

Christianity Explored

UNFOLDING THE MYSTERY

Making sense of the Christian faith !

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Many people believe that Christianity is no more than a myth - a series of old wives tales - certainly not factual. It is amazing how many different reactions you can get to the Christian faith.

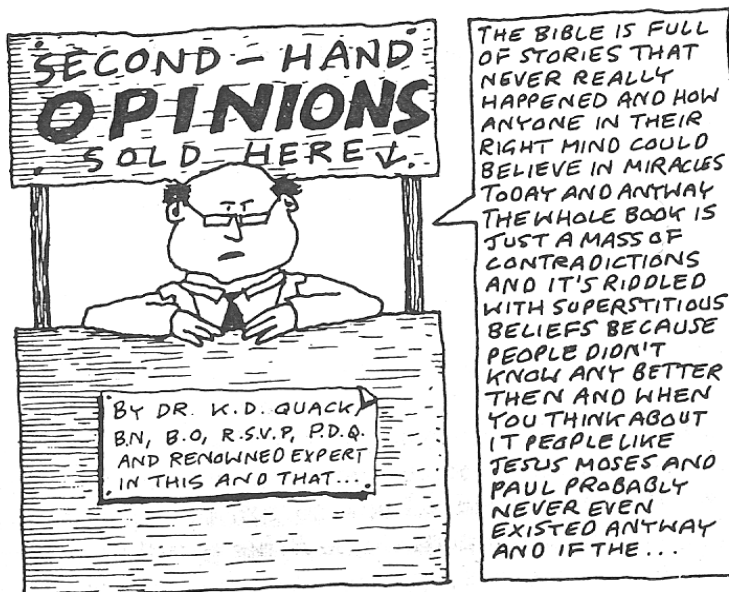
Here are some of them:

- † *"Don't mention Christianity to me. The church is full of hypocrites."*
- † *"Christianity stifles personal freedom."*
- † *"Most Christians have their heads in the clouds. They are too spiritually minded for any earthly use."*
- † *"Don't bother me with religion: it is irrelevant to the 21st century. It has nothing useful to say."*
- † *"Science is in conflict with faith," or even, "The Bible has been proved wrong by science."*
- † *"Christianity is only a crutch for the weak."*
- † *"What about all the evil and suffering in the world? Surely that proves there is no God."*
- † *"It doesn't matter what you believe: all religions are basically the same and will lead me to God."*

Maybe you have said something like this? Perhaps one or more of those statements have fallen from your lips in the past? But, what are we to make of them? Are we to ignore them, hoping that they might just disappear? Are there adequate answers? Does the Christian faith make any sense at all? In the following pages, you will discover the heart of the Christian message.

I know that many, in asking questions, are sincerely searching after the truth, but it must be said that so often those who make such earth-shattering statements about Christianity have not taken the time or the effort to study the facts. Often people's opinions are formed by 'borrowing' ideas from friends or relatives. For example, if some domineering friend says, "The Bible is full of contradiction", some people, without ever reading the Bible for themselves, adopt the opinion of their friends.

Prejudice is a great time-saver as it enables you to form opinions without looking at the facts.



Someone once said, "Prejudice is a great time-saver as it enables you to form opinions without looking at the facts." It might be a great time-saver, but I'm sure you would agree, this is such an important subject...

WE MUST GET IT RIGHT!

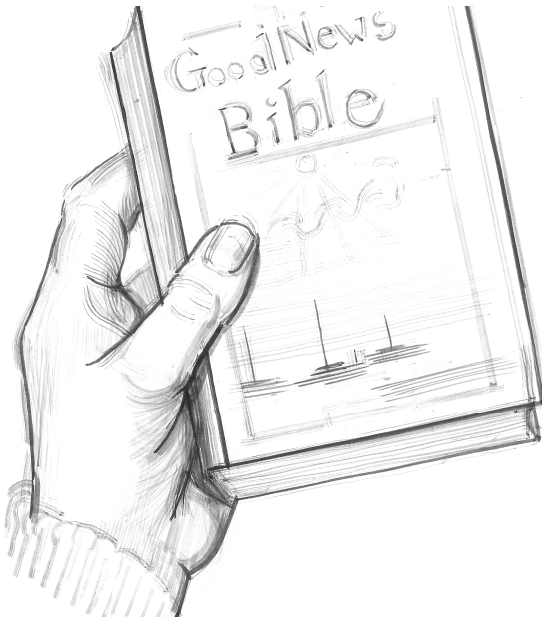
Most people would love to know what the Bible has to say to them, but they don't know where to start. Those who do start often give up because they have started reading from the first book in the Old Testament, Genesis. By the time they've reached Leviticus (third book) they are well and truly confused, wondering what this has to do with anybody today. A further difficulty is that when most people start reading the Bible they look for that old dusty copy (now up in the attic) that grandmother gave them, written in a language of "thee's and Thou's". No-one speaks like that anymore. It's hardly surprising that 'ordinary' people get confused.

