they wrote down still more imperfectly. In consequence, the best that we can hope to gain from the Bible is a certain amount of evidence as to what God may be like. We are reading it two stages removed—through the imperfect understanding of these original men and their still more imperfect attempts to record what they had imperfectly understood.

If we ask why there has been this drastic change in attitude towards the Bible, we shall find the first reason in the tone that criticism took in the middle of the nineteenth century. *Higher criticism* began to base itself on rational philosophy. Motivated by the rational philosophies that believed miracles were impossible, they came to the Scriptures to remove the miracles and the miraculous that was distasteful to their intellectual colleagues.

Then they discovered that many early books of the Old Testament were put together as pieces from *differing sources*, but those sources were not all of the same age or origin. Nevertheless, they had certain very definite characteristics that convinced the acute critics to disentangle these sources and then rearrange these pieces of the Old Testament in their true age and order. They maintained that this study of the sources showed that Genesis was not the first book of the Old Testament to be written, nor Exodus the second. Then, if we rearrange the component parts according to certain criteria, we should find that other pieces of the Old Testament had to be put first.

Finally, when we rearrange the component parts of the Old Testament according to their age, we should find that *the earliest pieces picture a very primitive stage in religion*, which finally improved as we come to the later pieces. It was held that this rather brilliant report was evidence for evolution in the sphere of religion. *The doctrine of evolution* was becoming popular in the physical sciences and, being comparatively new, it was found to be fascinating. It seemed to be compelling evidence that mankind had evolved in religious ideas too. They concluded that we do not have God's divinely inspired record of himself in the Bible; it is the fragmentary record of evolution in religious ideas.

It filled many a critic with a sense of pride that mankind had come so far from his humble origins. For instance, the early stages of the Old Testament showed that the Israelites began like all the other nations as *animists*, or certainly *polytheists* worshipping a whole pantheon of gods. But as they gradually progressed and their ideas were refined they became *henotheists*, worshipping one god but believing that their one tribal god had his counterpart in the gods of all other tribes. Having that special flair for theology that distinguished her from other nations, Israel then grew to the idea of *monotheism*—there is but one god. Mankind had come a long way!

They were content too, to see Christianity in this light. When the New Testament says that our Lord Jesus Christ in his death and sacrifice was the fulfilment of the Passover<sup>1</sup> in Israel (1 Cor 5:7), the evolutionists said that was nonsense! The Passover in Israel began, they say, as a pagan, primitive festival in honour of the moon god; but then it became a ceremony that conveyed much ethical and spiritual help to the people of the day, and gradually refined itself so that Christ could take it and use it as a figure of his own work. In this interpretation Christ and Christianity were not the final stage in God's self-revelation to men, but one (admittedly advanced) stage in his evolution. The idea that Christ and Christianity could be unique therefore had to be abandoned and the Bible being an inspired record was overturned by the very basic assumption.

This extreme view has long since become old fashioned and obsolete, but one frequently still meets these ghosts of ideas in school textbooks, stalking around as though they were modern scholarship. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, the theory of the evolution of religion has been abandoned. In the latest documents which archaeology and other sciences have shown us there is very early material which says, for instance, that in the stories of Abraham evidence is now forthcoming that the details are remarkably true to the era in which he is supposed to have lived. At the beginning of the twentieth century these were dismissed as being totally untrue to those times, but true of a much later date.

The theory of the *dating of the documents* is still the dominant theory. I would be giving a wrong and unfair impression if I said that that too had been overthrown. This theory is commonly called the Documentary Hypothesis of the Old Testament, and it has been shot through from every possible angle. It is no longer believed by some schools of even the most liberal scholars. Scandinavian scholars, for instance, have a very powerful critical school that cries 'Nonsense' to the idea of written sources for the Old Testament. It has developed

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<sup>1</sup> A divinely given ritual meant to foreshadow and prepare people's minds for the work of our Lord Jesus Christ and his sacrifice.

another theory of its own, which is no more conservative but it says that the older documentary theory is nonsense.

I well remember one of my own lecturers in my student days, himself attached to the documentary theory, informing us, 'Gentlemen, the documentary theory has been shot through, but we have to keep it because we have no alternative to put in its place!'

Some have been bold enough to say that, with the documentary theory proved wrong, we are not prepared to go back to the pre-critical days and accept that the Old Testament is God's word because God said so. That, at least, is a fair acknowledgement. It shows us that even in biblical scholarship there can often be prejudice that is moral, rather than intellectual.

Leading scholars have dismissed the evolution of religion, but physical evolution remains as perhaps one of the biggest modern stumbling blocks in the way of taking the Bible as the inspired word of God. Many younger people, brought up in an age that teaches them from babyhood that evolution is a fact rather than a working theory, find it impossible to begin to think that the Bible is the word of God, or that it explicitly teaches that God created this world and the kind of life we see in it today. Therefore, I must turn aside to say something about this matter of physical evolution and its relation to the Bible.

### **The Bible and physical evolution**

I confess at once that I find it very difficult to discuss the relation of physical evolution to the Bible in a public lecture. It is not difficult from the point of view of the evidence, but because of all the emotional complexes that are wrapped up in this subject. The general public has the idea that evolution has been proved, and therefore anybody who dares to raise the slightest question mark must necessarily be an obscurantist, opposed to scientific thought, hopelessly out of date and not worth listening to.

There are many kinds of evolutionary doctrine and many an argument gets lost because people are talking at cross-purposes. The term *evolution* is used to cover a multitude of different views. In all fairness, if we are to believe that evolution is 'materialistic evolution', then there is a head-on clash between it and the Bible. The Bible says that God created the world and all in it. It tells us very little about the mechanisms and means he used, but it does tell us that he made man in his image as a special creature. That creature did not evolve upwards but fell downwards and involved the whole race in his original sin. That is why we are sinners and need to be redeemed. Redemption proceeds in an analogous method. By one man sin entered and brought sin upon us all; so through the work and sacrifice of one man—Jesus Christ—we can be redeemed (see Rom 5:12–19). To most people it will follow, if that diagnosis of sin is not true, the remedy that the Bible prescribes is not true either.

