

# **The Case for Belief**

*Evidence for the Truth of our Christian Faith*

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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## What is Truth?

### *The Claims of Christ*

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I would like sincerely to say that I do count it a real honour to be asked to this famous city to talk to you, and on such a subject.

For five years before coming here to Ireland I worked in the Prior's Kitchen, now a university department but originally the kitchen to the great cathedral monastery in the city of Durham in the north of England.<sup>1</sup> No one who has had the opportunity of examining and working on the manuscript Bibles, or surveying the great collection of memorials that is housed in the kitchen there and in the refectory and in the dormitory, could possibly escape the tremendous influence that Ireland has had on Christianity, at least in the north-east of England. In the very form of writing, in the design of tombstones and crosses and buildings, and certainly in deeper parts too, we owe you here a great debt. Even if we must complain that you had to steal St Patrick from us originally, nevertheless we do thank you for the way you have magnificently paid back your debt, helping to rekindle the fires of Christianity when they were burning very low in our past.

Let me begin by explaining what I shall be attempting to do here this evening and in these three coming evenings. You have asked me to speak to you on *the evidence for the truth of our Christian faith*, and I shall be simply doing that, and in particular narrowing down to its true basis some of the evidence by which we may certainly know that Jesus Christ is God's Son, God incarnate. That, after all, is the chief cornerstone of our faith. If Jesus Christ is not God's Son, if he is not deity incarnate as well as human, then strictly speaking we have no Christian faith left at all.

I shall not of course be attempting to put before you all the evidence. I shall not say a half of those things that could be said; and if the evidence that I select is not perhaps the evidence that you might select, I ask you to overlook that matter. I shall not feel obliged either to put before you all those many difficulties that thoughtful minds have from time to time thought of against the truth of Christianity. I shall be mentioning some, of course, but in the space of four lectures it would give altogether a wrong sense of proportion if I loaded down my lectures with all those many possible difficulties that can be thought of. I shall rather concentrate on setting before you, I trust, enough positive evidence to put it beyond all reasonable doubt that Jesus Christ is who he claimed to be, and to make it then a matter of arbitrary and deliberate choice *not* to believe.

This evening my method of procedure will be to attempt to map out again what are in fact the claims of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the course of years it is possible, even for Christian people, that our ideas of what Christ himself actually claimed to be grow dim and uncertain.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Palaeography and Diplomatic.

Before we can possibly come to judge the truth of Christianity, we should have clearly in our minds what Christ actually claimed, so that we may come to some fair decision as to whether his claims are genuine or otherwise.

### **Evidence for the truth of those claims and implications arising**

Having then staked out what his claims are, I shall attempt to put before you evidence that those claims were true; evidence from his life, his character, his death; evidence for his resurrection. Proceeding from that I shall ask the question of basic Christianity: if Jesus Christ is God's Son, what relevance has that to ordinary people? After all, the thing that we are studying is not a subject of mere academic interest. If Jesus Christ is God, and God has for some reason visited our planet, then there evidently are certain far-reaching implications for us. But just what those implications are, is sometimes hazy in the minds of not a few.

I shall be attempting to map out what it was that happened in those early days when Christianity was first preached. If we can find out what really happened to those thousands of people all over the Roman Empire who became converted to Christ— who were, so to speak, the first ones to believe on him— we shall have added evidence as to who Christ himself is, judging from what he did in the people of his own day.

### **The source of our evidence**

So this evening let me begin to talk to you about the claims of Christ. I'm not asking you at this stage to decide in your minds whether you agree or disagree; I am merely asking that you listen to what Christ actually claimed. Our main source of information, I want to say at once, is of course the New Testament. We have allusions to Christ in the secular historians, Tacitus, Pliny and Josephus, but the majority of our evidence— ninety-eight percent, is found in the New Testament.

### **Some difficulties that people have**

*How do we know we have a true copy of what was originally written?*

Therefore, in order to be honest, I ought to deal first with one or two difficulties that people have against our New Testament. The first one is not so very important and I doubt whether any of you would seriously contemplate it as a difficulty. It has often been said to me, particularly by younger people who have not had the time to study, that our New Testament has obviously been copied out so many thousands of times it is no longer possible to take everything it says as representing what was originally written.

Sometimes, if one quotes a part of the New Testament about our Lord, one's friend will turn round and say, 'But how do you know it's a true copy of what was originally written? The Bible wasn't written in English; the New Testament was written in Greek and has been copied out thousands of times. Mistakes creep into the manuscripts, so how can we possibly know at this late stage, in 1962, that we have in our New Testament what was originally written and what, therefore, may safely be quoted as evidence?'

That seems to be a real difficulty to some, but actually it is no difficulty at all. All I need to do here is to quote the words of perhaps the greatest experts there ever have been on the

textual criticism of the New Testament. After years of patient toiling with the manuscripts those great scholars, Bishop Westcott and Doctor Hort, announced that seven-eighths of the whole are beyond any doubt whatsoever.<sup>2</sup> So we may be sure that we have seven-eighths of what the original writers wrote. Of the one-eighth that is uncertain, these two scholars gave it as their opinion that it is largely concerned with trivialities: odd particles here and there. Summing up their findings they tell us that less than one-sixtieth of the whole is still in doubt. Since their time whole armies of scholars have worked, and we have more certainty now than then. In the judgment of the greatest textual critics perhaps that have ever been, much less than two percent in our New Testament is uncertain, and the vast majority of that concerns mere trivialities. So I take it that I may dismiss that particular problem.

*Can we be sure that the original documents were genuine and not forgeries?*

But supposing we say that we can rely on our Bibles as giving us what the original writers wrote, if we are honest we ought to ask this further question. For instance, these letters that are under the name of Paul the apostle, may we be sure that what we have are genuine copies of what was originally written? Were they in fact written by that man that we know as Paul, who lived in the first century AD, one of the leading evangelists of the Christian church? Or might it not be that these letters were, after all, forgeries, written by other hands in later centuries?

Here again the trends of modern scholarship and more recent findings are interesting. One hundred years ago there would have been a whole army of scholars, notably on the continent, who would have said that hardly any of our New Testament documents are what they pretend to be. They would have maintained that the majority were late forgeries. Happily, that extreme school of criticism has gone by the board and we scarcely hear of it these days at all. It is in fact a position no longer tenable, and the majority of scholars of all kinds would admit with unanimity, over large parts of the New Testament at any rate, that what we have are genuine documents. The letters that claim to be Paul's were written by Paul; the Gospel that claims to be by Luke was by Luke, Paul's travelling companion; the Gospel of Matthew was written in the first century by a Christian gentleman, and we have no reason to doubt that it was Matthew.

*Did the Christian church add its own interpretation?*

More recently, however, Christian scholars have themselves, I'd better not say, 'invented' a difficulty; but they have at least cast some doubt on our New Testament records. They say, 'In the Epistles what we have is not history; we have bits and pieces of history, largely shot through with interpretation. It's what the later Christian church thought about Jesus, not what he actually said.' They have scanned through the Gospels and said the same thing about them: 'Here in the Gospels, we haven't just plain history; we have history plus interpretation. In order to be honest, therefore, we must separate the interpretation—that is, merely what the Christians thought at a later time—and try and thread our way back to what Christ actually said.'

That is a difficult task, as you can perceive, and one I want to submit to you is in great part misdirected. I do not wish to be unfair, but within the compass of these four lectures I must

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<sup>2</sup> Brooke Foss Westcott (1825–1901) and Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828–1892).

attempt to give a right proportion. It is true that the ancients wrote in what the scholars call certain *literary forms*, and if they were writing a speech it followed a set pattern. But that's a long way from holding the view that our Lord himself, and the teaching of the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven, could not recast those forms. The new line of Christianity doubtless burst the old literary bottles in not a few places.

It is largely a speculative occupation to try and separate out from what the apostles and the evangelists wrote, what their contribution was, and what Christ originally said. Nor indeed is it a sound procedure. The Gospel writers are agreed on this, and unless they were telling absolute and deliberate lies we must believe them. They all agree that when our Lord was here on earth he appointed certain men whom he called apostles, and ordained that they should be his official interpreters. There was wisdom in that. After all, what use would the life of Christ here on earth have been for us, if we had no interpretation of its meaning?

I take but one sample. We know, not only from the New Testament but from the secular historians, that our Lord was crucified in the reign of Tiberius Caesar. But what was the point of that crucifixion? What was the meaning of the death of Christ, if it had any meaning at all? Did he die as an over enthusiastic reformer? Being young, was he also hot-headed? Some have said that, if only he had been a little bit more circumspect, he might have placated his enemies and needn't have died at all. Or, as the New Testament roundly proclaims, was it not an accident at all but a divinely controlled event? In some sense his death was for us and for our sins; did it do something so that we might be reconciled to God? Who shall tell us? Just to know he was crucified wouldn't tell us much at all about the significance of that death.

Therefore, if our Lord did in fact come here that he might die for us and his death should mean something to us, he would have wasted his time completely had he not appointed men who should officially interpret the significance of that death. The New Testament claims that these apostles were appointed for that specific task. They had been with him in his life, so that he might teach them, and when the Holy Spirit came he would teach them the significance of our Lord's life, death, resurrection and ascension. It is therefore a misguided task to try and divorce what actually happened to Christ from the interpretation that the apostles put on it. If the apostles were true, then we have no need to divorce it. If the apostles were false, then either Jesus Christ himself was not true, and we may dismiss him from our thinking; or else Pentecost and the sending of the Holy Spirit has somehow failed and a major plank of Christianity is found to be corrupt.

I shall have more to say later on about the question of the authority of these New Testament documents. I just want to make the point here that we may take it that what the apostles wrote, they wrote with Christ's consent. In reading it, we are reading what Christ himself would have had them write.

### **What did Christ claim?**

I want now to examine what is written in our New Testament and mark out what Christ did in fact claim.

## **'I am the truth'**

We are familiar with the verse in which he is reported to have said, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (John 14:6). Let me select one item, 'I am the truth'. Shall we notice what he is saying? He did not say, 'I speak the truth', though we believe he did. He was not merely saying that on certain things 'I tell you true opinions'. His claim was far deeper than that. Not merely, 'I speak true things', but, 'I am the truth'.

*What is truth anyway?*

We all know what true things are. 'So and so told me a story and it proved to be correct.' True in that limited context. But what is *the truth*—what is the reality behind life and behind all things? The Christian claim, coming from the lips of Christ himself, is this: 'I am the truth'.

Let me illustrate it to you at these various levels.

*At the physical level*

Suppose I held a tulip in my hand and I asked myself what is the truth about this tulip. Then I take it to one of my scientific friends.

'Tell me about this tulip—what is the truth about this tulip?'

'Well, it is made up of such and such and such chemicals, and it grows by the process of photo electricity; the sun shining on the green leaves gets the chlorophyll working and it makes the tulip grow, and certain pigments here and there make the colours come.' He will relate all such marvellous things like that.

If you want to go a bit deeper than that you must go off into physics, and you will come down to the basic atoms of which the tulip is made. Says the scientist, 'the atom is composed of a nucleus plus all sorts of things that buzz around.'

And of course he is telling us correctly, but then you probe this scientist a little bit further. 'So you tell me that the truth about this tulip is that it is really made up of atoms, and that the atoms are largely made up of a tiny, tiny nucleus and electrical charges buzzing around it, and particles held together by strong electrical forces; it is largely empty space, and in this space there are electrical forces? Tell me, where did the nucleus come from, and where did the electrical forces come from?' The scientist can go no further.

The Christian claim is that they came from that person whom we have come to know as Jesus Christ. Writing with all the authority of Christ behind him, the Apostle Paul said at once stage:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:15–17)

The Apostle John, likewise writing with the authority of Christ, says, 'All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made' (John 1:3).

If you ask what is the truth about the tulip at the physical level, the ultimate truth is *Christ*. And that's a mighty big claim to make, for it will be the same whether you enquire about a tulip or a star; about this planet or the vast suns in space; about a speck of dust or a whole universe—the Christian claim is that the truth about it all is Christ. Let us set our sights big

enough, and I remind you that at this stage I'm not asking you to agree with me wholeheartedly at once. I'm merely telling you what the Christian claim is, and I want to state it in big enough terms that we see what kind of a question it is we have to settle. This is either the most arrogant nonsense that was ever talked, or it is true. There is no halfway house.

#### *At the aesthetic level*

When we have thought about the tulip on a physical level, suppose I took it to an arts person and said, 'Do you know the truth about this tulip? The scientists tell me that it is made up of atoms, and these atoms are largely empty space with a nucleus in the middle and certain particles are roaring around them.'

The arts person would smile rather condescendingly and say, 'Poor scientists. What they miss, if they only have that explanation of things. It's quite true in its way, but all those things were only the preliminary material necessities behind the tulip being a tulip. A tulip is a thing of marvellous beauty and wonderful aesthetic value. Look at the shape of its leaves, look at that wonderful colouring.'