Even in our sophisticated 21st century the Bible still remains a best-seller.

Where do we start?

It's probably best to start by saying that the Bible is the most incredible book of all time. Even in our sophisticated 21st century it still

"Is there a God?"



remains a best-seller. The Bible is a library of books, 66 in fact, written by over 40 different authors from many different walks of life, over a period of 1500 years, in three different languages, in three continents, yet there is an incredible unity throughout its pages.

But is it true?

Some object to the bible containing miraculous stories. They say that miracles do not happen and it is unscientific to believe in them. Apart

from many scientists being committed Christians, many other scientists wouldn't agree with that statement, simply on the basis that there are many things that cannot be explained by scientific means. However, before attempting to answer whether or not miracles can happen, I believe that it is necessary to ask another question first, that is, "Is there a God?" If we answer "possibly" or "maybe", then we cannot rule out that miracles happen either, because, if there is a God, then by very definition this Supreme Being will be able to do absolutely anything. I personally have no problems with miracles simply because I believe that there is a God in heaven, and for Him nothing is impossible.

We don't need to throw our brains away.

Full of Contradiction?

Others say, "The Bible is full of contradiction". In fact, most people who say that have never made the effort to read it themselves. The Bible is

Over 300 ancient prophecies were fulfilled.

often treated like a dictionary, i.e. most homes have one, but it is hardly ever used. What we tend to do is ask a friend how to spell a word rather than look it up ourselves. It is much quicker, but far less

reliable. Lots of people treat the Bible in the same way. Their knowledge is second-hand, (or perhaps 42nd hand!). God doesn't require anyone to throw away his or her intellectual integrity to become a Christian.

"An Eye for an Eye"

There are, however, some difficulties where, on face value, the Bible does seem to contradict itself; yet on a closer look these problems simply evaporate. For example, "turn the other cheek" and "eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth". This is often quoted as an example of a blatant contradiction. However, apparent contradictions can be quite easily explained. In Old Testament times Moses instructed the people with the "eye for an eye" principle in order to prevent excessive retribution and revenge.

At that time people were killing each other in revenge attacks for far lesser things done against them. Moses, in effect was saying, "If you must have revenge, let it be no more than what was done to you." Even this was not mandatory, for forgiveness was always the better way.

Furthermore, the "eye for an eye" wasn't an opportunity for personal revenge, but this was the sentence through the courts of the day. No one could take that law into their own hands. In the New Testament, Jesus, by teaching His disciples to "turn the other cheek", was highlighting the better way of forgiveness. The Jews had made "an eye for an eye" into a compulsory law, when God never meant it that way. With a little understanding apparent contradictions disappear.

Compared to other ancient writings, e.g. the evidence that we have of Julius Caesar coming to Britain in 55BC, the Bible manuscripts are quite convincing. For Julius Caesar's history we have 9 or 10 documents preserved in our museums: the earliest of these was written some 900 years after the event. Compared with that we have some 2000 early manuscripts of all or part of the Gospels, some as early as just a few decades after the originals were written. Although no 'original' documents have been found, most scholars vouch for the accuracy of the ancient documents.

"Has God ever come to where we are?"

Another clue to the Bible's accuracy is the way in which prophesy was

Jesus is the One who divided history.

fulfilled (the future was predicted). I don't mean the sort of thing that you read in your average horoscope... "Today you will meet a handsome stranger. Tomorrow it will be dry if it isn't raining". But we have predictions about where Jesus was born; that He would enter Jerusalem on a donkey; that He would be rejected and killed; that men would gamble for His clothes. In fact over 300 prophecies from the Old Testament, which were written at least 400 years before Jesus walked this earth, were fulfilled during His lifetime. **THE BIBLE CAN BE TRUSTED!**

Don't all Religions lead to God?