More than that. The Bible says that when God created the world he created various kinds of creatures. Here again we must be clear. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that the kind of creatures were what the modern scientist calls *species*. I willingly admit that there has been change within species—everyone can see that. Nevertheless, the Bible does affirm repeatedly that when it comes to the big orders (obviously the word *kind* refers to some large order) God personally created these by deliberate act and intervention.

Therefore, if evolution means that the entire living universe stemmed from one single cell and life developed from that original cell or cells crossing the borders of orders and species, then there is a head-on collision with the Bible.

In these lectures I am talking as a Christian and I am happy for it to become apparent that I am prejudiced along the lines that all true Christians are prejudiced. I do not expect non-Christians to be prejudiced along those lines, but I would appeal to them at least to be good scientists. I would point out that in evolution there are multitudes of different schools, many of which are mutually contradictory. The whole thing is still a working hypothesis, which has not been proved. If you hold the kind of evolution that demands that all that we see and know came out of nothing by some colossal accident, you are taking a bigger leap of faith, with far less evidence, than the Christian takes to accept the biblical view. You are entitled to take your leap of faith, as I take mine, but let neither of us pretend that we are being scientific, in the sense of that word.

Even to willing minds there is a tremendous difficulty in many current theories of evolution; namely, the appalling lack of evidence. Evolution is after all the name of a process. That is to say, there is enough evidence that various forms of life bear striking similarities the one with the other. Because of that, evolutionists say that they must have evolved the one from the other. They call that *process* 'evolution'. Evolution is not the name of a fact; it is the name of a process.

Of course there are other theories to account for the similarities between these different forms of life. There is the *creationist theory*, not to call it belief. All we shall expect of the scientist is that he will back home his theory by evidence and he will explain to us in a convincing manner what the mechanism of the business has been. It is here that I would charge the evolutionists with departing from scientific methods. On their own confession, they cannot tell us what the mechanisms have been.

Take, for instance, the words of J. Arthur Thompson—who nobody would accuse of being faithless to the evolutionary school. Said he,

Biologists remain in a thick mist as regards most of the big lifts in organic evolution. The formulae of mutation, heredity, selection, isolation, and the like, can, no doubt, be applied, but they do not as yet scatter the clouds.<sup>2</sup>

Conwy Lloyd Morgan has done good service in frankly admitting that we cannot at present analyse these creative syntheses or emergences. This is an evolutionist talking, telling us that some of them have explicitly said that, though they are sure evolution has taken place, they cannot tell us how.

But that is just what evolution is supposed to be! It is supposed to be the 'how', and if there is no evidence for the how, then to regard it as an established fact is certainly not the kind of procedure that would be regarded as scientific in other fields.

Somebody will say, 'Surely, if we cannot demonstrate the how, the science of fossils provides us with enough evidence that it has taken place.' It is here again that I would level

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<sup>2</sup> J. H. Muirhead (ed.), *Contemporary British Philosophy: Personal Statements Vol. II*. [1925] repr. London: Routledge, 2014, 332.

the charge that many evolutionists admit—the record of the Bible is one of the most damning pieces of evidence against evolution. Take for instance the words of another scientist:

There is no more conclusive refutation of Darwinism than that furnished by palaeontology. Simple probability indicates that fossil hoards can only be test samples. Each sample, then, should represent a different stage of evolution, and there ought to be merely ‘transitional’ types, no definition and no species. Instead of this we find perfectly stable and unaltered forms persevering through long ages, forms that have not developed themselves on the fitness principle, but *appear suddenly and at once in their definitive shape*; that do not thereafter evolve towards better adaptation, but become more rare and finally disappear, while quite different forms crop up again. What unfolds itself, in ever-increasing richness of form, is the great classes and kinds of living beings which *exist originally and exist still, without transition types*, in the grouping of today.<sup>3</sup>

The German zoologist Oscar Kuhn likewise remarked, ‘We can indeed speak of a descent within the types, but not about a descent of the types.’<sup>4</sup>

I am not a scientist myself, nor make any claim to be. I believe that in this whole matter, if we are going to be scientists in our approach we should be good scientists. The theory of evolution demands that in the fossil records the intermediary types should be overwhelming in their number. I say again, if your prejudices make the theory attractive to you without the evidence, then you are of course within your rights to hold the theory—as my prejudices leave me to accept what the Bible says. But I do submit that we should be wise, as well as scientific, not to take the unproven theory of evolution as a stumbling block that would bar us from making the practical experiment that is open to us all to make, to discover by practical means whether the Bible is more than human words and is in fact the word of God.

### **The Bible as the word of God**

I am aware that in Christian circles (in order to get out of what seems to be an impasse in this relation of the Bible to scientific theory) defence has been made by having all sorts of explanations that the Bible is not to be regarded as the inerrant word of God—it is to be regarded in the nature of evidence. We are told that one would not expect evidence in the law court to be one hundred per cent consistent or one hundred per cent full. Some of it might be contradictory, some positively deceitful, but it would be the main drift of the evidence to which we should look. We are told that the Bible is like a light that is bright at the centre, but as it streams outwards it grows darker towards the edges until it is no longer possible to say whether it is black or white.

Those points of view and explanations have a certain amount of attractiveness, but I am going to submit to you that they fall foul at this point. When they turn to the Bible, the Bible itself would deny such explanations. The Bible does, in fact, claim more than human origin. It

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<sup>3</sup> Oscar Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926, p. 231 (italics in original).

<sup>4</sup> Ed. For a more recent discussion on these topics and an update of sources, see John Lennox’s *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God* (Lion, 2009).

is useless to invent explanations of the Bible that the Bible itself denies and to offer them as true and acceptable interpretations.

The fact is, if we will let the Bible speak it talks like this, 'All Scripture is breathed out by God' (2 Tim 3:16); or again, 'No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet 1:21). The Old Testament is full of the claim, 'Thus saith the Lord.' The Christian apostles were to acknowledge that what they were writing were 'the commandments of the Lord' (1 Cor 14:37, for instance).