He will begin to turn into a poet, as he expresses his reaction to this beautiful thing. It may be nice to know how it works, but it wasn't made so that a scientist could take it to pieces again. It was made so that we may enjoy the flower. To examine it minutely and find out how it was made and not enjoy it would be absurd. That would be to miss the whole purpose for which the thing was made. So, while it is quite possible to enjoy the purpose for which the flower was made without knowing anything about how it was made, tulips have a purpose.

And if tulips have a purpose, what about human beings? The scientist could take you to pieces and explain you in terms of atoms and nuclei, but it wouldn't be a very satisfactory explanation, would it? I suppose you would be the first to object. You don't like to think of yourself merely as a collection of nuclei and bits and pieces held together with electricity; you're something more than that. A thing of beauty maybe. If we took off the outer layer it would be rather ugly, I must confess; but then we're not interested very much in the inside mechanics, unless we happen to be medics.

#### **What are we here for?**

That is only a preliminary to the whole question. If tulips are here for us to enjoy, what are we here for? All sorts of answers have been given, and sooner or later every thoughtful man and woman will enquire about it. We ought to be wary of giving too small an answer to that question.

'To make the world a happier place.' That is to say, to make all the other people in the world happier. But what are they here for? When we have made them happier, what will they do?

I do not wish to go into a discussion of all those many reasons that have been suggested as the purpose of human life. What I want to do just now is to state the Christian claim. With the full authority of our Lord, the Apostle Paul tells us that not only were all things made *by* Christ and *through* him, but all things were made *for* him. In the last analysis that tulip was made for him, and human beings everywhere and at all times were made for him. That is the meaning of human life, and we at once begin to see that the Christian claim, far from being a merely academic thing, is a thing that comes home directly and personally to each one of us.

If Christ is true, then each one of us was made for him. Not to live for him, whatever that may mean, is a denial of the fundamental reason for our existence.

The Christian would in fact point to all the trouble and chaos in the world, all the unhappiness here in our own beloved country, and tell you that basically it springs from the fact that, having been made for Christ, we have gone astray and do not always live for him, thereby thwarting the very purpose for which we are made.

I'm not asking you to assent; I'm merely pointing out what Christ claims. Once again, the claim is so tremendous, and this time so personal to each one, that if it is not true it is the most wicked imposition upon people. Christ was the most undesirable sort of meddler, and it is arrant nonsense to be resisted with all our might. There is no middle path. If it is true we may welcome it. If it is not true it is nothing short of sheer bondage and slavery and an insult to mankind.

But still we haven't done with our tulip, surely? We may enquire about it at the physical level, we may enquire about its purpose; but even tulips raise other issues.

#### *At the moral level*

The other day a colleague of mine was talking to somebody on the telephone. In a way that sometimes happens, the wires became crossed somewhere and they were interrupted by another telephone conversation, which turned out to be a gentleman ringing a florist and arranging for flowers to be sent to Mrs So and So, who obviously wasn't his wife. From the brief conversation my colleague said that it was pretty apparent that the flowers were to be sent at such a time as when Mr So and So wasn't in.

Is that a right kind of a thing to do? Even such things as tulips and flowers raise other issues, what we call *moral issues*; whether it is right to do a certain thing. Who shall tell us what is right? What is the truth about what we call morals? Is it just a convention? Is *right* just what people think is right?

Nowadays in some quarters the commandment, 'You shall not commit adultery' (Exod 20:14), is represented to us as being merely a convention. A kind of 'rules of the club', and therefore it is wrong if you do it because you are offending against your particular society. But if you were from some other country, and they commonly committed adultery, it would be the right thing to do because everybody does it.

*What is the truth about morals?* Is it merely a convention, or do these morals go back to an absolute standard? The Christian claim, I need hardly remind you, is that there is an absolute standard, and what I do want to remind you of is the claim of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he is the absolute standard. We may grasp the point of that, if we think back to the situation when he was first here upon earth. The Jews among whom he was born held it as a tenet of their religious faith that the Ten Commandments contained in the Old Testament were laws that were given to them by God through Moses. For that contention they had fought, and thousands of them in the course of history had given their lives.

When our Lord came, knowing right well that they believed those Old Testament regulations to be of God, he said 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them' (Matt 5:17). He honoured them as of God.

But then he said that there would be certain modifications. 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But *I say to you* that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (vv. 27–28).

At this juncture the Jewish ears stood up on end. What was this? A young man of thirty, thirty-one or two, maybe, daring to put himself in a place that they had regarded as the prerogative of God? And that was precisely what he was doing—'I say to you'—he claimed to be the absolute standard.

He went further than that. Not only did he himself claim to be the absolute standard of morality, he announced to his astonished contemporaries that at the end he would be humanity's judge. 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son' (John 5:22).

I wonder what your reaction would have been, I wonder what mine would have been, if a young man of thirty-one, whom we knew to have been brought up in a carpenter's shop, and had no formal education as such, said in our hearing 'at the last, when all humanity comes to be judged, I shall be your judge.'

And then he said that these are the terms on which the judgment shall proceed: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears *my word* and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life' (v. 24).

Words perhaps that to us are very familiar, so that sometimes we lose their impact and fail to see what a tremendous claim is here staked out. Let me repeat them to you, for this is the claim that Christ through his people still makes to every one of us. He says that there is an absolute standard of morality: he is that standard. He says that the meaning of human life is this: that it was made for him. He says that in the final day he will be judge, and the judgment will proceed on these terms: 'whoever hears my word'—in the sense of not merely listening and then forgetting; but hearing, and doing, and obeying.

'What, the Ten Commandments?' someone asks.

No, he didn't say that. He said to his astonished listeners, and to us too if we will take it in, 'whoever hears *my word* . . . does not come into judgment—it is my word that shall judge people in that final day.'

The Jews eventually said he was speaking blasphemy and they took up stones to stone him. I've no wonder they did. Any non-Christian who wouldn't, surely has missed the point of what he was saying. For a young man to come before us and say that we were made for him, that he will be our judge, that the judgment will proceed according to how we personally have treated his word, if that is not true it is so preposterous as perhaps to mark the man as insane. But if he really means it and he's sane, we'd better pick up our stones and hurl them with all our might. Not to do so would show that we are lacking in moral fibre, or haven't understood the point.

Perhaps I labour things, but I do wish in this first lecture to get this clearly into our minds. Unless we see what the claims of Christ really are we shall be in no position to come to any adequate judgment about them. It is for lack of carefully studying what Christ actually claimed that one can often hear loose and altogether inadequate ways of thinking.

People will say, 'Well I can't go as far as saying that Jesus Christ was divine, or that he was the Son of God, but I think he was a good man in his day.' Such statements either show

that the person has never read the New Testament or, reading it, has completely missed what is basic to our Lord's claim.

Other people will say, 'Yes, I believe Jesus Christ was a good man in his way, but I think all religions are as good as each other and it doesn't matter really which way you come to God. The Buddha did as much for his people as Jesus Christ has done for us Westerners, and Confucius for those who follow him. Wouldn't it be a little bit more charitable if we as Christians were to recognize the good in all religions and be willing to at least amalgamate with them?'

Again, such thinking, charitably intended as it may be, shows clearly that it has never understood what it is that Christ claims. If he had come to us merely as a teacher and a preacher, we could perhaps have compared him with others; but he will not rest content at that. He said, 'I am . . . *the* truth . . . No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

'All things were made by him and in him and for him' (see Col 1:16). If that is true, there's not another like him. If it is not true, I'm afraid you must literally be done with Jesus Christ. To save anything from that utter ruin would be mere sentiment.

### **Why were the early Christians persecuted?**

Evidence is mounting on the part of classical historians that it was for preaching such claims of Christ in those terms that the original Christians were persecuted. One hears it commonly said that the original Christians were persecuted because they refused to worship the emperor and offer their piece of incense to his image. And doubtless that was a part cause of the intense hatred which the Romans and others felt against Christians, but it cannot have been the only cause. If for no other reason than this, that the Jews likewise as a nation refused to worship the emperor or offer their incense to him. Yet when the Christians were being very violently persecuted the Jews were not persecuted, so there must have been some added reason for persecuting the Christians.

What was that added reason? The evidence mounts that it was the *exclusiveness* of the early Christians, if I may so term it. The Romans were a reasonable lot, on the whole. It was their political policy to show tolerance to religion of all sorts and kinds. Wherever they went, they allowed the nations whom they conquered to carry on with their own religious service, only of course if they added a prayer or two for the emperor and were willing on occasions to offer their incense to him. The Jews refused to offer their incense to the emperor but the Romans overlooked that, for the Jews worshipped the gods of their fathers, and the Romans knew little about the gods of the Jewish fathers.

But to the Romans these Christians came to be the most execrable people on the earth. Whether they had been brought up Jew or Gentile, they discarded their original religions. They preached a Jesus who would know no rival, no equal, save God Almighty. It was that very exclusivism that brought the wrath of official Rome down upon their heads, and it is that very exclusivism that is liable to be misunderstood today. It sounds uncharitable, but I do submit to you that if we would be true to the historic claims of Christ we cannot budge so much as one inch from that position. If Jesus Christ is no more than one more teacher, one more preacher, one more prophet to add to the rest, then he is convicted of being a liar in the most important things he ever said, the worst of the prophets that has ever been, and for centuries he has deceived millions of people.

*Responding to his claims*

If he is true, however, then he is our Creator, the one for whom we were made. Where we have not lived for him, we have transgressed the fundamental reason for our existence and are found to be sinners. He will at the end call us to judgment, sit in the judgment seat and cause the judgment to proceed on these terms—what have we done with his personal word?

He likewise undertakes that all who believe him shall never perish. Again, to his startled contemporaries said he—if I may paraphrase his words in homely fashion: ‘Would you like to live forever? Would you like to be sure here and now of eternal life? Well look, I will be there at the last day and I will raise you up, if you believe on me’ (see John 6:40). Those who believe on him have this eternal life that he gives, and similarly the Christian position is that they who refuse him shall not see life (John 3:36). They shall have rejected their very Creator and their only Saviour. That will be nothing short of eternal disaster.

These then are his claims. In the coming weeks I hope to put before you the evidence to show that those claims are not the words of a lunatic or an excitable, uncontrolled prophet, but we have reasons enough to believe they were spoken by one who is God incarnate.

While I say these things in the objective language of a lecture, I trust it will become apparent to all that behind these words come the insistent claims of Christ. As we think of the meaning of our lives, our moral success or failure, and of the eternity to which we travel, we have to settle the claims of Christ as they impinge upon each one of us personally. It is in a person that we are asked to put our trust, and no one will put his or her trust in any such person unless they are fully convinced that he was what he claimed to be. To trust Christ if he is not all that he claimed, is to put our head in the sand and to go out into what will probably be a disastrous eternity.

Therefore, I ask you to pay me as close attention as you may in these coming weeks. I shall attempt to put before you the evidence that, if we are Christians, will help to strengthen our faith and assure us that our faith in Christ has not been misplaced, and he will do all that he has promised. And if perchance we are not yet Christians, or not yet fully convinced Christians, shaken maybe by current tendencies in thought, we might come to the conviction and believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. To borrow a phrase from the New Testament itself, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life—eternal life—in his name (see John 20:31).

## Who is This Man?

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, in my first lecture last week I attempted to sketch out the claims made by our Lord Jesus Christ in as absolute terms as I could use, in order that we might see clearly what that question is that each one of us must decide. I offered you no evidence; in fact, I did not invite you to decide over those claims, but merely to let our minds dwell upon them, to see how extreme they were, and to observe once more that we really have no alternative between either accepting them in full, or rejecting them completely.

This week and in the coming lectures, I propose to put before you evidence that these claims are in fact true. If from time to time, instead of speaking of *evidence*, I slip into speaking of *proof*, I ask you to bear with me, particularly any mathematicians present, if I use the word 'proof' in this kind of context. I am quite aware that in your science—or perhaps you prefer to call it an art—you use the word proof in a somewhat restricted sense; and in your restricted sense I can offer no proof of the truth of Christianity. But if I should use that word, proof, I use it in the sense that we lesser mortals use it of evidence that is overwhelming. The kind of evidence a man would receive as proof to him that his mother loved him. You cannot prove a mother's love by mathematical proof. In fact, all the things that are most valuable in life are quite incapable of being proved that way.

In all those higher things, there must be the element of faith. When evidence is beyond reasonable doubt there still remains the place where we must exercise faith. That is true in human relationships, and it is necessarily true in the relationship between humans and God.

But before I proceed to put before you some at least of the evidence, I want to deal with one more basic objection that some of you may feel. I made the point last week that when we read the Gospels and the epistles written by the authorized apostles and disciples of our Lord Jesus, we have every reason to believe that he himself would have approved heartily of all that they wrote, for he himself appointed them for that task among others. But there is of course a more basic difficulty, and I am not unaware of it.

### **Surely the followers of Christ were biased in what they wrote?**

Someone will say, 'But were not these apostles and the writers of our Gospels themselves followers of Jesus Christ? And if they were followers and believed in him, then surely they must have been biased in his favour. So that when they came to write his life and character, the likelihood is that they may, perhaps even unwillingly and unwittingly, have weighted the scales in his favour, and not given us an altogether unbiased account of him.'