Often you will hear people say, "As all roads lead to Rome, all religions lead to the same God". As we know all roads do not lead to Rome; likewise all religions do not lead to God. All major religions claim very different things, which are mutually exclusive. Take, for example, the 5 major religions in the world. Their differences are enormous. Buddhism is silent about the nature, or even the existence of God. Hinduism believes in many gods; Islam believes there is only one god; Judaism believes that Jesus was not the Messiah, the Son of God; Christians do believe that Jesus was God's Son and Saviour of the world. In short, they can't all be right.

5 Major World Religions



... they can't all be right !

What is God like?



Let us work this one out ourselves. If there is a God, what characteristics would He have? What would His qualities be? Let me suggest some. If there is a God..... then He would be **All POWERFUL**. He would also be **PERFECT IN EVERY WAY**. How about being totally **HOLY**; a God of infinite **LOVE**; someone who is always **JUST**

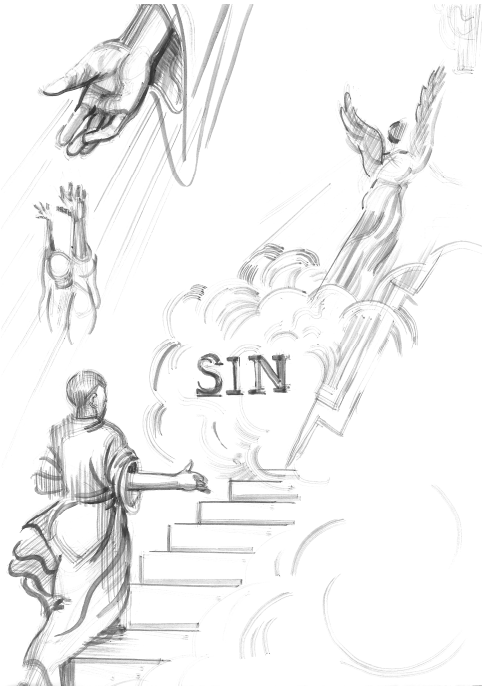
in every action? If there is a God in heaven, then it is conceivable that He would have these qualities.

\$64,000 Question

But the \$64,000 question would be, could it ever be possible to have any sort of contact or relationship with such a God? There is no way that we could reach up to such a God due to our sinfulness. We would be disqualified immediately. The Bible teaches that because of our imperfections and sinfulness, God would have to take the initiative and come to us.

If this is true, the question we need to ask is, "Has God ever come to where we are?" As we look back over the centuries, searching for a

time when God may have taken the initiative and reached down to humans, we are confronted with the story of Jesus as found in the Bible. We cannot get away from it; Jesus was the most truly significant person in history. Many regard Jesus as a great teacher, which He undoubtedly was. Today many quote things that He said, often unknowingly, e.g. "turn the other cheek"...."go the second mile".....parables of the "Good Samaritan"....."Prodigal Son" and so on. The year in which we now live is 2000 AD, meaning "in the year of our Lord", pointing back to One who divided history.



However, the Bible claims that Jesus was much more than just a historical person, or a religious leader, or a great teacher. Yes, Jesus was all of those things, but far more, for Jesus Himself claimed He was the Son of God, who had come down to earth from God. His mission, He claimed, was to bring the world back into a right relationship with Almighty God.

Probably you are thinking, "Anyone can claim absolutely anything". For example, a deranged person can claim he is Superman, but the deceit will be revealed when that person tries to stop a runaway train or fly from the top floor of an office block. The important question to ask is whether a person has the credentials to substantiate their claims.

Jesus claimed to be God, but was that just some idle claim, or did

His life and works support such a declaration? Why not examine the evidence for yourself:

So often people compare themselves with other people. The result is, they don't fare too badly.

1. If Jesus was God, He would be perfect in every way. In other words, He would not be sinful like humans. The Bible never records

Jesus sinning. In fact, quite the opposite. Men like Paul, John and Peter who knew Jesus spoke of Him as having no sin. Peter and John were with Him for three years, yet they couldn't find a fault. It wasn't only His friends who testified to this fact, but His enemies also. On one occasion, Jesus challenged His enemies to show Him His sin. Although many would have liked to have done so, not even those opposed to Him could do this.