### **The Lord Jesus used the Old Testament as the authoritative word of God**

We reach the supreme height of difficulty when we come to our Lord himself. When he referred to the Old Testament, it is beyond any legitimate doubt that he spoke of it and used the Old Testament as the inspired and authoritative word of God. Asked his views on divorce, our Lord replied, 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife."' (Matt 19:4-5). Our Lord said not only that God made them; not only that Genesis 2 is a proper account of the matter; but that the words of Genesis 2 come to us with the authority of divine revelation. In his own life that is how he regarded the Old Testament. He told his disciples and his disciples have told us that in the time of his grievous temptation he answered the tempter's assaults by the repeated formula, 'It is written' (John 4:1-12). There can be no doubt that our Lord regarded the Old Testament as the authoritative word of God.

### **He claimed equal authority for himself**

But we reach an ever bigger peak of difficulty (if indeed it is difficulty) with our Lord's own words. Whereas he regarded the Old Testament as the authoritative word of God, he claimed equal authority with the Old Testament and thus with the word of God itself. His repeated formula, 'I say unto you,' should be evidence enough. He said, 'Not only does the Old Testament say this, but also I say unto you.' And if we wish to know in what sense he claimed this, we have only to take his words regarding the final judgment.

The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. (John 12:48)

It is our Lord's claim that his words were not offered as advice by a mortal (however high up the evolutionary scale) to those who were limping along behind; they were offered as the absolute authority by which men shall finally be judged.

It is utterly inadequate to take the words of Christ like that and say that they are evidence right in the middle, but the evidence fades off and grows darker towards the edges until it is no longer possible to say whether it is black or white. We must either accept Christ's claim that his word and the Bible to which he gave his imprimatur and the New Testament written by his apostolic authority are in fact the absolute criterion of God's revelation to men; or we must reject it as the biggest hoax that has ever been perpetrated.

If the Bible is wrong on this central issue of its relation to God; if the Bible writers are mistaken here—so mistaken that they have claimed it to be God’s authoritative word when all the time (whether they knew it or not) it was not, but just their understanding—then they have constituted themselves the most unreliable guides, the last sort of people that any educated person would think of following when it comes to this supreme decision.

### **As a man himself, could Christ have been mistaken in the things he said?**

Some have said, ‘We cannot quote the authority of Christ like that, for Christ was a man. And, because he was a man, he was subject to all the limitations that ordinary men are subject to. (Of course, all Christians grant that he was a man.) Therefore, when he spoke of the Old Testament he would merely hold the ideas that the scribes and people of his day held—ideas that modern scholarship has proved to be inadequate and sometimes positively inaccurate. We cannot claim Christ’s *imprimatur* for the Old Testament.’

The argument is that Christ emptied himself of his deity when he came to earth, and being a man he would hold the views of the men of his time, mistakes and all. They say, if Christ could not have been mistaken on these things, he could not have been a real man.

There are several false steps in that argument.

1. That humanity necessarily involves making mistakes. It is true that we know humanity simply as fallen, but it is the Christian belief that Christ was sinless. For a Christian to argue that Christ made mistakes, it would be a contradiction in terms.
2. It is not the Christian belief, nor the Bible’s statement, that Christ was a mere man. Certainly it is true that he was man, but it is nowhere the Bible’s contention that he was *merely* man.
3. Appeal is made that Christ was limited in his knowledge. We are frequently told that when Christ was here on earth he said that he was entirely ignorant of at least one matter—namely the hour of his coming. It is just one statement among millions that he made, one among thousands that are recorded. It is strange how critics, disposed everywhere else to argue that we cannot prove anything from one verse, proceed on this one verse to attempt to prove their point!

The verse surely does not prove it. Our Lord said to his disciples, ‘But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only’ (Matt 24:36). I put it to you; if one of your friends told you on the street that not even the angels knew your name, would you not ask him whether he meant that seriously? And if you did find that he claimed to have some private sort of knowledge about what angels do and do not know, what would you do? Regard him as a mere human, or a human gone wrong in the head? The statement itself implies a claim to a mind that is more than human.

### **Because the Bible records the history accurately, that doesn’t mean God approved of it**

But then we are told that to accept the doctrine that the Bible is the inspired and authoritative word of God brings all sorts of impossible and unacceptable implications. The difficulty is, if

the Bible is the word of God we are obliged to accept all of it, even those parts that are morally unacceptable. I cannot now go into problems of morality in certain parts of the Old Testament, though in my estimation that difficulty has been wildly over-estimated; but I would point out that we have an accurate record of all those topics that God wished to speak to us about. It does not mean that God approved of all that he recorded. The lie of the serpent to Eve, the shallow maxims that Job's comforters preached to him in his distress—God positively disagrees with these things. It has pleased him nevertheless to give us an authoritative and accurate record of what was said. Many of Jacob's shady tricks are recorded with accuracy and by authority, but with no intention of telling us that they were right actions or that we should go and do likewise.

### **What about the condition of the biblical manuscripts?**

Then some will say that it is impossible to believe that the Bible is inspired of God because of the present state of the biblical manuscripts. Allow me to step outside the bounds of modesty here and inform you that I am a textual critic, whose job it is to work on the manuscripts. We are told that the Bible was inspired in its original and all we can know about the Bible is that it is inspired, but it was completely different from what we now have. It is difficult to know how otherwise responsible scholars can begin to talk like that. I do not hesitate to say, without any rancour, that it is incredible nonsense.

Sir Frederic George Kenyon was a British palaeographer and biblical and classical scholar. From 1889 to 1931 he occupied a series of posts at the British Museum. There has never been a more brilliant or more widely read textual critic. He cannot possibly be accused of being a conservative in theology, as I am, yet he has given us his assurance that when we read our Bible, even in English, we have substantially all that was originally intended.

That is also the verdict of great textual critics like Bishop Westcott and Dr Hort. Even a more modern liberal like Dr Vincent Taylor will tell us that it is only two per cent of the New Testament that is in any doubt as to what was originally written; and not one tenth of that two per cent concerns anything that is fundamental. It is nonsense to say that we cannot believe in the Bible as being originally inspired because of the present state of the manuscripts.