Somebody will say therefore, 'Would it not be fairer if we had a record of his life and character from somebody who did not believe him? A somebody who could have been relied

upon to have recorded all of his faults, if there were any, and all his failings, and so given us an opportunity to judge from what would be an unbiased description of Jesus Christ.'

I want to deal with that difficulty as honestly as I can, but I confess to you straight away that I am biased. You will have perceived that already. I want, however, to make the point that you are biased also; and the further point, that there has never been anybody that has faced Jesus Christ and his claims who has not been biased. If we were to ask for an unbiased account of Christ, we could not possibly get such a thing, and I hope to show you what I mean by that a little later.

The claims of Christ are such that they cannot be faced with that same kind of attitude as a person faces a mathematical problem, calmly disinterested whether it comes out this way or that way. No human being can possibly face the claims of Christ like that. His claims are so personal and come home so near to the human heart that it is impossible for any of us not to be biased.

I am not going to ask you to grant me that these New Testament writers were inspired; I believe they were inspired and I believe it with all my heart. But in putting before you the evidence that they give for the deity of Christ, I cannot honestly ask you to agree that they were inspired as a starting point, otherwise, of course, I'm asking you to give me what I want to prove.

I'm going to admit to you, if you like, that these men were biased. But then I'm going to point out to you that they realized their bias and prejudice, and had a very keen eye for the bias that besieges every heart when dealing with this subject. I put them before you as just ordinary writers and I ask you to judge as fairly as you can, remembering that we too necessarily have our prejudices. For instance, if you ask his contemporaries for their verdict on Christ, Luke at the end of his Gospel refers to quite a number of people. Let me quote you six of those verdicts.

### *Three against Christ*

Caiaphas  
Pilate  
Herod

### *Three for Christ*

The dying thief  
The centurion  
Joseph of Arimathea

I ask you to consider that selection for a moment, to ask yourself whether, as a matter of history, that proportion was true. Luke is a Christian writer, and you may call him biased if you please, but, when he comes to tell us how many people rejected Christ and how many received him, he gives what we must take to be a fair selection and a true cross section.

He said that against Christ were the leading ecclesiastics and politicians led by Caiaphas; the Roman governor and military man, Pilate; and the Edomite, Herod. All eminent people.

And who were for him? An otherwise unknown criminal who was being executed as a common thief; a centurion, a sort of equivalent of a sergeant, an un-commissioned officer in the Roman army, a man of very little account. In this context, Luke lists just one man of honourable position, Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish parliament.

'There you are,' says Luke, 'the big people are against him.' While there was the occasional man of some eminence who stood on Christ's side, the majority of those who believed him when he was here on earth were 'nobodies'. I ask you then, does it look to you as if Luke is cooking the facts? What would you make out of that as a piece of Christian propaganda?

That is not only true of Luke, but it was true of all the apostles. They never went anywhere to preach and tried to make it out that Jesus Christ had been popular with the leading thinkers of the day. They always said that the leading thought was against him. In fact, those who were responsible for his crucifixion were 'the princes of this world' (1 Cor 2:8 KJV). The apostles did not try to hide that the majority of people who trusted Christ were ordinary people, though there was a sprinkling of others. I submit to you that a man who will tell us the facts so honestly has resisted all temptation to overstate the popularity of Christ.

But Luke also tells us about the behaviour of these courts in which Christ was condemned.

## **Those who were against Christ**

### *Caiaphas*

For instance, he tells us that the chief priests and scribes challenged our Lord directly: 'If you are the Christ, tell us' (Luke 22:67). Luke represents them as not being honestly open to consider evidence, but rather as being so prejudiced that all they were wishing to have was the prisoner's own claim that he was the Christ; and upon that they would condemn him.

And somebody says, 'But surely Luke was being prejudiced. Faced with such a big claim, no thinking person would dismiss it without really considering the evidence.'

Let me ask you to think what the prejudices were behind the men who sat on the bench that day. These were religious men. They were Jews who believed that Messiah would come one day. Was this Jesus that Messiah? They had decided he wasn't and were prepared to have no evidence that he was. Why were they prejudiced like that?

Let us think of the implications if this Jesus was Messiah. Caiaphas must get down from his leadership of that nation and hand it over to Jesus of Nazareth. If this Jesus was Messiah, Caiaphas must follow him, and presently this Messiah must establish his claim and overthrow the Roman Empire that at that moment held Judaea in its bondage. He must believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the born king, not merely of the Jews but of all mankind. And it frankly seemed utterly impossible to Caiaphas, a man of great learning and education, that an artisan from the north could possibly be not only the king of the Jews but the world ruler.

And then there was that personal element. A few days before that trial, Jesus had entered into Jerusalem (see Mark 11:1-10). He had already sent two of his disciples and told them that they would find a colt tethered at the crossroads. They were to bring it for the use of our Lord, and if the owners protested they were instructed to say that the Lord, *the Owner* (lit trans.), has need of it. In so entering the city he had laid down his claims to absolute proprietorship of all that was in it. Those ecclesiastical men were keen enough to see that if he started taking

colts today, tomorrow it would be their bank balances, and the next day themselves. So it was not without a very great bias that they assembled on the bench that morning.

But my point is to ask whether you think it is a likely story that Luke tells. You see, in judging Christ, we must see him through the eyes of his contemporaries, and we have to sort out, as far as we can, how fair those contemporaries were in their opinion. What other evidence have we got? Was it likely that the leading thinkers in the religious circles were thus biased? Our only means of settling that is to ask ourselves if it is likely that people would be biased like that now. I submit to you that it rings true to the test of experience, and men and women are still biased on that score.

Suppose at the end of this lecture you go to your car and find somebody unlocking the door and getting in.

You say, 'What are you doing with my car?'

'The owner needs it,' he says.

'But I am the owner!'

'Oh, no, my good sir, there's an owner above you, who now requires his car.'

Would you not object? It's not merely with cars, but with all that we have and all that we are—that is precisely the claim that Christ makes. And if he is God, it is a reasonable claim. But who could face that question even now and be unbiased? If we come to the decision that Jesus Christ is God's Son, the only reasonable response in our hearts is that we hand over everything to his supreme Lordship. Can we face the question unbiasedly? I submit that Luke touched a very real thing. As a Christian writer, he had a very keen perception of the circumstances. It was real then, and it is real now.

### *Pilate*

Pilate was the leading political figure and he saw that Christ was innocent of the political charges levied against him, but he was unwilling to come definitely to a decision on the matter. The other leaders of the day were against Christ. It would have been to his serious embarrassment in the political circles at Rome if he had been represented by Christ's enemies and Herod as having let a man go who claimed to be king. He was in a predicament, and though in his heart Pilate believed Christ was innocent he seized the opportunity to send him to Herod. He heard that Christ came from Herod's jurisdiction, and very gladly Pilate tried to get out of making the decision himself by sending him to Herod.

I ask you again, does that sound a very likely story to you? Would Pilate say, 'Strictly speaking, this isn't a matter for me to decide; Herod is the man to whom he belongs'? I submit that it is an exceedingly likely story; at least if we can judge by what people do nowadays. Many scientists argue like this. 'I don't know what to think of Jesus Christ. But it's not for a fellow like me to decide, I haven't got the know-how. I'm a scientist, I wouldn't know where to begin. I leave it to the theologians to tell us that sort of thing.' Many a businessman has argued like that too. 'I haven't the time that the academics have to decide such things. That's not my area of expertise.'

Again, I submit to you that this ancient record rings true. It was a foolish thing, of course. If Jesus Christ was God, then it was for Pilate to decide. We cannot share that issue with somebody else. When it comes to asking about our health we may consult a doctor; or on a

point of law we may consult a lawyer; but when somebody stands in front of us and claims to be our Creator, it is foolish to try and dismiss the decision and put it on to somebody else's shoulders. The only one who can decide for you whether Jesus is your Creator or not, is you. There's no escaping the decision.

### *Herod*

Herod gave his verdict against Christ, but we shall not trouble long with his verdict, for the man couldn't afford to have Christ's claim be true. Herod had murdered John the Baptist, Christ's forerunner, to try and cover up his conscience, laden with the guilt of immorality. For long years Herod had had a very ugly skeleton in his cupboard, and if Jesus Christ proved to be true, that skeleton would have to come out and be faced. Herod couldn't afford to have that, and he did all he could to make a mockery of the whole thing. It is really the only thing you can do if you have a skeleton in the cupboard like Herod had.

I submit to you that Luke has not coloured the information. I believe those men came to their decisions as Luke says they did and for those reasons, for they ring true to life.

### **Those who were for Christ**

On the other side let me just take one of the witnesses for Christ, for I want to show you that I'm not unaware that he too was biased.

### *The dying thief*

He was biased for Christ. And what was his bias? Well he judged Christ, not as one sitting on the judge's bench with the prisoner at the bar; he came to his conclusion about Christ as he was hanging beside him upon a cross. He was a condemned and self-admitted criminal, going to a death he deserved and facing the beyond nearly and squarely.

If you judge Christ from that aspect, it makes a world of difference. The man was in his last few hours on earth, going out into eternity, a self-admitted criminal, and he apparently began to think. Turning to his fellow criminal, he said, 'Do you not fear God?' (Luke 23:40). They had lived for many years as though God didn't exist, why should they fear God now? What reason had they for thinking that there was a God to fear?

Said the one criminal to the other, 'Do you not see that this day the innocent and the guilty are suffering the same fate? This man here has done nothing wrong. We are rightly condemned, but here today the guilty and the innocent are suffering alike.'

That is a sad travesty, if there is such a thing as right and wrong. Where did we get our sense of right and wrong from anyway? Everywhere that mankind has ever been, in whatever state and however depraved, you will always find he has some sense of right and wrong. It is so uncomfortable that we cannot think he put it there himself; and if there is a Creator who put this sense of right and wrong within us, that Creator must care for the difference between right and wrong.

Says thief number one, 'You and I are soon going to leave this life. If there's a God it is certain that we'll meet him, and he cares for the difference between right and wrong.'

The unfairness of earth cannot permanently be left. If there's a God who cares about the difference between right and wrong, then certainly there will come a day when he must deal with earth's injustices and put things right.

'If there's a coming a day like that,' said this thief, 'then you and I had better start fearing God.'

As he looked at Jesus, he said, 'This man is dying, but he's not dying like me—this man has done nothing wrong.' But yes he has—if he claimed to be the Son of God and wasn't, for that would be the most hideous blasphemy and sin that ever a man committed. This thief was biased. If the man on the middle cross was holy; if it was the fact that he had done nothing wrong, there was a chance that he was the true king and could be dying for his sin. Maybe death didn't end everything, and this man would come again in his kingdom. As the coming King, would he forgive even him and give him an eternity of bliss? Of course the thief was biased, for, if he were true, this man spelt forgiveness and eternal life, and the thief sorely felt his need for such forgiveness and such eternal life.

I'm not ashamed to confess that I share that bias, and you will detect it in my remarks. But I point out that none of us can decide, except that we are from one bias or the other. We cannot come at an impartial judgment. If, like that convicted thief, you were spending your last days on earth as a self-admitted sinner, and you believed that there is a God of justice to be faced, you would be biased towards the hope that Jesus Christ is indeed God's Son, who had come to bring us deliverance and forgiveness.

And if perhaps you feel no sense of sin or personal inadequacy you'd probably be biased in the other direction. You're quite happy to face eternity because you don't believe there is a God at all. You don't think there is such a thing as sin, or if there is it doesn't matter. It would be our wisdom to recognize what our particular bias is and to make all allowances therefore, if we can.

### **What kind of evidence can I submit?**

1. Our Lord's miracles
2. His personal character
3. His death

I must deal with them very briefly. My hope is that in these lectures I shall renew in you the desire to go back to the evidence and read it again for yourselves; or maybe even provoke it in a few of you for the first time. It is surprising how few people have really read and studied the evidence in their adult years. Talking with friends, many of whom are agnostics, I have found the pattern of conversation to run like this:

'Have you ever considered the evidence for the deity of our Lord?'

'Well of course I have.'

'I mean, have you read the New Testament?'

'Of course I have; I've been to church many times.'

'Yes, I know; but in church the amount that we can read of Scripture is necessarily very short. Have you read it for yourself in full?'

'Why yes.'

'The Gospel of John is written that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. It is a piece of Christian propaganda, if you like. Have you read it recently and seriously studied the evidence?'

'Well no; we did Mark at school.'

That's not really an adequate way of dealing with such a profound thing. My hope is that I shall provoke you as adults to read the evidence again.

## **1. The evidence of our Lord's miracles**

However critically we scan through the records, it is impossible to escape the fact that when our Lord was here on earth he was accredited with doing the miraculous. We have to be very careful in estimating the claims of the miraculous. It doesn't follow, because somebody does something that appears to us to be miraculous, that he is divine. Suppose you took a person from a remote rainforest to Cape Canaveral and he saw a rocket for the first time. Just by switching a few knobs it goes off into space, and then, without any wires, ropes, or hooks, it comes back again. He might well think that this was a miracle, but it wouldn't prove that the Americans are divine!