2. Consider the works that Jesus performed. The mighty miracles of healing: the dumb spoke; the deaf heard; the blind saw; the lame walked; even the dead were raised. Jesus who Himself said that He too would rise from the dead, actually did. Jesus also had power over nature itself. He walked on water, stilled a stormy sea, turned water into wine, fed 5000 men plus their wives and children on two fish and five loaves. Surely such works could only be done by One who is God.

Was Jesus a Lunatic? Was He a Liar? Or is He Lord?."

3. Jesus also fulfilled over 300 prophecies from the Old Testament. Prophecies that were written hundreds of years before Jesus walked the earth. The chances of only a few of these being fulfilled purely by coincidence is astronomical.

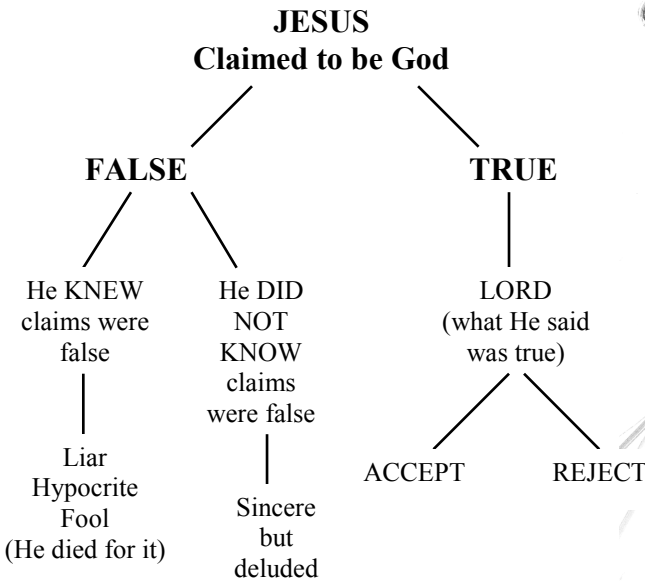
The greatest commandment is to "love the Lord"...

The one thing that it would be quite foolish to say is that Jesus was a good man, or a moral figure, but not God. For if Jesus lied about His own identity, then He was certainly not good or moral. Someone once put it this way, "If Jesus Christ wasn't God, then He deserved an Oscar".

Or, as someone else has said, "The choice is ours. Was Jesus a Lunatic? Was He a Liar? Or is He Lord?".

But (and this is very important), if Jesus was who He said He was (i.e. God), we can either listen and obey what He taught or turn a deaf ear. But should we do the latter, it is at our peril!! Jesus told one religious leader of His day, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life"(John 3v16).

May I ask you a question? "Can you say for certain that if you were to die tonight you would go to heaven?" (Sorry if you thought that was a bit heavy!!) I know that many people say that we will never know for certain, because dead men don't tell tales, but the Bible says that we can know for



certain: "I write these things to you....that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5v13).

Some will answer "YES" to the above question. They will say that they do believe that one day they will go to heaven. If that is the case, an essential follow-up question would be: "If you were to stand before God, and God were to say to you, 'Why should I let YOU into my heaven?' You'd be surprised at the many different answers I get to this question. Some say that they believe they will be "up there " on that Great Day because they have lived good and moral lives; some believe that it is because of their good works in helping others; others believe it is because they were church members or occasionally prayed or read their Bibles. There is only one answer that is right and many that are wrong.



Heaven is a free gift



Firstly, and this may surprise you, heaven is a free gift! The Bible says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." (Romans 6v23).

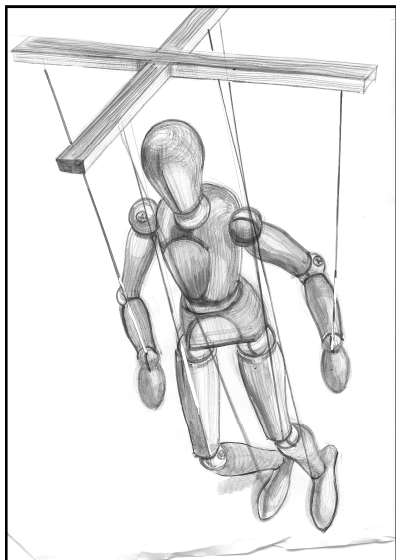
The Bible also says that heaven cannot be earned or deserved. In another place in the Bible it says that it is not through the good works that we do (Ephesians 2v8,9). If you did a survey and asked, "What is a Christian?", undoubtedly you will get answers like, "A good person"; "Someone who helps others"; "Someone who gives to those in need". A Christian may do all those things, but that essentially isn't what a Christian is.