### **God used men to give to us his authoritative revelation**

But then we are told that inspiration would require us to believe what is altogether unacceptable about the mechanics of inspiration. People will say, 'Surely you do not believe in verbal inspiration? God did not use those men as dictating machines and by-pass their personalities.' The evidence is that he did not use them as impersonal machines; I have already stated that one can trace their characteristics in their writing. But I do submit that the very framing of that difficulty is unfair. Suppose I wish, and you are willing, to convey a message to an absent friend upon a subject about which you know very little. I ask you to take the message verbally in code and I say to you, 'When you get to my friend tell him, "Dick, Dock, Dack".' Would you think I was being immoral or insulting your intelligence? The fact is that we do use those methods and if the matter I was talking about was



exceedingly complicated, perhaps I would be well advised to do it that way rather than let you try on your own to explain matters you do not fully understand and about which you could not speak authoritatively. Shall we complain if God chooses to take men and specially use them to give us an authoritative revelation for all time?

### **What about the apparent mistakes in the Bible?**

Others tell us that we cannot believe the Bible because of the evident mistakes in it. I would be the last to suggest that there are no difficulties or apparent discrepancies, but let me make two remarks:

1. The general trend of theological and historical research has been to remove what seemed impossible difficulties. I recall the distant days when the argument ran that the Bible talks of a certain King Sargon (Isa 20:1), but unfortunately there were no records of any sort anywhere that so much as mentioned a King Sargon. Therefore, the Bible was wrong. But Sargon turned up! And that has not happened just once or twice, but many times.

2. Most of these difficulties resolve themselves in the last analysis as a question of one's idea of probability. For instance, Luke talks about Theudas and Judas the Galilean, who raised insurrection (Acts 5:36–37), and it would seem from our present knowledge that Luke got them the wrong way round. Somebody who believes that the Bible is God's word would say that it is quite possible, for Theudas is a very common name, an abbreviation for a whole host of longer names. In those days there was a multitude of people who rose up in insurrection; it is quite possible that Luke is talking about a different Theudas from the one we think he is talking about. However, a person who does not believe that the Bible is the word of God will say, 'No, I don't feel obliged to make that assumption.' In other words, it is his prior sense of probability that is guiding him.

### **What evidence do we have that the Bible remains God's absolute truth?**

Therefore, we ought to face the first question as to whether there is some means by which we can know and decide the central issue, 'Is the Bible, or is it not, the word of God?'

We are told, 'No, it cannot be, because if the Bible were the word of God, God would be confined to a book; whereas God ought to be left free to speak at any time and at any place. If God were confined to a book written thousands of years ago, he would become obsolete to the modern generation and therefore we cannot think that God would so confine himself. What he said then was good for the people of that day, but he will have to say different things to the people of this day.'

Again, the argument comes the wrong way round. Shall we be the judges of what God may or may not do? Is there no such thing as absolute truth? Do not  $2 + 2 = 4$  now, as it did in 6000 BC? And is sin not sin now, as it was then? We should examine this matter at its heart to see whether there is an absolute truth or whether humankind is to be made the measure of all things. Any view less than the Bible being the authoritative word of God leaves people a loophole to wriggle through when the moral pressure of revelation is put upon them. If the Bible is the absolute, objective self-revelation of God, human reason must bow to it and not change, but understand, what God has said.

What evidence do we have? Unashamedly I submit to you *the evidence of the early Christian writers*, of the church over many centuries and of the Bible itself. It is the claim given in the Old Testament that only the true God can foretell the future. The Bible here is unique amongst holy books. From the earliest days onwards it tied itself to two things:

1. to history instead of philosophical speculation;
2. to a prophetic programme, saying that God would use a certain nation to bring forth the saviour of the world.

Though the Bible is a collection of a wide variety of books written by a very wide variety of authors over many centuries, it remained true to this prophetic claim. Jesus Christ claimed that those prophecies spoke of him. Somebody will say, 'The Jews wrote the book and prophesied that the Messiah would come. The Jews produced the Messiah. They laid down the conditions; they fulfilled them and presented to us what we cannot possibly accept.' But that was not so. The Jews who produced the book rejected Jesus Christ and cannot be accused of collaboration. They still reject him.

But it is open to us all to make the experiment and I trust we do so with scientific zeal, energy, patience and continuance. Does Jesus Christ match these prophecies and if he does, down to the minutest detail, how do we account for the phenomenon? Certainly, you will not have to do it with any other book. There is no other book among the religious books that dares to tie itself to history. There is no other spiritual leader of the stature of Jesus Christ, who has ever come into this world with anything like the same preparation—or ever claimed to.

*The evidence of personal, practical experience* is by far the biggest piece of evidence. The Bible claims to be life and certainly there is a vivid source-evidence about that; when it talks to us it talks primarily to our moral sense and convicts us of sin. This is an integral part of the evidence—to decide whether or not the Bible is the word of God is not first an academic pursuit. The Bible does not come to us at that level but at the level that we are sinners and need to be saved. Our moral judgment is perverted and we do not even live totally according to our own moral standards.

However little we believe about the Bible; even if our minds are filled with doubts about it, let us take the moral sermons of Jesus Christ and ask, 'Is this bit true?'

'But', you say, 'I don't believe the Bible is the word of God.'

Then, don't believe it; but make the experiment. Live with the Sermon on the Mount for five weeks, or six months if you like, and see if you don't have to admit that you are the helpless sinner that Jesus Christ says you are.

'I still could not believe in the miraculous.'

Never mind if you still cannot believe in the miraculous; never mind the source of the Bible! Prove it the other way round, as to whether indeed it is light that exposes. Once we have become convicted that we are sinners, we shall find our sense of proportions different. No longer shall we be terribly worried about certain scientific difficulties, we shall be far more concerned with the fact that we personally are sinners and would like to be saved.

When people come there, they may make another test of whether or not the Bible is the word of God. The Bible claims that Christ came to do something from the outside. It is the

Bible's claim that what mankind needs is not more information alone, but an added sense to understand the things of God. He needs nothing short of spiritual life to be given to him. If we discover ourselves to be sinners it is open to us all to make that experiment. This new life, this new sense, this practical salvation and knowledge of God—is it a thing that happens as the Bible says it happens? If we do make that experiment earnestly and seriously, all other discussions about the Bible are totally unnecessary.