Somebody says, 'The East is full of people who seem to be able to work miracles. Even to the present day you will see people that put themselves in such states of hypnotism<sup>3</sup> that they can cut their bodies with knives and stick great skewers through their cheeks and no blood comes out. Perhaps that's something like the miracles our Lord did; some psychological trick that got exaggerated afterwards. It seemed miraculous, but there were many people who did that kind of thing in his day.'

When we face our Lord's miracles, we shall find that there is a whole world of difference in their quality and in those other kind of things. Different even from those miracles that we can sometimes read of in the lives of the Saints, which tend to be mere exhibitions of the supernatural, to no point or purpose. The thing that must strike one about the miracles of our Lord is their quality. Admittedly, some were done to call attention, but the majority were to relieve physical suffering. Yet, even there, we find that, while our Lord had power to relieve physical suffering, very often he refused to go further. He abandoned the crowds when they pressed for physical healing, because he taught them that they had need of a greater healing than the physical. Many of his miracles were nothing short of sermons, preached by dint of that miraculous element; sermons that went right down to man's true and fundamental need. That, I submit, is a tremendous piece of evidence.

Would you really be impressed if God Almighty came down here on earth and did a whole array of pointless exhibitions of power? Wouldn't we find his exhibitionism rather vulgar? We know God is almighty if we care to look at his creation; what use would it be for us men and women if he came down here and did some exhibitions of power? It would get us nowhere; we have bigger needs than that. The remarkable thing about the miracles that Christ did was why they were miraculous: they met that deepest of all human needs.

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<sup>3</sup> Or is it some more sinister power?

*The miracle of turning the water into wine*

Let me give you just one example. I suppose his miracle of turning the water into wine is one of the most widely known, but who can fail to see that, while it was a miracle, it was a very powerful sermon. It was at a wedding and the wine had run out. We may picture, then, the confusion on that great day, when the wine that was there to promote the merriment and happiness of the guests unaccountably failed. But that is not the only wedding at which the wine has run out, surely? Not if our newspapers give us any idea of the unhappy marriages that exist. It's a parable, surely, of the confusion that arises when the joy runs out of life's relationships.

When our Lord saved that state of affairs by a miracle, I want you to notice that he didn't take just any water. He deliberately took some water jars that were there for the Jewish religious rite of cleansing. They were there for purifying. The people at this wedding were decent enough people. Like most people today, when it came to their wedding day they thought of God. They made a bow in the direction of social custom and religious etiquette. Somehow or other, when it comes to a thing like a wedding, it does stir our sense of decency and we like to surround those sacred things in life with ceremonies that are decent. So they had their ceremony, and when those parts were all over there was the wedding breakfast. But the water jars were on the fringe; they hadn't been brought to the wedding breakfast.

Maybe I'm too hard, but many weddings are divided like that. There's the religious side in which we pay our respects to God, and when that's over—'Well, that's enough of that!'—the wedding breakfast has a different atmosphere. Many people would blush if they heard the question of personal salvation raised around the table at a wedding breakfast. We have that sort of inner sense that it is not the place to speak of those kinds of things. Yet our Lord did just that; right in the middle of this wedding breakfast he did that 'religious something', and then he did a miracle. He turned that water into wine.

Do I believe that? I do indeed, for what he did in the physical realm he has done in the spiritual realm countless times. Whether you believe it to be rightly founded or not, you may have observed that for multitudes of people Christ has done that very thing. Whereas before, religious things were on the fringe of their lives, he has taken this matter of cleansing, of forgiveness, being purified and clean in God's sight, and he's brought it central to people's lives. Has he poured cold water on all things natural as a result? Indeed, not. The very reverse. With countless people he has taken this matter of their personal cleanliness, righteousness and holiness before God, and has made it the chief fount of their highest joy. He did it for John Newton, the slave dealer, and for John Bunyan. He did it for John Wesley, and for Bishop Moule. That is precisely what Christ does.

That's why I say that his miracles preached a sermon. He would still say that the reason why the joy runs out, even in relationships like marriage, is precisely because we tend to leave that kind of thing on the outside. We treat God with respect, but no more. He is not a passionate love in our hearts. The question of being forgiven, of being what the Bible calls 'saved' (but some people call 'lurid'), we think is only to be talked of in rather restricted circumstances.

This is where the human heart goes wrong, for if you don't love the Lord your God and make him centre in your life, the joy is bound to run out. But what is more, he does that miracle

still. He takes this matter of personal cleanliness and purification and, what we think of as a chilly subject that will dampen our joy, he turns it into the chief joy that a Christian has. I believe that original miracle, for I see the spiritual miracle taking place in many a life even yet. I'm impressed with a miracle of that kind, because it's not just an exhibition of power but a diagnosis of the basic need of the human heart. There is a *rightness* in that diagnosis that our hearts inwardly recognize, even if we find it rather unpalatable.

## **2. The evidence of his personal character**

I submit to you that it goes for the rest of our Lord's miracles, but I want to come to something far deeper and far stronger. Miracles are outward evidence, but let me come to the evidence of his personal character. I've already put his claims before you in such a fashion that we must all see by now that there are only two practical possibilities. Either he was God, as he claimed to be, or else he was a lunatic. You may argue that he wasn't a lunatic, but if you still hold that he wasn't God incarnate, then you must dismiss him as worse than a lunatic; a deliberate deceiver in the most sacred things of life. If he is not the Son of God, it would be kinder to dismiss him as a lunatic.

All I want to do now, therefore, is to ask you to think briefly, and perhaps provoke you to think more deeply later on, of the general character of Christ. He claimed to be God incarnate; what kind of a character was he? Naturally, we should be very suspicious of anybody who made such an extreme claim. More inclined, perhaps, to say with the Jews, 'But man, you're mad. You have a demon' (see Luke 11:15).

Alexander the Great, who claimed divine honours for himself, was mentally disturbed at the end of his days. Worn out with military campaigning and burdened by tremendous stresses, there is increasing evidence of insipient megalomania in that otherwise brilliant young man.

Is it so with Christ? Not of his general character. If he's a megalomaniac, he would be pompous, swell-headed, demanding great things to no sane purpose. But the Christ who comes to us in the Scriptures talked like this, 'I am gentle and lowly in heart' (Matt 11:29). At the Last Supper, he girded himself with a towel and washed his disciples' feet, so that he might give them an example of how they should love one another (John 13:1-20). When his disciples were quarrelling as to who should be the greatest in the kingdom, he said, 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matt 20:28).

Far from showing any traits of megalomania, our Lord has permanently set the example of humble, loving service. We should judge him, not by the Christian atmosphere in which we have all been brought up, in a civilized nation that has been flooded with Christianity for centuries. If we judge him against the background of his own times, when the rulers of the Gentiles did in fact grind down their subjects, it is certainly remarkable that Christ blazed this trail of self-sacrificing, loving, sensible service.

People have accused him and his followers of being mentally immature, and certainly psychology has taught us to recognize emotional immaturity in some forms of religion. But when we come to examine Christ and his character from the plain view of psychology, we must admit that he is startlingly before his time. It was he who taught us the value of the little

child. 'Beware, lest you stumble that child,' he said (see Matt 18:6). He has done more to get rid of anxiety neuroses in people than anyone I've heard of. He taught us that there is a heavenly Father who has numbered the hairs of our head, and even sees the sparrows fall (Matt 10:29-31). He teaches us not to be distraught in the race for goods and food and clothes, and he cut at the root of neurotic perfectionism (see Matt 6:25-34).

It is the fact that you will see people driving themselves to the last inch in supposedly religious service, when it is obvious to their friends that it is not true Christianity but a neurosis. Christ cut at the very root of guilt complexes when he told of a God who loves us even while we are still sinners, and is prepared to accept us on the ground, not of what we have done, but, in spite of all our guilt, he will receive the truly repentant and love them even while they're yet sinners (Rom 5:8).

Yet, at the same time, there never was a character who penetrated more the rationalizing with which we conveniently forget our shortcomings. The zeal with which he tore the screaming hypocrisy from the Pharisees and religious people was nothing but psychologically healthy. He made them face reality instead of concocting an idea about their personal holiness that was so unreal.

The question before us is whether Jesus Christ was insane, or whether he was in fact just what we would expect God to be. God is absolute in his claims to loyalty, demanding that we follow him even before our love to mother, father, wife or child. Christ demands all we have, and yet at the same time he shows us that God incarnate is a God who, in his lowly and intense love for us, would get down and wash our feet. Is this insane, or is this not just what you would expect God to be?

### **3. The evidence of his death**

As I bring the lecture to an end, there is the evidence of his death. Here I need say very little, for once more it must be evident to us all, surely, that Jesus Christ is unique. There has been nobody else in history, that anybody has begun to take seriously, who claimed that he came to die for the sins of his fellow men and women. And there's a very good reason why nobody else has made that claim. If one of your friends made it, even if he was the holiest person you had ever met, however much you revered him, if he made the claim that he had come to die for your sins, you would urge him to see a psychiatrist as soon as possible, wouldn't you? Yet that is precisely what Jesus Christ claimed. The issue again before us is nothing less than this: was the man insane, or was he true?

Judge him by this. If God really came down to this earth to offer a sacrifice for human sin, how could it possibly be that he came so unawares that people didn't know? But he didn't come unawares. God spent centuries preparing for his coming, and those who care to read the Old Testament, notably Isaiah, will find that centuries before Christ's coming God announced that there would come one who would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (Isa 53:5). No other man came into life with such prophecies behind him.

You say, 'That's an easy one. He was a Jew, and the Jews wrote the prophecies, then they provided the man who fulfilled them. Anybody can do that.'

No, anybody can't. The Jews who were entrusted with those books disagreed and said he wasn't the Christ. The last thing they ought to have done was to have crucified him as they did and fulfil the Scriptures that had prophesied his crucifixion. So blind and terrible was their prejudice that, as Peter observed, they fulfilled those Scriptures in condemning our Lord (Acts 2:23). But there was no collusion between them.

### **Our own human need**

Finally, I ask you to judge the question by the criteria of our own human need and I come back to where I started. I submit to you that if Jesus Christ came as the best preacher there ever was, you would have very little room for him. We've had enough of preachers, and lecturers for that matter. As one colleague of mine put it grimly to me, 'Why should I pay a parson to tell me to be good? Don't I know I ought to be good?'

Our real need is not for someone to come and tell us again that we need to be good; our need is more fundamental than that. If we believe in absolute values at all, what we need is somebody to come and first of all deal with our guilty past, then bring us forgiveness and give us power to live differently. Next week, I shall have to say something about the power that Christ claims to give. This week, I put it to you that our Lord's claim to be the Son of God who came to die for human sin, and in some sense to offer a sacrifice for it, appeals to us deeply. If true, it is the thing that we need above all else.

You say, 'Sir, this is very biased reasoning. It is very empirical.'

How do we know what is good for physical hunger? How do we know that a loaf of bread is good, and it is what it claims to be? If we find we have physical hunger we make the experiment, and the bread deals with it. Would you want better proof?

If we are honest we know that we are sinners, and if we are sensible we are worried about our sins. When we find one solitary man in all history, who claimed that he had come to die as a sacrifice for human sin, isn't this likely to be true? If he is not true, humanity has no answer to its fundamental need.

## What Happened on the Third Day?

### *Evidence for the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ*

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, in this series I began by staking out the claims of Jesus of Nazareth to be God incarnate. In the second lecture I argued that those claims were absolutely true, and cited as evidence of his character, his miracles and his death. Tonight I wish to put before you some of the evidence that he rose again from the dead on the third day, and I shall be arguing that his resurrection proves his deity.

I want to make the point right away that the evidence should not really be considered in isolated pieces. It is cumulative and we cannot rightly separate one piece from another. Nevertheless, I must admit to you that perhaps, of all the evidence that can be offered on this topic, the resurrection is the most crucial piece, for the simple reason that if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead; if he is in fact still but mouldering dust in the tomb of Joseph; then there is little or nothing that we can salvage from the wreck of Christianity. He himself said, as presently we shall see, that he would die and rise again on the third day. If he did not rise, then we must confess straightaway that he was deceived, and deceived in something that he counted as the main plank of his whole system.

And then again, if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead on the third day, the apostles themselves too are found to be untrue. Paul admits that very thing. Says he, 'If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, then we apostles are found false witnesses, because we have testified that he did so rise' (see 1 Cor 15:15 KJV). Everywhere the early Christians went they preached consistently, as the main plank in all their gospel, that Jesus Christ rose again. It is evident from their writings that, when they said he rose from the dead, they meant he literally rose. They did not mean that his influence survived, or that his memory remained particularly strong in the minds of his followers and served as a kind of an impulse to them. They maintained that our Lord literally and physically rose from the dead on that third day. If Christ did not rise, these men, as they themselves confess, would be found guilty of deliberate deceit and falsehood.

### **Some objections that people raise**

I must freely confess that it is a question of all or nothing. To begin with, therefore, I want to raise another objection that people might feel.

*All the evidence for the resurrection comes from Christian writers*

I pointed out last week that people feel this objection, so perhaps even more strongly this week. Someone will say, 'But look, if Jesus Christ really rose again on the third day, how is it

that we have no evidence from non-Christian quarters? Is it not a little bit suspicious, more than suspicious, that it's only Christian people that tell the story? Would it not have been far more convincing if we had evidence from some non-Christian people?'

I must straightaway admit to you that I would not know what evidence from non-Christians to quote. As far as I know, there is not any. A passing reference by one or two pagan historians to this Jesus, but no admission on their part that he did in fact rise from the dead. But I am going to submit to you that, far from this being an embarrassment to the Christian position, it is partly what one might expect, in that it shows us that all the people who examined the evidence were convinced and became Christians. You cannot examine the evidence, find the evidence true, and refuse to become a Christian.

But you say, 'That means, doesn't it, that there must have been a lot of people who examined the evidence at the time who were not convinced and they did not become Christians?'

Maybe so. But I in my turn would like to ask, where are their writings that prove to us that he did *not* rise from the dead? The argument from silence, of course, is notoriously difficult, but here is an instance that is exceptional. The whole of the vested interest of the Jewish religion was concerned to stop the heresy of Christianity. It caused not a little reddening of faces and raising of tempers in Jerusalem when the early apostles persisted in their statement that Jesus Christ, whom the authorities had executed, had risen from the dead and was thereby demonstrated to be the Son of God. It was the fact that the authorities were exceedingly anxious to smother this statement from its very birth.

Where, then, is the evidence from them to prove what must have been very easy, if the resurrection was not true? Where is their evidence? There is none, and that silence on the part of men who would have given anything to have proved that the resurrection did not happen is exceedingly evident.

But let us examine these Christian writers once more, for if they are the sole witnesses that does not necessarily mean that they are wrong. Let us consider for a moment the moral issue in their testimony. We must be prepared to sum up their character as far as we can. Some at least of our inclination to believe or to disbelieve will depend on our estimate of the character of these early preachers.

Suppose Christ did not rise from the dead, then what are we to think of these men who said he did? Were they clever men and deliberate deceivers? Is that a tenable hypothesis? Are we to think that Peter and John and Paul were deliberate liars? These were the men who brought this renewing force into the decaying conditions of morals in the Roman Empire. It is a matter of fact that wherever Christianity came in those days, it brought with it a renewing and a cleansing effect. If at heart they were liars, does that square with your estimation of Peter and James and John and Paul?

Many of these men paid for their own story with their lives. Did they go to a martyr's death with a lie at their heart, and knowing it? These were men who saw many of their converts put to death for their faith. Did they stand by, knowing it was all a lie that they had inculcated into these martyrs? Did they watch these people lose their lives for the sake of a lie that they had originated, and that they still preached in the cause of truth and holiness? That, I submit to you, would be a very, very difficult interpretation to hold and to defend.

Were they then not clever men, but simple men who were holy and well intentioned? If sometimes holy men are rather silly, are we to say that these holy men were a little bit silly; victims of their own wishful thinking, sentimentalists? Granted for a moment that they were simple men, how did simple men come to write those documents that we call the four Gospels? Let me select that Gospel that we were thinking about last week, the Gospel by Luke. Judged by literary criteria, that Gospel stands as one of the world's masterpieces. The story of the Prodigal Son, the story of the Good Samaritan, these are marvellous thumbnail sketches that rank amongst the world's highest literature. How did simple men come to write that kind of stuff?

And then supremely, above all, how did simple men come to concoct this character that we know as Jesus Christ? So living, so real, that for millions of people down the centuries he has been a living personality? We all know how difficult it is for writers to construct a character that lives. The great geniuses of literature have created a few characters in the course of the centuries that live for people, but if Jesus Christ were not true, then the people who concocted this character were the world's biggest geniuses, and if they were only simple men, how did they come to do such a masterpiece as that? We must own that they were for the most part simple men. That makes the story and the character that we find in our Gospels verge on the miraculous.

But as we come to study the evidence for the resurrection, we must be prepared to take it from men who were, for the most part, humble men, and we must therefore scrutinize the evidence very carefully. In the last analysis, of course, the case must rest on the inherent truthfulness and persuasiveness of the evidence itself.

## **Luke's evidence**

I want to begin therefore with the evidence that Luke has put before us. It was one part of the evidence that the early Christian writers submitted to their contemporaries, recorded in what we call the Bible. I have no arguments of my own to adduce.

### **Christ predicted his resurrection in his own lifetime**

Luke begins his chapter on the resurrection by telling us that when the women went to the sepulchre and found not the body, they were met by angels who 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, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise. (Luke 24:5-7)*

In other words, says Luke, it is the Christian claim that, even in his lifetime, our Lord, predicted his resurrection. That is an exceedingly important point. It has been argued by some, and notably by the Jews, that the resurrection of Christ was something that the early Christians thought up. They were expecting Jesus to be Messiah, who would control the nation and put down the Romans and establish a kingdom. Instead of that he was crucified and buried.

And then, when the early Christians got over their initial bewilderment, they suddenly thought of this new idea. They invented a resurrection story, quite foreign to anything that Christ himself had said. They invented it all as a way out of their awful predicament, that the teachings and the purposes of Christ had come to an unexpected end in his death. Such a contention will not face the evidence. Unless the men who wrote these stories were utter and deliberate deceivers, the resurrection is not something that was invented after the event, or after the death of Christ; it was a something that Christ himself predicted when he was still alive.

### **The Old Testament Scriptures predicted that the Messiah would rise again**

Secondly, Luke tells us the story of two people who were going to Emmaus. They were bewildered that the Jesus whom they had hoped to be the nation's Messiah had been executed by the authorities. A stranger came alongside them. Says Luke, 'Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him' (24:15-16). The story goes that this stranger took them through a number of Old Testament prophecies. 'Gentlemen,' said he, 'you are really very dull of understanding. Why are you disappointed that the Messiah has died? Have you not read these Old Testament prophecies? When the Messiah comes, shouldn't his death be the very thing you would expect? What about this prophecy and that prophecy and the other prophecy?'

Luke tells the story and expects us to deduce the very important fact that the Christian claim is not merely that Christ predicted the resurrection in his own lifetime, but that the Old Testament records, which by common consent date from before the birth of Christ, they too predict a resurrection. I don't have to ask you to believe that the Old Testament is inspired in order to follow this piece of evidence, though I personally believe it is inspired. I needn't ask you to believe anything about Christ, except that he did exist, for you'll notice that this story tells us that the stranger was so hidden from them that they didn't recognize him. If they had recognized him as Jesus, they would have believed anything he said. So he was hidden from them, and they were led through this next piece of evidence without granting anything, except that these Old Testament prophecies were there.

I would like to make that point with you. I do not mind if you are not a Christian, nor if you don't believe in the inspiration of Scripture. I don't ask you to give me anything; but I would like to provoke you to study this piece of evidence, to take these Old Testament records and to see whether they do or do not prophesy a Messiah that should come, should die, and should rise again.

I cite the kind of thing that I mean from perhaps the best known of all the prophecies. We quoted it here last week—the prophecy of Isaiah and his fifty-third chapter. That prophecy talks of a someone who would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities; he would pour out his soul to death, being numbered with the transgressors. It clearly predicted his death. And yet it goes on to say,

he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the

righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. (vv. 10–11)

It maps out a glowing programme for him, albeit it says that ‘he poured out his soul to death’ (v. 12). You cannot reconcile those two prophecies, juxtaposed there, without a resurrection. If I could provoke you to reread that evidence, I should count it that I had done a worthwhile thing.

*Could someone have impersonated Christ?*

But someone will say, ‘That’s all very well. You say that when Jesus was here on earth he predicted that he would rise again. For a non-Christian, the fact that he predicted it is not necessarily any proof that he did. The Old Testament records prophesied the coming of a Messiah who should die and rise again, but for the non-Christian the fact that they prophesied it is no proof that he did. In those days after Jesus Christ was crucified, somebody may have been pouring over the Old Testament records and come across these verses, decided that he would impersonate Christ, and sell it to the credulous disciples that he was the Christ risen from the dead. Could that man on the Emmaus road have been an imposter like that? How did they know that it was Jesus himself?’

There are many pieces of evidence here that this person who came and talked to them was the one they had known intimately before he died as Jesus of Nazareth. Luke chooses one piece, ‘he was known to them in the breaking of the bread’ (v. 35). That’s when it suddenly dawned on them who they were entertaining in their home.

But you say, ‘How is that a very clear piece of evidence—he was known to them in the breaking of the bread?’

I submit to you that it is an exceedingly subtle piece of evidence. Impersonations are easy to carry off to a certain limit. If we would expose an impersonation, it is in the subtler things that we must look. You see, an imposter could have wounded his hands and faked wounds in his feet, for everybody would have known that Jesus had been crucified on a cross and would expect to see wounds in his feet and hands. But I wonder if an imposter would have thought of this.

I’ll illustrate what I mean by what is perhaps no more than a crude illustration. A colleague of mine in my student days, who is now a lecturer in law in Cambridge, was telling me of some famous cases he had read about, and one was of an impersonation. The heir to a family fortune had gone abroad and hadn’t been heard of for many years. It came to the point when the estate should have been passed on, and before it was all wound up there appeared a man who claimed to be the heir. Let’s call him John Smith. John Smith came and he had a tremendous amount of evidence to prove that he was genuine, and the case was going very much in his favour. He seemed to have proved everything, until at last counsel said, ‘You know that John Smith was educated at such and such a school. You were at that school?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now John Smith had rooms in the quad. You had rooms in the quad, didn’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is a quad?’

‘Err,’ he said.

He didn't know.

'Never mind, Mr Smith. At this school, John Smith read Caesar.'

'Tell me, Mr Smith, in what language is Caesar written? French, German, or English?'

'French,' he said.

He had overlooked the little things that an imposter wouldn't think of. It's by those subtle things that we recognize people.

These people were sure it was Jesus of Nazareth. Why? Because he broke the bread in a way that, when they saw it, they knew in their heart of hearts that nobody could possibly have imitated him. You see, the breaking of the bread with our Lord was in itself a sacrament, even when he miraculously broke it to give to the crowds. He broke that bread so that he might give them an object lesson that he personally was the very Bread of God, come to feed people with eternal life. It was a something that no one else had ever done; and I submit to you that no one ever could do it like Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It was so him, there was no mistaking it, and Luke seriously submits it as a very strong piece of evidence that this was no impersonation. The men who knew Christ most intimately, and were most capable of judging, were satisfied by such proof that this was no imposter.

### **The nature of Christ's resurrection body**

Luke makes it clear to us that he does not mean that the resurrection was a kind of a survival of Christ's soul or spirit. He tells us that Christ appeared to the eleven disciples and others in the Upper Room and showed them his hands and his feet. He asked them to feel that he was flesh and bone; and then, to demonstrate that he was a real human, he asked for food and ate it.

You'll notice that the Christians have been careful to demonstrate that they were not the victims of hallucination. Not only was it those disciples and some others in the Upper Room who saw him. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul claimed that our Lord was seen on one occasion by above five hundred people, most of whom were still alive at that time (1 Cor 15:6). Presumably they were available for cross-examination. One person, two or three maybe, could have seen a vision, or could be neurotic; but it would be difficult to maintain that five hundred people all at once had a vision.

When you consider that many were rough, healthy fishermen, who were used to living out in the open air, they were not the kind of people who are subject to hallucination. It wasn't a dream. 'God raised him on the third day and caused him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead' (Acts 10:41).

### **The spread of Christianity**

As another piece of evidence, Luke invites us to think of the tremendous evangelical movement that arose around that time, which we now call *Christianity*. Suddenly from that Upper Room in Jerusalem there started a movement that in a few years had spread throughout the Mediterranean world and forced itself on the notice of the Roman authorities, until they

were obliged to take some positive action about it. In spite of myriads of persecutions, that movement has gone on, and its fame continues to fill the world at this present time.

What was behind that movement? What sparked it off? If there is 'no smoke without fire', we must ask ourselves what was the mainspring behind it.

Someone says, 'It's nothing unique. I could quote you Mohammedanism in return. It has more adherents than Christianity.'

Ah, but there are some things here that are just a little bit peculiar. As everybody knows, Christianity arose out of Judaism, and for centuries the Jews had been content with their own religion. Some of them were interested in proselytising other people, but you could only be fully acceptable if you became a Jew. They never had, and still do not have, any interest in worldwide evangelism. Have you ever known of any big Jewish missionary enterprise to convert the world? Where did this one come from? The only one that Judaism ever produced, they disown!

Luke claims that it came from the risen Christ, who in the days of his resurrection pointed out again to those early apostles what the Old Testament had prophesied. Not only should Messiah die and rise again, but this gospel of repentance and faith and forgiveness should be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. I ask you to consider whether you can account for the phenomenal rise and progress of Christianity, coming from a Jewish source, without a tremendous impulse at its root. The story with which Christianity began was the story of a resurrection.

Luke is not the only writer; there is some other evidence. But first I ought perhaps to deal with an objection that may arise in the minds of some at this point.