When our Lord was on earth he not only diagnosed our need as sinners but he said that mankind was blind. Our trouble in coming to this question of the Bible and its authority is that we are blind through sin. You say, 'But that makes your lecture absurd. You have offered evidence, and if we are blind we cannot see the evidence.' When you find a man who is physically blind and say, 'Would you like your sight?' you might think he would say, 'Of course I would like my sight.' So you could ask him if he would be prepared to make an experiment.

Our Lord did this. He made clay and put it on such a man's eyes, which must have made him darker than he was before. He said, 'Go wash in the pool of Siloam, and you will come seeing.' The man was wise; he had nothing to lose. If he had stayed where he was he would have remained blind, but there was a chance that it would work and the Bible says that it did work.

Our Lord then turned the miracle upon the Pharisees as a parable. He said, 'You don't understand, do you? If you were blind you would have no sin, for a man cannot be blamed for not seeing what he cannot see; but if you say you see, then your sin remains' (see John 9:41).

This remains a challenge for all time. 'My teaching is God-given and authoritative,' says Christ. 'I can prove it, if you are willing on your part to make the experiment.'

There are those who stand back and say they can see quite clearly that they don't need to make any such experiment. They have all the answers, and in particular about the matter of sin. Then that is the end of the matter. But for men and women who know themselves to be morally sinful and blind and are willing to take the chance, they can make the experiment. If you are willing to do God's will you can start on those terms (John 7:17).

You can take the whole question to God, and say, 'I don't really believe that the Bible is your word; I don't even know if you exist. But if you do and Jesus Christ is your Son, then I want to do your will and I set myself now to find out what your will is. I will read the Bible despite all my doubts and I intend to do your will as I find it. You keep your part of the promise and show me.'

Christ says that if you dare to do this he will give you proof positive that his teaching is the inspired word of God. The proof may come in other ways than we think. It may be of a different quality from what we are used to, but as sure as Christ is alive that proof will come.

## Conversion

### *Emotional Disturbance or Spiritual Regeneration?*

It will be no news to any of us that Christianity preaches the necessity of conversion in some sense or other. I propose to investigate the explanations that are given of conversion. On the one hand the naturalistic explanation that conversion is nothing more than an emotional disturbance; and on the other, the supernatural explanation that conversion is the effect of the operation of God's Holy Spirit accomplishing a spiritual regeneration.

But before I proceed perhaps I ought to discuss what we mean by the term *conversion*. Most of us find it quite easy to conceive of the conversion to Christianity of somebody who has not been Christian at all. We understand quite easily what it means if we hear that a member of the Hindu faith or a Muslim has been converted to Christianity. But when evangelical Christians lay it down that, even if a person is born into a Christian family in a Christian country and perhaps from birth received into the Christian church by the rites of that particular church, he or she still needs to experience a conversion, many people find it difficult to conceive what conversion could possibly mean in that kind of context.

When they meet those who claim to have had such an experience and then speak of themselves as being children of God, or perhaps use that very popular but not always welcome term *saved*, many people feel a certain resentment. They consider that the experience such individuals have gone through (if indeed they have gone through any experience) has been an excess of emotion tinged with not a little spiritual pride and arrogance. They feel that whatever it has been that makes these people claim they are now saved, cannot be genuine and it cannot, and does not, issue in solid, spiritual, moral living.

Their conception of Christianity is, that on the one hand we accept the doctrines of the faith—we believe in some sense or other that Jesus is the Son of God, we believe in some sense or other that he has risen from the dead, we accept the authority of his church—and thereafter we do our honest best to be good and to do good. And that is the sum total. Anything more than that; anything that offers us certainty in our spiritual relations with God is to be held in suspicion as no more than emotion.

You will see, therefore, that our first need is to examine the New Testament itself to discover, if we can, what is involved in this experience that we commonly label *conversion*. There are many examples given in some detail.

## New Testament examples of conversion

### I propose first of all to consider the case of the famous Apostle Paul (Acts 9)

As Saul of Tarsus he was brought up an orthodox Jew of the stricter Pharisaic school. He was a man who all his life had believed in God, the same God as Christians believe in. He believed a remarkable number of things about him that Christians also believe. Paul likewise accepted the Old Testament as the official revelation from God, and all his life he had done his very best to live by the laws of God as enunciated in that Old Testament.

But it is a matter of history that Saul of Tarsus got converted. What can conversion mean in a case like that?

Someone will say, 'Surely his conversion was simply that he came to see that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and that led to certain adjustments in his theology? He was now prepared to admit that God was a trinity. But when he made that claim in his theological outlook he went on living very much the same as he did before; so conversion is nothing more than a sort of a moving-around of our spiritual chess pieces on a theological chessboard.'

That, of course, is not true. Paul himself has given us quite a detailed account of other things that were involved. It is true that this theological issue was involved, but there were other things that created nothing short of a revolution in Paul's personal attitude. In his letter to the church at Philippi he tells us himself what that attitude to God was before conversion. He points out that he was a member of the very strict party of the Jews, diligent in keeping the Ten Commandments. He loved God's moral law and gave his whole life and all his energy, as best he knew how, to carrying it out.

Nobody has ever suggested that Saul of Tarsus was anything less than one hundred per cent sincere. He could honestly describe the result of his efforts as touching that righteous character that comes by keeping God's Ten Commandments—'blameless' (Phil 3:6). He was not claiming to be sinless; he was claiming that, as far as his fellows could see and as far as he knew himself, he had made a whole-hearted honest attempt to keep God's law. He was not knowingly defying or disobeying any of its precepts.

If we pause for a moment and consider a man like that who can honestly say he has been doing his level best to keep the commandments and has pressed that home by faith in the living God, we see at once that that kind of a character is the conception that many people have today of what it means to be a Christian. I am not overstating things when I say that many people's conception of being a Christian is that you believe there is a God; God has spoken, the Bible is God's word; Jesus Christ is his Son and he is risen again. And for the rest, you do your very best to keep God's law. Now Paul was practically all that (except for belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ), *before* he became a Christian, *before* he was converted.