### **A further objection**

*The simple answer to all this is that Christ never really died*

It is an objection that we do not hear so much nowadays as in years gone by. There have been people who have seriously, as far as one can determine, suggested that Jesus Christ did not really die. Being placed in the cool of the tomb, he eventually revived with enough strength to creep out and appear to his disciples in a half-swooning state. This figure, who lived a miserable existence in the fields, half-dead, half-alive, appearing now and again at a cottage door and eventually dying out altogether, was a Jesus Christ who never really died to start with. He only swooned, regained consciousness enough to crawl out of the tomb, but eventually succumbed.

It's almost an insult to your intelligence for me to raise the objection, for I don't fancy that any one of you would wish to adhere to such an absurd theory. The Christian writers have supplied the evidence to give the lie to all such suggestions.

## **Other evidence**

### **Matthew**

The authorities were not unaware that Jesus had prophesied he would rise again. In fact, the Jews came to Pilate and said, 'Sir, this imposter, before he died said he would rise again. Now,

seal up the tomb, lest his disciples come and steal him away, and the last fraud shall be worse than the first' (see Matt 27:63–64).

We are told that the story the Jews put around was this. The disciples came and stole him away. But there again, it's a silly story and very difficult to believe that the Jews would have set up such a silly story. The guards who were supposed to be guarding the tomb were told to say that the disciples had stolen the body while they slept. But if they were asleep, how did they know what had happened (28:12–15)?

## Mark

Pilate, too, was not unaware of this. Before he handed over the body to Joseph of Arimathea, Pilate took the simple but necessary precaution of making sure that the body was already dead. He called the centurion in charge of the execution squad and gained his affirmation (see Mark 15:43–44). 'And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph' (v. 45).

## John

John tells us that a soldier pierced his side, and there came out blood and water. Says John, who was standing some distance from the cross, 'I saw it and my testimony is true' (see 19:34–35). There's one thing certain, that Jesus Christ literally died. He was wrapped tightly, and around his corpse there was sprinkled a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. 'So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews' (v. 40). Even if he had only swooned, no man who had come through all those sufferings, with that loss of blood and a spear wound in his side, and now wrapped up with seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes around his body, could possibly have crawled out. He literally died.

John concentrates on two pieces of objective evidence that he rose again.

### *1. The position in which the grave clothes were found*

Again, it might seem to be a little thing, but so very often it is the little things that teem with significance. The story goes that when John and Peter arrived at the tomb and looked in, they found the linen clothes *lying* (20:5). They use a word that indicates that the linen clothes were out straight, in the position in which they had been when they had been round the body.

The napkin that had been around his head was not slung into some corner, as though it had been hastily removed and carelessly thrown away. It was still in its place, and still wound round like a turban (the word means), just as it had been wound around a head (v. 7). Unless John is deliberately telling us a lie, we must face the implications of the position of these grave clothes.

What does it mean? Suppose Jesus Christ didn't rise from the dead, I say again, we are in the presence of a wicked, vicious, deliberate fraud. For if he didn't come through those clothes miraculously, thus leaving them where they were, then you'll notice what someone has done. Someone has come to that grave, carefully unwound the clothes and the napkin, removed the body, and then just as carefully wound the clothes and the turban up again. What for? There could only be one motive in that. This would be a case of deliberate fraud and deceit. The

person who removed the body was deliberately out to deceive and try to make us think that Jesus Christ had miraculously come through those clothes without disturbing them.

Is that your estimate of the early Christian preachers? Deliberately cunning and very subtle; so subtle that they would be impossibly wicked, deliberate deceivers?

Who would have done such a thing, and who *could* have done it? Certainly the Jewish authorities wouldn't have done it. Who had access to that tomb? Some have suggested it was Joseph; he eventually regretted giving Christ this particular tomb and removed him. When the early Christians came and couldn't find the body, they got it into their heads that Christ had risen again. But then Joseph was responsible to Pilate for that body, and Joseph was no unheard of man. He was a member of the Jewish parliament, known in the highest political circles. Pilate would never have given the body to any less person, and when this furore arose in Jerusalem about the disappearance of this body, Joseph would have been a marked man. He must be held to account for what happened to that body.

The only way of getting out of that predicament is if Christ rose again, came through those clothes, and left them as they were. I admit to you that that is a miracle, and I do not attempt any explanation of miracles. I know the scientists will tell us of neutrinos and things that can go through rocks, and the mathematicians will talk to us about the fourth dimension: he possibly went up into the fourth dimension, whatever that is, and then came back on the other side of the stone.

I personally confess that I don't understand those things. I don't know how God does miracles and I do not regard it as necessary to know. The fact that we can't explain how miracles take place is not a valid reason for refusing to accept the plain and overwhelming evidence in front of us. What we face here is a miracle, the biggest miracle earth has ever known.

## 2. *The behaviour of Mary*

There's another piece of evidence. Alongside the matter of the grave clothes, which is a piece of objective material evidence, there is very powerful psychological evidence. Again, as far as we are concerned, it is objective evidence. I refer to the story of the behaviour of Mary and all her fellow Christian women in those early days.

We read that, having seen the grave clothes, John and Peter went home. As men do, they fell to arguing and thinking and deducing, and so forth and so on, but Mary stood at the grave weeping. Why did she stay? I submit to you that this is a very evident piece of feminine psychology. Logical arguments, or no logical arguments, there's something about a woman's heart that refuses to let go of someone she loves. Or if they have irretrievably lost someone they loved, they will nevertheless cling to some token, some relic, some thing that stands as a kind of a symbol.

I don't know whether they still do it, but I remember being shown a little locket, and inside was a curl of a child's hair. 'This is my son's hair,' said his mother. Her son was not anything like that now; perhaps he hadn't any hair at all. He's nowhere near so beautiful, but that piece of feminine affection refuses to let go.

Mary remained at the grave, I submit, for that very evident reason. To her, Christ meant everything. He had brought her mental peace, forgiveness and respectability; and though he

was dead she refused to leave the grave, and though the body was gone she refused to go. It hadn't dawned on her yet that he was alive.

'Tell me where they have taken his body,' she asked the 'gardener', as she thought him to be (see v. 15). She wanted to take the body away. What for? What do you think she would have done with the body? Being women and Oriental, those Christian women would have built around it a most magnificent shrine that they would have visited daily with their flowers and their tears and their prayers. It would have been the centre of a cult of Christ. Just as ancient pagan women had for many centuries kept alive the cult of Tammuz, who was supposed to have died and risen again, so would these early women have spent their affection on a relic placed in a tomb (see Ezek 8:14).

I must ask you what I think John wants us to ask: why did Christian women in those early days never attempt to do anything of the sort? Never once did they attempt to build a shrine. It was in the Middle Ages, when Christianity began to decline from its pristine fervour and purity, that people began making shrines, but not those early Christians. Why didn't they? Why did they abandon the sepulchre? What was it that broke that powerful impulse in the hearts of the early Christian women? I warrant you, if Mary had got it into her head that Joseph had stolen away that body, Joseph would have had no peace until he produced it.

The answer that John gives us is this. Mary met the risen Christ in the garden that morning. She wasn't convinced by a theological text nor by a very sound logical argument. Those things are good for the head but they do not satisfy the heart, and they could not possibly satisfy this kind of emotion. There's only one thing that can satisfy that emotion, and that is a living person. Mary's story was that she met a living person, who brought to her the knowledge of the living God and gave her daily and constantly the intense and profound satisfaction of a personal relationship that is beyond the power of death to sever.

You say, 'Then why don't those things happen now? I would be disposed to believe Christianity, if God would but for one minute give me to see Christ risen from the dead. If he did it then, why doesn't he do it now?'

I must admit to you, on the face of it, that is a difficult question to answer. Let me repeat it, and, if I may, take leave to talk to any who are agnostics. You say to me, perhaps, 'I'm not indisposed to Christianity. I would like to believe, but I cannot believe without seeing enough evidence. If it is true that Jesus Christ is literally alive; if it is true that my salvation and being right with God depends upon my believing in him, and God really wants me to know it for sure; why doesn't he cause Jesus Christ to appear in front of my eyes here and now, as he caused him to appear before the eyes of those people? I would believe straightaway.'

Would you? Would you trust your eyes to that extent? I wonder if we could answer that question honestly. It is, partly at least, answered for us by the next story.

## **Thomas**

He was not with them on the occasion when Christ first appeared in the Upper Room. When the disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, Thomas said, '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). A tremendous piece of evidence to hang upon visual perception!

*Is seeing believing?*

I'm going to submit to you straightaway that our visual perception is not the most reliable thing. How would a blind person get on, if believing in Jesus Christ all depended on visual perception? Is it with your eyes that you know your mother loves you? Do you think that the most satisfactory proofs you have are the things that you've seen? How would you expect to recognize God if you saw him? If the archangel descended here this very moment, all of us, perhaps without exception, would be inclined to bow at the feet of such a supernatural being. That wouldn't prove the supernatural being was God. Is it some excessive glory, a kind of a glorified halo, that would convince you that some person you were looking at was God?

Visual perception is not the most trustworthy or the most necessary evidence; but I must admit that Christ appeared before Thomas, and Thomas was in part convinced because of what he saw. Our Lord said 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (v. 29).

However, it is evident from the story that it was not merely because he saw that he believed. There was something more to it. Thomas had said, with apparently nobody listening except his fellow disciples, 'I will not believe unless I put my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side.' The moment the risen Christ stood in the room, so the story goes, he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe' (v. 27).

*God knows the secrets of the heart*

The words spoken when Thomas knew no one was present except his fellow disciples had been heard and seem to be so transparently known by Christ. He felt the overwhelming sense that the very secrets of his heart were open, and that was the great piece of evidence that led to Thomas's faith.

**A personal relationship with Christ outweighs all the evidence**

As I end this lecture, I'm going to suggest seriously to us all that it is along this line that we shall eventually be convinced, if ever we are convinced. I have repeated before you the evidence that the early apostles put forward in the New Testament, and I frankly submit to you that the objective, logical evidence is overwhelming. And yet I suppose all of us can see that to be intellectually and logically convinced that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is, by itself, so far short of what must be that it is altogether unsatisfactory.

For if Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then he was the Son of God, and I must argue like this, as we all must. If he really rose from the dead and he is the Son of God, then his death was for my sin, as he said it was. His whole coming to this earth was for my 'salvation', to use that biblical term. It was to put me in touch with God. If he then is alive, he must be aware of me as I am here and you as you sit there.

In fact, if Jesus Christ is alive and he came here for our salvation, he is at this very moment trying to get through to us, if he has not got through before. Salvation is a personal thing. It is a question of having personal dealings with God. It is through Christ, if he's alive, that that personal link is to be forged. He must be willing this very moment to make himself known to

me in some real sense that I shall know that I'm dealing with a person, and that person is God, my Saviour.

One might almost say that there is a short cut to this. There is one way of knowing he is alive, by following the logical evidence such as I have submitted. But there is a far more satisfactory way of knowing it, by taking that next step and opening our personalities and hearts to receive him. The Bible lays it down, and Christian experience will bear it out, that when a person is convinced that Jesus is the Son of God, come for his salvation, and deliberately opens the door of his personality and bids Christ enter, Christ is so very really alive that he does enter and personal relationships are formed that outweigh all the evidence, as the sun outweighs the light of the moon.

Christians know him to be alive and living within, not by the weak sense of visual perception but by the deepest instinct of the human heart. That is in fact what eternal life is. To that end the Gospels were written, that we might first of all come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. But not to leave it there, thank God. Being convinced that he is the Son of God, we take that next step and come literally and personally into a living relationship with the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Ladies and gentlemen, I do not speak sentiment. Those of you who are Christians will not need me to press this point, and I do not wish to anticipate what I shall be saying next week. If I speak to any who are not committed Christians, agnostics maybe, or people of other faiths, I would lay down to you a challenge. If we are honest, there is a way in which we may prove conclusively that Jesus Christ is alive.

### **Everyone who receives Christ becomes a child of God**

If we are really prepared for the consequences, then we may make the experiment. We may open our hearts to receive him. To those who do so, he gives the power to become what they never were before. Because they do receive this life that Christ imparts—this resurrection life, this new life—they become for the first time children of God (see John 1:12). It is in fact eternal life begun here and now. There is no need for us to go through life in some vague hope that we may receive eternal life at the end, for eternal life is being put into personal contact with Jesus Christ, to know him, and God who sent him.

If any make that experiment—ask Christ to manifest himself and come into their lives to give them eternal life—and it doesn't work, my arguments to such would be of little use. I would still maintain that Christ is alive. The objective evidence is overwhelming still, but it would be of little help to people, if they should make this experiment honestly and Jesus Christ did not respond. But happily enough, if we make that experiment and Christ honours his word and imparts his life to us, then all my arguments will in some sense scarcely be necessary. We will find him, we will know him personally, and in the present enjoyment of eternal life we shall have evidence that no power on earth or elsewhere could ever undo.

## What Happened on the Damascus Road?

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, in past lectures I have been submitting to you evidence for the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. This evening I propose to submit still further evidence, but of a somewhat different sort. Hitherto, the evidence I have submitted for our Lord's deity has mainly been what we might call *objective evidence* from his life, his character, his miracles, his death and his resurrection. This evening, I turn to the other side, the side of our personal experience, the *subjective evidence* of the truth of our Lord's deity.

I have left this until the last section, devoting to it only one lecture in a series of four. I would not like you to gather from that that I consider this evidence to be less important than the other. In fact, there is a sense in which this evidence is of supreme importance. I chose the order of the lectures for the deliberate reason that, unless we first of all believe that Jesus is the Son of God, we shall not be prepared to take those next steps that are necessary in order to come at such a personal experience of God that will satisfy our souls.

If I may borrow the phrase of the Apostle John that he gives at the end of his long discourse, the Gospel of John, I would point out to you that he himself follows that same order. He says, 'these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (20:31). You will see that there are the two sides here.

There is the objective side: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that evidence must come first. But John does not stop there. In fact, it would be almost a denial of everything that John has spoken if he did.

There is the subjective evidence: those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, must necessarily go that next step, and by believing on him they find eternal life, which it was his purpose to bring us.

After all, our Lord came here to this earth not merely for exhibition's sake; not merely that he might let us know that there is a person whom we call the Son of God; he came here eminently for practical reasons. He offered himself to the people as the bread of life, thereby implying that people are hungry; offering himself as the bread that can satisfy their hunger (John 6:35). His offer of himself as the light of the world shows that he regards men and women as living in darkness without him (8:12).

To sum it up in a phrase, he came to give men and women eternal life. He defined eternal life in these terms, 'And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (17:3).

It is a thing to be noticed very clearly, that in his preaching he was constantly pointing out to people that eternal life is a thing that starts here and now in this life on earth. We shall find

a marked difference between the preaching of our Lord Jesus and some of the more popular phraseology that we are accustomed to nowadays. It is possible to represent salvation as being merely that some go to heaven and some to perdition at the end of life on earth, so that being saved in many people's minds has become equivalent to 'going to heaven'.

Now to be sure, it is quite true that they who trust our Lord will be taken to heaven. He himself explicitly said to his disciples just before he left them, 'And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also' (John 14:3). That expectation is a great and glorious part of the Christian hope, but we should not let it becloud our minds. Our Lord spoke far more of this other thing, of having eternal life. That does not mean existing forever, nor merely going to heaven when we die. That is an experience of God that men and women enter into now, here in this life. They know it with a conviction that comes not merely of reasoning, but by the working of God's Holy Spirit in their hearts, so that anyone who is brought into touch with God by Christ in this fashion 'has the testimony in himself' (1 John 5:10). A certainty, a sureness, an experience of God that none could possibly take from him, because it is implanted there by the direct workings of God himself.

If that is what Christ came to do, the greatest evidence that any man or woman can possibly have of the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ is not that he did miracles, nor merely that he rose again from the dead the third day, but that he has done precisely this thing in his or her particular human life. Therefore, as I say, I want to submit evidence for his deity after this fashion. But you will immediately see that, strictly speaking, I can offer you very little, for the evidence that comes in this direction is the personal experience between the individual soul and God.

I may argue that a certain confectioner makes good cakes. I may point out to you that in one particular cake there are so many pounds of fruit, it is the best possible flour and mixed up according to the very best recipes, and perhaps that might incline you towards the general direction of putting out your hand and taking a slice of that cake. But in the last analysis, the real evidence that it is a good cake only comes to the person who is prepared to make the experiment, put out the hand, take the cake and eat it.

If I might compare small things with large, so it is with our Lord, who offered himself as the bread of life. I have submitted evidence of his miracles, evidence of his death, of his character, of his resurrection from the dead; evidence which I submit is overwhelming that he was and is the Son of God. But now of course comes the crucial test. If anyone would know with utter certainty, there must necessarily be that personal experience, that consent upon the individual's part to allow our Lord Jesus Christ to do that very intimate and personal work that he calls *salvation*.

### **How does salvation happen and what does it mean?**

Curiously enough, when we come to the practical application of Christianity, we shall find a whole array of ideas as to what Jesus Christ really was intending to do. I am aware of these very many different interpretations. I am aware too that some people, perhaps almost with the counsel of despair, have said it doesn't really matter what interpretation we put on all

these things. So long as we are sincere, so long as we make some genuine attempt to lead the Christian life, then let each one have his or her own way of looking at things. Why should we trouble too much about doctrine when really what we want is a bit of Christian living? If we all live in a Christian fashion, why should we trouble about the niceties of conversion?

In view of that, I want to speak quite humbly. I submit to you that our best tactics are to take the Scriptures, the inspired histories, and ask what did Christianity do when it first started? We know as an historic fact that Christianity spread like wildfire in spite of the fact that the early Christians were eventually brought under the fiercest persecution. Still it survived and went on and grew.

There was the extraordinary situation that an apostle like Paul could go to a city like Thessalonica, be there scarcely a month, and leave behind a Christian community that survived against very severe persecution. What happened? I invite you to judge from the kind of thing that these men preached.

There is one historian in the New Testament who was inspired of God to give us a faithful summary of the kind of message preached by the early Christian missionaries. I refer of course to the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke. We may presume that all the sermons he has recorded are faithful summaries, leaving out nothing that was vital or important. The first thing that must surely strike us about the preaching of those early Christians is that there is an almost complete absence of the subject matter of the Sermon on the Mount. So much so that we could say that the people were not converted to Christianity by the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. You would look in vain in any of Paul's or Peter's public sermons for any stressing of the golden rule, 'whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them' (Matt 7:12). That wasn't what converted the ancient world to Christianity.

Let me hasten to add, you will find that when these men wrote to people who had already become Christians, their letters are full of the kind of exhortation that we find in the Sermon on the Mount. They evidently regarded those teachings to be for people who were already Christians. But how did you become a Christian? The standards of the Sermon on the Mount are exceedingly high, and it must appear to all thoughtful people that, unless we are given more than human power with which to carry out those exhortations, they set such a high standard that it would almost be impractical for us to attempt anything.

I want to make that point very definitely, for sometimes I think in our modern world we are in danger of obscuring and confusing these two things. We do not become Christians—we do not enter into this experience of God which Christ calls eternal life—by attempting to keep the Sermon on the Mount, however honest and well-meant such an attempt is. There is a prior experience. There is this basic matter of receiving eternal life, the fundamental experience of being put into a right personal relationship with God through the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts.

## What did the apostles preach?

### 1. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus and the certainty of judgment

First and foremost, with almost monotonous regularity, they preached the resurrection of our Lord Jesus, and they argued from his resurrection that he was the Son of God. Very frequently, they took the next step and pointed out that he was not only the Son of God, not only had he risen from the dead, but eventually he will come to judge mankind. Addressing the Areopagus council in Athens, Paul preached this most definitely, as almost the first conclusion anyone ought to make from the resurrection of our Lord.

[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:31)

One of the first conclusions God wants us to draw from the resurrection of our Lord is the certainty of a moral judgment that all must face. It is after all to be expected, surely? Mankind cannot crucify its Creator, put him safely in a tomb and think he has heard the last of it. Any programme for the future that omits to account for this grave issue must be fundamentally wrong. Jesus Christ was God's Son, and in this world God's Son has hung upon a cross. It cannot be that we have heard the last of that yet. Raised from the dead, he is most certainly coming to judge; so that a human being who says 'I do not feel any personal need of Jesus Christ,' is hitting his head against a stone. Whether we feel the need or not, the resurrection of Christ is urged upon us as God's final proof that there is coming a moral judgment.

Let us listen to the words of Christ himself on this score. How serious will that moral judgment be? Sometimes people get the impression that Jesus Christ has brought us such a message of God's love that he has forever dispelled any ideas that God is a God of judgment. Such notions are evidently not founded on the historic preaching of our Lord. He reminded his contemporaries that not to avail of this eternal life that he had come to bring was to perish, and in that coming day there would be people who would be cast out of God's kingdom.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. (Luke 13:28)

It was not an apostle, whom you might think had got a distorted idea of what Christ said, it was our Lord himself who used those exceedingly solemn terms. For some, eternity would mean suffering.

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. (Mark 9:47-48)

If someone should say, 'such a view of things is too extreme for us to accept,' that is why I have spent three weeks arguing with you the deity of our Lord. To accept his deity is no academic matter. If Jesus Christ is God, then we must bow to everything he says just because he says it. We need to be exceedingly clear just here. No amount of sentiment, no amount of

arguing how we think God ought to be, can save us from this dilemma. If we really believe that Jesus is the Son of God, then we must accept what he said about the future state of mankind. If we would reject that idea, then we must be prepared to reject the deity of our Lord. If we reject that, then what we have is a Christianity of our own making.

## **2. The death of the Lord Jesus as a sacrifice for sin**

Not only did they preach the resurrection of our Lord and the certainty of a moral judgment, they preached the death of our Lord with great emphasis. Not to begin with as an example for men and women to follow, but in the sense of a sacrifice for sin. In this, they were not preaching any doctrine that was really novel. We reminded ourselves the other week of the prophecies of the Old Testament that had prophesied for what purpose our Lord should die. Notably that great passage in Isaiah 53:

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (v. 5)

This evening I do not wish to argue this matter from the Old Testament or the writings of the apostles. In the short time at my disposal, I wish to quote the highest and supreme authority, our Lord himself. Central to Christianity, right back to the early days, there are two institutions, two rites. One of them is baptism, the other is the Lord's Supper. In that second institution, the Lord's Supper, we have the gospel preached in symbol, but in an unmistakable fashion. In fact, one would gather that it must be central to Christianity. To help his people remember him, he left bread and wine.

Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.' (Matt 26:26–28)

It is well that we get that in focus. When Christians are asked to celebrate the Lord's Supper, it is not as our great example that Christ is being set before us, it is Christ as our great sacrifice for sin—his body having been given for us, his blood shed for the forgiveness of sin. That supper was not an invention of the apostles. Going right back to the very beginning, this was what our Lord himself instituted on that most sacred occasion in those last few hours before he went to the cross. To reject this and its message would be to reject the most sacred thing in all Christianity.

Our Lord laid it down that his people were to take ordinary bread and wine, so that they might have a literal and physical symbol of this fact that is central and fundamental to Christianity. His blood shed as a ransom for many would bear in upon our minds the demand of Scripture everywhere that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (see Heb 9:22). With God there is bountiful and free forgiveness, but basic to all Christianity must come forgiveness that is purchased by the shedding of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### 3. The offence of the cross

Now if we would rightly understand what this means, the impact it had upon the ancient world and the impact it ought to have upon us, we must be prepared to hear another hard saying. You will find the early Christian preachers saying that there is an *offence* about the preaching of the Christian gospel, what Paul called 'the offence of the cross' (Gal 5:11). That didn't mean they were rude and discourteous. Inherent in this very message of Christianity there was a stumbling block, something over which people would be liable to trip. They would find a great barrier to accepting the Christian message. I want to stress that, because unless we see that point we probably haven't got 'the right end of the stick'.

If we do not feel within our hearts what Paul means when he talks about this offence of the cross, we're probably being content with too shallow an interpretation of the Christian message.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor 1:18–25)

#### *An offence to intellectual people*

The Greeks seek wisdom, says Paul. They stand for intellectual types, and the cross to them seems foolishness; it is an offence to them.

One must admit to this very present day, that people will be found arguing, 'But look, this Christian gospel urges that I should believe and submit my mind to what the Bible says, but surely God means me to think. I don't have to accept everything Jesus Christ says because he said it, I'm meant to think for myself. After all, what did God give me a brain for if he didn't expect me to think and decide for myself?'

Well certainly God gave us brains so that we might think with them, and perhaps most of us, myself included, do not think enough; but there are evident limits to our thinking. Quite apart from religious things, suppose I watch a scientist at work and see to what extent he uses his mind. I shall observe that he has not been called upon to use his mind to create a universe; he merely studies the universe which has already been created. He doesn't create any evidence. He doesn't argue with the sun, 'Look here, sun, according to my theory and the brain I was given to think with, you ought to be a little bit different from what you are.' No, if his theories disagree with the evidence, then the scientist changes his theories. He's not there to create evidence, he is there merely to study it and understand it.

So it must be with God. We're not asked to create a God such as we would approve of. We could never find him by our own reasoning powers. We are called upon to face the evidence,

and that evidence is Christ. If our theories conflict with him, we need to change our theories. But the offence of the cross goes deeper and it points to an uncomfortable truth. When the very best brains have laboured all they know, men and women are still sinners incapable of saving themselves.

Many centuries ago Socrates and Plato thought that if only people could be educated sufficiently, to know clearly what is right and what is wrong, they would choose what is right. Socrates argued that if a man really knew a thing to be wrong and knew he was going to suffer for it, he wouldn't do it. But 2,300 years have proved Socrates wrong. Our present generation enjoys education as none has ever done before. The two devastating world wars were not brought on by uncivilized people, but were fought out between the most highly civilized and educated people in the whole world. If education or our own thinking powers could save us; if we had some latent ability to think, and by our thought control and ingenuity we had that power; then we would have done it long since. And what is more to the point, God's Son need never have been put to a cross.