Notice the differences between what he had before and what he gained as a Christian. It was certainly nothing short of a revolution. Summing up all he had achieved by patient keeping of God's law before conversion he said, 'That was gain for me, but being converted meant that I threw the whole lot over—and all that character that I had woven by diligent keeping of God's commandments, I threw it over.' Now those were stern words.

What did he gain from Christianity? He adds, 'that I may be found in Christ, not having a righteousness which is of my own creation, but that which is through faith in Jesus Christ' (see Phil 3:8–9).

Evidently, this is not a piece of verbal juggling. Here is a man thinking of a tremendous change in heart attitude towards his creator. Formerly, he was doing his best to keep God's law—his whole personal relationship with God depended in the last analysis on what he personally did and on how well he kept God's law. But at conversion he scrapped all that relationship and substituted a completely different outlook. Now his relationship with God does not depend on what he does, or on how well he keeps God's moral law—it depends entirely on what somebody else has done, namely Jesus Christ. The two attitudes are as far apart as the east and the west. How did he come to that kind of change of attitude? People come by different routes perhaps, but in all the cases of conversion that we are given in any detail in the Bible there are certain similarities.

### **I want to discuss now the equally famous conversion of Nicodemus, the Jewish rabbi (John 3)**

We shall examine the process by which our Lord himself led that learned theologian into this changed attitude that is conversion. At this stage we are simply investigating biblical cases of conversion to see what is involved. We shall then have to decide whether we think it is mere emotion or if there is something supremely more.

How is this conversion business brought about? Again there is a modern problem. In promoting what they call conversion, evangelical preachers are often accused of using unworthy psychological techniques, which in the minds of many people proves that it is a bogus, psychological experience.

Let us consider the techniques of our Lord himself. Nicodemus was a learned theologian who had already believed far more than Saul of Tarsus. If he wasn't prepared to go the whole way and believe that Jesus was the Son of God, he could believe that he was 'a teacher come from God' and he came to discuss theological matters. Our Lord said to him, 'Nicodemus, all this is very interesting, but the fundamental issue between you and me is that you must be *regenerated*.' What did that mean? In what sense does a theologian need a personal conversion? He had been brought up to believe in God and had done his best to carry out and expound the law of Moses and the Ten Commandments.

Our Lord drew an analogy. Nicodemus was the chief theologian in Jerusalem, and therefore our Lord quoted what to most people was an obscure incident in the Old Testament to serve as an illustration. It was the occasion in the desert when the Israelites had sinned and in consequence God sent some fiery serpents among them, which bit the people. Many were dying and many were dead already. When they were hopelessly in the grip of the poison they cried to God, and God told Moses to make a serpent of brass, erect it on a pole and put it somewhere centrally in the camp. Moses was to inform the people that everybody who looked toward that serpent on the pole would be cured and live.

He said, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up' (John 3:14). As they had to look to the serpent to get rid of their illness, so people now will have to believe in the Son of Man in order to receive spiritual life—particularly as he

would be lifted up on a cross. Nicodemus was thoughtful enough to think out the implications. It is very clear that Jesus was telling him on God-given authority that he, in common with all humanity, had been bitten by a disease worse than serpent bites. Just as those people were incurably ill and hopeless to recover themselves, the analogy forcibly pointed out that sin has men and women in an incurably bad state so far as their own efforts of recovery go.

It is sometimes thought that this is a technique that modern evangelists have invented, but I want to emphasize that it was Jesus Christ himself who said it and he staked his whole divinity on the proof of it. The real trouble is that people are held by sin. Even when we have done our very best we are helpless to conquer, cure or stop the ravages of the disease. What the Bible means by conversion is that a person comes to see that this is true. All his struggles have not improved the situation, but God has done something about the problem of sin outside of him. In looking to Christ and putting all our faith in him, we find that God has the power to work regeneration in our hearts.

I trust it will be evident to us all that conversion to Christianity is not merely a matter of theological assent; it is a matter of the deepest personal attitude and orientation of ourselves towards God. In this sense therefore, conversion is a necessity, whether a person is born and brought up a Hindu or (nominally) a Christian.

## **Objections to Christian conversion**

### **All this emphasis on sin is an anxiety complex**

Hammering away to people that they are sinners under God's displeasure, incapable of helping themselves, actually causes anxiety. At best it is the emotion of fear and self-loathing that is in all of us which produces a conviction or feeling of guilt. The real state of affairs is not nearly so serious. Pour on that negative emotion of fear and guilt long enough and, instead of helping people, you will hinder them by inhibiting any hope in the value of their own effort.

### **Certainty of salvation is impossible and bogus**

Curiously enough, at the other extreme you will find this objection. The best a person can do is to go down the long, long pilgrimage of self-reformation, and he can never be sure that he has got at the goal. Anybody who dares to claim that he or she has received the forgiveness of sins and eternal life by believing in the Son of Man who was lifted on a cross must be guilty of extraordinary exaggeration and not a little presumption.

So in many people's minds the whole business of being converted is mere emotion. I shall be maintaining later that true spiritual conversion involves the supernatural power of God's Holy Spirit, something infinitely superior to emotion. But I would be the last to admit that we must be afraid of emotion and I shall want to maintain that emotion is inseparably involved in conversion.

We know what people mean when they complain that from time to time certain hyper-emotional methods have been used in the name of Christ and his church. On the other

hand, it is impossible to get rid of emotion. You might as well try to get rid of your leg! In fact, you could succeed more easily. As many psychologists will tell us, we are built in three parts. There is the thought-side of our mental experience, the feelings-side and the will. It certainly is a pity when Christian preachers stress emotion to the exclusion of thought and try to overpower people's wills by surges of bogus emotion. But in the most respectable of conversions, as in a multitude of other situations in life, a decision deeply affecting our personality is inevitably accompanied by emotion.

When a man decides to get married his decision cannot be taken as a cold mathematical equation. In fact, mathematicians are so built that they find emotion in equations! We would regard it as an altogether improper and perverted state of affairs if a man could decide to get married and take up a personal relationship without any emotion.