In spite of our fine powers, the most intellectual among us are quite unable to save themselves and make themselves acceptable to God. In fact, so incapable that if ever they are to be acceptable to God, no less a thing must happen than God's own Son must die upon a cross. That is a humiliating thing to have to be told and it raises the issue, is it God's Son on that cross? If it is, then evidently such a drastic measure would not have been necessary if any other means could have been found to save mankind.

#### *An offence to religious people*

But the offence of the cross extends not only to the intellectuals. 'It is a stumbling block to Jews,' said Paul. It may be less so today, but the Jews were the leading religious people in the ancient world. In spite of all their failings, the Jews were vastly superior, at least those who took their religion seriously. After all, they had a religion and a law given to them by God. The moral commandments of the Old Testament stood pre-eminently above all the other codes of ethics that the old world knew, and a Jew who honestly made an attempt to guide his life by those Ten Commandments certainly was a very fine character.

So the gospel to them was an offence for that very reason. It told men and women that, however honest their attempts were to keep God's moral laws, they could not be saved thereby. In fact, the New Testament lays it down bluntly and pointedly that, if men and women could have been saved by honestly attempting to keep God's commandments, the cross of Christ was completely unnecessary (1 Cor 1:17). If righteousness could come by keeping God's Ten Commandments, then Christ is dead in vain (see Gal 2:21 KJV).

Once more that is a very hard pill to swallow, but I emphasize it because we are dealing with the terms that our Lord himself lays down, and we must get our foundations clear here. He came to bring us into a right relationship with God and to impart to us eternal life. To come into a right personal relationship with God, we must see ourselves as God sees us. Christ hanging upon a cross tells us straight that, when we have done our very best, we are still morally bankrupt in God's sight; so bankrupt that the only means of our salvation was the sacrifice of God's Son upon the cross. The love of God as expressed in Christ and in Calvary

is far from being a sugary, sentimental thing. In fact, it will bid us, somewhat sternly, to face the realities of the situation.

### **The practical example of Saul of Tarsus**

Let me take you to a practical example of what I mean. I have entitled this lecture ‘What happened on the Damascus road?’ and I mean to select Paul as a vivid example of what happens to people who have this experience of receiving eternal life. These are people into whose lives Jesus Christ has come, he has put them right with God, and given them eternal life. I would like us to see in full how the thing is done and what it means.

What did happen to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road? There was, to begin with, that blinding vision. Visions are not given to all, nor are they necessary, but that vision first of all proved to Saul of Tarsus beyond doubt the thing that I have been labouring to you over these past three weeks—that Jesus was risen from the dead and he was the Son of God. Perhaps nothing less than a vision of that sort could possibly have convinced Saul. Evidently, it meant a revolution in his life that anybody could see. He discovered the Jesus whom he had persecuted to be alive from the dead and in fact to be God’s own Son.

Let us listen to Paul stating the terms of that revolution in his life. Notice that he didn’t say: ‘Before now I was a Jew. I’m still a Jew, but I’m a Christian and I must try even harder now to please God than I did before.’ It is not stated in those terms. In fact, this is such an exceedingly important point that I take liberty to read to you from the Scriptures themselves. This is Paul’s own account of the revolution in his outlook.

In his letter to the church at Philippi he details some of his previous attainments in his efforts to please God under the Jewish system (Phil 3:4–6).

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee. (vv. 4–5)

Anybody who knows ancient history will know how exceedingly strict and punctilious those Pharisees were in the observance of the law.

as to zeal, a persecutor of the church (v. 6)

‘But that shows him to be a horrible monster,’ someone will say. ‘To hurl men and women into prison for their religious faith is a terrible thing to do.’

Perhaps it is, but it shows at least that Paul really believed what he believed. He was not morally anaemic. In his unconverted days, Paul sincerely believed that Jesus Christ was a mere man. For people to maintain that a mere man was the Son of God was, in the first place, utter blasphemy, and, in the second place, Saul would have regarded it as the most wicked sin that anybody could perpetrate against his fellow human being. To mislead people, and that eternally, to follow an imposter was a wicked thing to Saul in those far-off days. To show his love for God and his love for his fellow men he attempted to stamp out this new sect to

the best of his abilities, and by means that were quite acceptable to his contemporaries in days when people felt very seriously about the fundamental matters of life.

But whatever we may make of his zeal in what to us are mere outward rituals—circumcision and so forth, we are pulled up with a jolt by the next thing that he can claim:

as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (v. 6)

Saul was a well-known figure in Jewish circles and since his conversion, even more well known. His character was so well known that anybody was at liberty to poke holes in it if they could. He claims that in his unconverted days, so far as keeping God's commandments and doing unto others as he would that they should do unto him was concerned, he was *blameless*. Not *sinless*. He doesn't claim to have been sinless; but, from the point of view of anything that you could observe outwardly and see in his life, he was utterly exemplary.

He lived to please God, honestly trying to keep the commandments and succeeding perhaps more than any one of us here. As touching the righteousness which comes by keeping God's law he was blameless. I submit to you that that is a good many people's idea of Christianity, is it not? If they could honestly and consistently say they have kept God's law to the very best of their ability, and are blameless as far as they personally know, they would regard themselves as distinguished Christians. Or at least, good enough Christians to please God, with nothing more being required of them. But I do want you to notice that that is the utter reverse of Christianity.

When Paul saw that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and woke up to the fact that the figure hanging upon that cross was God's Son, there came such a revolution in his attitude that he completely threw over all those other claims.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (vv. 7-9)

*How did he come to that attitude?*

'If that is God's Son upon that cross, why was he there? Was he dying for me? Am I not all right, am I not doing the very best I can? Why did he need to die for me?' And then the truth dawned on Paul that, even with all that moral worth about him, God's view was that he was so desperately lost that nothing short of the sacrifice of his Son could possibly save him. And when Paul came to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, it revolutionised his life to the extent that he abandoned completely all reliance upon his own efforts to keep God's law and took his stand before God solely and totally as a sinner depending on the sacrifice of Christ.

*Does it matter what attitude we take?*

Of course it matters what attitude we take! Christ constantly emphasizes that this matter of salvation is a question of our personal relationship with a person. When we sin, we do not sin against a code of rules. It is not that God has a book up in heaven and he looks up a particular command and says, 'Ah, you sinned against that command.' When we sin, we sin against a

person and that person is God. To be saved, to have eternal life and come into relationship with God, again is a personal matter, and not until this grave question of our personal sin is dealt with can God possibly impart to us his eternal life. He says that the very best we can do by keeping his law will not fit us; it will not make us acceptable. If we would be accepted with God we must learn to abandon faith in our own efforts and, as bankrupt sinners, come to God through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Somebody will say, 'But I don't get this. It sounds too extreme to me. Surely we are to do our best? If you preach that men and women have to abandon faith in their own moral efforts and trust only in Christ, that will jettison all moral effort and all moral accomplishment.'

Before I proceed, may I tie you down just here? I want to provoke you, if I can, not to argue with me but to see whether I am expounding fairly what God says. What do you really believe about that figure on the cross? Is he the Son of God, and why does he suffer?

Somebody will say, 'But surely we have to do our best in these matters, and where we come short Christ died for us so that he might help us over that little bit.'

He did not! We mistake God's laws if we have that view.

At Queen's university we hold yearly examinations, as you know. We encourage the students to take them and stick by the rules. At the end, if a student comes out with seventy-five percent we congratulate him. He's attained first class honours. Falling short by twenty-five percent is a mere nothing, this is distinction level.

It would appear that many people have the viewpoint that if we keep God's law to, say eighty percent, we have sort of attained a distinction level mark, and the death of Christ encourages us to think that God will overlook the rest. That is not so. God himself tells us that if we keep his whole law and fail in one point we are guilty of all (see Jas 2:10).

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.' (Gal 3:10)

You say, 'That's grossly unfair.'

### *God's ultimatum*

Well then, it comes down to what you really think of Jesus Christ. We cannot believe he's the Son of God one moment, and then refuse to believe what he says the next. It does really come down to what I make of his death upon the cross. God's ultimatum is that we take one of two positions.

1. We stand on our own merits, on our keeping of his law, and if we fall short in one thing we are cursed.
2. We abandon our merit and, as bankrupt sinners, come on the ground of Christ's sacrifice.

I see no way out of that impasse, not if we're to believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son.

You say, 'But, Mr Preacher, that cannot be right. If that were right, people could be saved, as you call it, and then do as they pleased afterwards and still be saved. Surely that's wrong?'

Well it is interesting that people make that objection. If you do not mind my being just a little bit conceited here, that shows how right I am, because that was precisely the objection they levelled against the early Christian preachers. You may read it in full in Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 3. They said, 'You know, Paul, this doctrine is ridiculous. It comes to this, why not do evil that good may come? You may live as you please, and then God will save you if you just have faith. That's absurd.'

Surely the very fact that they brought it against him, as some would be inclined to bring it against me, shows that he and I preach the same thing. Of course, if a person trusts Christ, learns to abandon faith in his own works and trusts only in that sacrifice of Christ, it does not lead to antinomianism—doing as I please; for the other great thing that Christ does for a person who dares to trust him is that he imparts his Holy Spirit.

### *Salvation is two things*

1. It is forgiveness; being reconciled with God through the death of Christ.
2. It is the positive receiving of God's Holy Spirit; and God never gives his Holy Spirit like this to any who do not come on the grounds of the death of Christ.

But when he does give the Holy Spirit, then the Holy Spirit becomes a vital power in that man or woman. It is such a new thing that the Bible calls it a new creation. It is really a life. As Jesus Christ himself called it, it is eternal life. I do not say that such people receive violent, emotional disturbances. It is not to be confused with the joy and the happiness that result at times from the receiving of God's Holy Spirit. Though his work is silent, yet it is real. Some of the biggest forces in this universe are silent, as you know. The power of gravity that the sun is exerting at this very moment on earth, keeping earth on its course, is completely silent as far as I know. We have never heard gravity, but only a fool would deny that it exists.

When Christ brings a person into a right relationship with God, he imparts to him the Holy Spirit. This is what makes Christ unique. No one could possibly believe this, unless Jesus were the Son of God. No one else could do it. So we come back once more to this thing, is Jesus really the Son of God?

You see, he didn't come to inspire us first and foremost with his example; he's too much of a realist for that. He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). What they needed first was forgiveness and peace with God. Next they needed a completely new power, his Holy Spirit to abide within them.

## **Taking the step of personal faith in Christ**

I have not enough time left to tell you in detail how this thing happens, but I trust it is obvious to us all that here we have reached that stage in our argument when this thing must become entirely personal. I can only submit the evidence to you and tell you what Christ asks of each one of us. If you have never done this before, I can only urge you to make the experiment that Christ lays down, in which Christ himself will show us the truth of these things by giving us this eternal life.

As I close I should like to stress this thing. It is not enough to assent intellectually to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. Says James, rather bitingly, 'You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!' (2:19). The demons believe that there is a God, but it doesn't do them any good.

If we are to be pleasing to God and know these certainties, there must of necessity come that personal step by which through an act of faith we are linked with our living Lord Jesus Christ. The terms he uses to illustrate this transaction are many, and all of them indicate an exceedingly simple act.

If it is thirst, a yearning for God, 'let him *come to me* and drink' (John 7:37).

If it's security, 'I am the door. If anyone *enters by me*, he will be saved' (John 10:9)

Or the reverse way round, 'But to all who did *receive him*, who *believed in his name*, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12).

They started off in life as creatures of God, for not all are children of God; but when they received him, he gave them the power to become what they never were before, children of God. It's a question of receiving him, and he himself inspired that lovely illustration.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Rev 3:20)

Invaded by Jesus Christ, this is the true love of God. It calls us to a deliberate act of the will to accept God's terms, to open our personalities and beings, and to receive his own Son so that he and we might be one forever. And those who do that will know that it is true.

Lest you think I'm going beyond my own authority, let me quote you the words of the great Apostle John. He wrote a Gospel to this end, 'these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31).

That is a momentous step, and an experience that people go through here on earth, and know it. This is evident, when he wrote to some Christians who had received Christ: 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life' (1 John 5:13).

That is the glory of the salvation that the Son of God brings. He gives us here on earth to know God, to know peace with God, to receive eternal life, and the crowning joy and certainty of knowing it.

'How do I know it?' you say.

'Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself' (v. 10). God's Holy Spirit will witness with that person's spirit that he is born of God; he or she is a child of God. But I must press upon you that this is not automatic. 'Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life' (v. 12). It is open to the human will to make the other choice. 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever *does not obey* the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him' (John 3:36).

These words are exceedingly solemn and therefore I suggest it would indeed be fitting if we bowed our heads now just for a moment in quiet prayer, and we who already know this experience may thank God for showing us his salvation in Christ. If there are any who have

not yet had this experience and come at this evidence by personal faith in him, they may be pleased to ask God to show them how this thing really happens.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.