The analogy is a proper one; our Lord used it himself. He began his ministry not in a church but at a wedding breakfast (see John 2). He performed a miracle, which was also a parable. The wine at the wedding ran out. He told them to get some water pots that were standing at the side of the room and fill them with water. Then he told the servants to serve it to the guests and as they did so it was turned into wine.

It was an eloquent parable. In the Jews' religious manner, the water pots were used for purifying. As they came to this wedding the chief actors and guests made a bow in the direction of decency and religious custom. The water pots were there, but I cannot say how sincerely they may have been used because now they stood empty and were left aside.

Somehow weddings provoke this sort of attitude in most people. If they never go to any other religious services, at weddings they will make a passing bow towards religion and try to keep things decent and clean. You have the religious bit in church, but you don't take it to the wedding breakfast!

Our Lord is saying that this is precisely where our ideas are wrong, and that is why human joy runs out. The idea that you can bow in God's direction and keep him happy is the fateful mistake that many people make. Mere decency, being clean and courteous towards God, is hopelessly inadequate. If you want true joy in human relationships, you must bring the matter of your relationship with God right to the centre of everything you do.

At many wedding breakfasts, if a guest got up to wish the bride and bridegroom every happiness and pointed out that true and lasting and deep happiness must be founded on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a good many of the guests would be offended. They would also feel embarrassed at that kind of thing being mentioned at a wedding. Why? It is because our emotional reaction to God is astray. What happened with the water that was turned to wine is what happens at conversion. Before it had been a matter of being courteous and decent and clean towards God—such chilly stuff that you normally only talk of in church! Now it has become the centre of life and instead of being chilly it is a source of uninhibited joy.

It was Jesus Christ who reminded us that we are to love the Lord our God uninhibitedly, with all our hearts as well as our minds. There is a place for very genuine emotion; and the fact that very often we find God and spiritual things embarrassing and cold may be a sort of temperature reading of our true spiritual state. When people who have lived like that come in contact with Jesus Christ they are bound to have a pretty heavy emotional reaction. They



have entered into a right relationship with God and now God is at the very centre of their lives and enjoyment.

Our Lord himself had to remind a certain Pharisee of the inadequacy of his experience. When a woman from the streets, who had obviously been converted, came in and sobbed her heart out at the feet of Jesus Christ, the Pharisee objected to her 'wearing her heart on her sleeve.' But our Lord said, 'See how she loves me.' This is genuine emotion—emotion that springs from the fact that the woman has been saved and her sins have been forgiven. 'But Simon,' he said, 'is there any evidence in your life that you have been saved? You are very distant. You gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet' (Luke 7:44–45). Our Lord very often counted that kind of emotion as evidence of whether there was an inward relationship with God or not.

### **Healthy emotion**

But consider the matter just a little more closely—I don't want to over-labour this point. Nowadays one of the chief grounds against the insistence of conversion is that many people automatically feel that anybody who preaches the need of a personal experience must somehow be psychologically wrong.<sup>5</sup> I want to go further and say that emotion is not always wrong in this matter—but the kind of emotion that Christianity will set going is the very best and healthiest emotion that you could possibly have.

*The matter of sin.* Our Lord challenged Nicodemus to observe that for all his theology he was a hopeless victim of sin. Somebody will say, 'Surely that is the most morbid emotion.' Morbid or not, it is extremely real! One of the fundamental laws of mental health is the courage to be realistic. In our teens many of us had all sorts of bright ideas. We might even have felt that, given good educational training, a sharpening of our reasoning and the right environment, we might cope with the problem of sin. Some may even have felt that a bit of amateur psychoanalysis might have got rid of some of the less pleasant pieces in our character.

I would not speak disrespectfully of the great work that many psychiatrists do. But, if we are honest, this matter of sin goes deeper than we can cope with. Anybody who is frank will admit that we are still fighting a losing battle. It is here that many people build a brick wall around their consciences and the very mention of spiritual things or conversion gives offence. It might pierce that uneasy part in the human make-up. Very often criticism of conversion comes from the fact that people have been brought to remember things they are desperately trying to forget. However, the first law of mental health is having the courage to face ourselves as we are. If we have any moral sense at all, there is not one of us but would admit that we come short, even of our own moral standards. Jesus Christ is right—we are desperately sinful.

Modern thought has tried to get round that. And here again the Christian message of conversion seems to stand in its way and provoke not a little dismay.

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<sup>5</sup> They have read such books as William Sargant, *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing*. London: Heinemann, 1957.

Certain people say, 'Yes, you are sinful, but then it doesn't really matter. You must give up any ideas of judgment from God against sin—these surely are relics from our primitive past. All these ideas of judgment, of God's wrath with sinners, are surely not true; God doesn't get angry about anything.'

They have tried to get round that predicament by believing that they can still be sinners and God won't really mind. Our Lord said that attitude was impossible. The Christian gospel preaches that sin matters so desperately that Jesus Christ had to give himself as an infinite sacrifice for sin and suffer the sanctions of God's holy law against sin.

Somebody will say, 'Can you possibly believe in absolute values like that?'

And the Bible says 'Yes, there is none except absolute.'

It doesn't help a man, when he has committed adultery, to tell him that it doesn't matter, it isn't sin. If you take out of life its absolute values, in the end you will make life itself purposeless and destroy its very bloom and joys. People have a way of thinking that sin does matter at some levels. They don't like six million Jews gassed in gas chambers; they don't like it if their little girl gets raped. Jesus Christ says that sin matters desperately. If we are going to keep our self-respect as men and women—and self-respect is one of the fundamental laws of human mental health—we must retain our sense of values.

### **The Bible's answer to objections**

The Bible says that there is a way out of our predicament. God himself has done something about it—that is the significance of the cross on which Jesus Christ died. God himself has done something about this matter of sin. It is one thing to try to honour his values and satisfy his laws, but that can't bring forgiveness and the possibility of a new start. Jesus said to Nicodemus that the way this new start begins is when a man learns to look away from himself to what Christ has done. And here I would argue that it is an exceedingly healthy emotion when people in all their need learn to anchor their faith outside themselves. We know for a fact that if we get over-introspective it can possibly injure us mentally. It is a tremendous step forward when we learn to look outside of ourselves to something objective on which we can rest—something that is unchangeable and has been permanently finished and done.

It ought to be evident at once that if we can receive full forgiveness through what Jesus Christ has done on his cross, there is going to be a most powerful springboard from which to begin a new and positive attack on our sin. When somebody starts to point out our faults, we all know the natural reaction is to put up our psychological defences. On some things we don't have the courage to have a good look at ourselves and admit the truth, but in the biblical sense of conversion we learn that God loves us in spite of our sins. God's law and his values are not lowered. While he hates our sin, for Christ's sake he is willing to accept us as we are. God is prepared to guarantee to all who come genuinely to him that he will never cast them out. They will never come under God's wrath; they are permanently and eternally received. When men and women wake up to find that God has received them because of what Christ has done, they gain courage to have a look at themselves and admit that he or

she is a sinner, in the confidence that God knows it already but has an answer in what Jesus Christ has done.

This kind of conversion puts a person on the road to emotional and psychological health. If your child grew up under the impression that you would throw him out unless he behaved one hundred per cent correctly, he would probably become emotionally disturbed. You wouldn't like to have a child who lived out his life doing things to please you in utter fear of your rejecting him.

God doesn't want children like that either. God's way of salvation, as we heard from the Apostle Paul and Nicodemus, is that acceptance does not depend on how well we keep God's law. He is prepared to receive us for Christ's sake and to let us know we are received, saved, regenerate, forgiven. This is so now, and we will never be cast out. It does not depend on how well we behave. Oh the relief, the basic security that brings to life, helping us to expand and relax in the confidence that God will never cast us out. We dare to face life with God and cooperate with him in the new development. I for one am not ashamed of the gospel; it copes with our emotions of fear and deals with our conscience and our honesty and our sense of values.

But somebody will say, 'If a man could possibly know that he's saved and be sure that he will never be cast out, then surely he can live as he pleases?'

At least, let us be fair here. Many other people's objection to this kind of conversion is simply that they don't want to live to please God and to get heaven as a reward. As one of my colleagues put it, 'If you are going to be good, you want to be good for goodness' sake, not by wringing God's arm and getting a heaven at the end as a reward for being good!' Why not? When I repeat the insistence of the New Testament on conversion, let me underline that I am not preaching that we have got to be good in order to get to heaven. In fact, it is the very opposite! There is no such thing as deserving heaven by being good. A man who is saved is regenerate and begins then to do it simply for the sake of being good. He knows his salvation does not depend on it and that introduces a different kind of a quality into being good.

### **Does it work?**

To answer that in the final part of this lecture I can merely state my belief—and the belief and experience of millions of Christians—that it does work. Conversion not only involves very healthy emotions; it is more than emotion. It is a spiritual regeneration. Our Lord underlines the necessity of such an experience in these words, 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit' (John 3:6). Christianity is not religious training of our natural state, it is nothing less than the introduction into our personality of a new element called *eternal life*—a new spiritual power. The apostle Paul speaks of it as receiving a new nature. 'Once we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind' (Eph 2:3). 'Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit' (Rom 8:5).

You see, I can take my dog into the kitchen and give him a beefsteak and both he and I understand beefsteak. We have that much in common. I can take my dog into an art gallery and show him a Rubens and he just sits there and looks. I could take him to all the dogs'

schools that there are and he would still just look. The reason? There are things in the human world that a dog, however you train him, cannot appreciate.

The Bible says it is not merely a matter of dealing with sin and patching it up. If ever we are to understand God in this deeper sense, we must receive something that we were not born with; we must receive God's Holy Spirit. In this sense we were not born children of God, we have to become children of God. I have seen that miracle happen, and in the last analysis it is only personal experience that will convince anybody of the truth of this. I have known people who found the Bible and God's things boring in early life, but when they receive God's Holy Spirit what once was mysterious and boring becomes the very centre of pleasure and joy.

### **Proof from personal experience**

That is Christ's claim and I do not propose to offer any evidence on this score. The only valid evidence of it is personal experience. If you have come across somebody who has had this experience you may certainly find the evidence that something has taken place. It's like a cleric I met who was unconverted in his student days at Durham. When I asked him what had made him realise that he needed something more, he told me it was because he had met some other Christian students. He said, 'To my dismay they read the Bible and enjoyed it. I was doing it for my degree and I couldn't imagine what made students in other faculties come together on a Saturday to read the Bible. And, worse than that, they obviously enjoyed it!' He, too, found the secret.

It is a matter of personal investigation and experience. Let us be clear that Jesus Christ does seriously offer, not merely the putting right of emotion, not merely forgiveness, but a new kind of a life. The tragedy is that many people still have the idea that Christianity is like every other religion—it is basically what we give to God. Whereas true Christianity begins the other way round—it is what God gives to us. As our Lord put it:

If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water. (John 4:10)

When he talked in this fashion our Lord did not mean any ritual. He said to his contemporaries, 'I put my challenge before you. I am soon going back to heaven; I offer you spiritual life; you must decide what to do with it.'

If men and women receive it, that does not mean they are sinless overnight. But it does mean that they are inseparably joined to Jesus Christ forever. Christ begins to promote in them the birth and growth of a new life that was never there before; it will carry on side by side with old habits that are diminishing gradually and at last, when God's perfect day breaks, those old things shall fall off like the dead chrysalis falls away from the living butterfly.

As I understand it, that is the claim of Jesus Christ. If you receive him in this fashion you may feel relief and a very pleasant emotion, but you may not feel much emotion at all. The biggest powers in this universe are silent; the colossal power of gravity has never been heard, yet none but a fool would deny its existence. If Jesus Christ is right, there is a person in this

lecture room who is God. He is challenging us to face him with our sin, to accept his sacrifice and his ability to impart new spiritual life and acceptance with God here and hereafter.

It is urgent and personal and he asks for a personal response. Either we believe and receive him and are regenerated, or we dismiss him and go our way (decently enough, of course). But if Jesus Christ is to be trusted, going without him is to go to a shattering personal and eternal disaster.

May God give us the courage to face what Jesus Christ really meant, the sense to think it through, the determination to find out whether it is true or not and the grace to make the right decision.

## About the Author

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