HOLY JOE



You may have sung the great old hymn "Amazing Grace". Well, the word "grace" actually means "unmerited love". In other words, God loved us even before we loved Him, and if eternal life is a gift (something that you cannot work for) then, as with all gifts, we can either receive it or reject it.

Our lives have been spared by Jesus taking our punishment.



**God didn't
make us
PUPPETS.
He gave us all
the CHOICE
to love and
accept or to
dismiss and
reject him**

**Our sin gets in
the way.**

All this makes sense when we understand what the Bible says about humans.

Firstly, the Bible says that every person who was ever born is a sinner. Many are often shocked when I tell them this, for many have a limited understanding of what sin really is. Some think of sin only in terms of gross wrongs, such as murder, rape, burglary, etc, even people who do not live particularly good lives often excuse their sin, by saying such things as, "I'm only human after all", or "I'm not hurting anyone".



God's standards are far higher than ours. Often we will turn a blind eye to some sins. We will excuse a "white lie" for example. But Jesus said that the person who lusts after another person has already sinned in his mind. In other words, the thoughts and motives are as sinful as the action. When you add such things as jealousy, pride, envy etc. you will see how difficult it is to live up to God's standards.

Someone once put it like this, *"If you only commit 3 sins a day (that is*

in the way that God sees sin) you would be a walking angel. But that would mean a 1000 sins a year, and if we lived to 70 it would mean 70000 sins for a walking angel !!!"



So often people compare themselves with other people. The result is, they don't fare too badly. In fact, by those standards the majority do quite well. After all, most of us aren't hardened criminals, but quite good people really. But God doesn't compare us with each other. We are measured against God's absolute holiness.

Compared with God we all look pretty murky! The Bible says, "*All have sinned*". (Romans 3v23). In school, when we did exams, the pass mark was normally 50%, but God's pass mark is 100%.

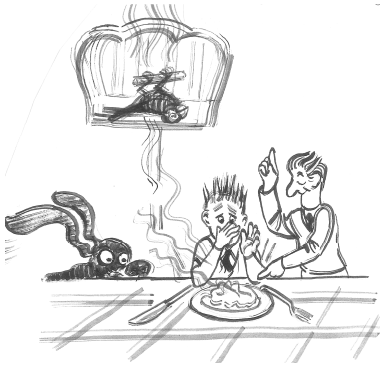
Another example would be if we were trapped on the top of a cliff and the only chance of escape we had would be to jump onto another cliff. I say to you that I would be able to only get half way across by jumping. It would be absolutely futile for you to say, "I can do better than that, I can get 3/4 the way across". Comparing ourselves with others is exactly the same - we still fall short!



Incidentally, would you agree that the greatest sin is to break the greatest commandment? Do you know what the greatest commandment is? Jesus was asked this same question. He replied, "*To love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*" (Mark12v30). I know that there have been many times

when that wasn't the case in my life. The greatest sin is to leave God out of our lives and to place ourselves in the driving seat wanting to run our own lives. The second thing that we need to know about ourselves is that not one of us can save ourselves. The Bible also says that "*Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just*

-- one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (James 2v10)



You may find that difficult to understand, but let me explain. Suppose you came to my house and we decided to have scrambled eggs. I broke the first egg and it had obviously gone off, because of an obnoxious smell that came from the mixing bowl. Knowing this, I still went on to mix 4 other good eggs in the same bowl and I said to you, "Don't worry, it's only *one* egg that has gone off!" I'm sure that you wouldn't be too impressed! The same is true in our lives. It's no good for us to come before God and say "Four parts of my life are good - I only have a problem in this area". God can't stand sin, and our sin is worse than a bad smell to Him.

It seems a hopeless situation that all of us have missed the mark and come short of God's standards. Is there any hope for us? Where is the good news?

Love and Justice

Before getting too despondent there are things we must know about God.

In all other religions it is a case of man looking for God, but Christianity is the other way round - it is God looking for man! To understand what Christianity or the Bible is all about we must understand something about the nature of God. If God was only a God of love, but not justice, then everyone would go to heaven. If

God was just, without love, then everyone would go to hell. But the Bible says that God is both loving and just. God is loving in that He doesn't want anyone to be punished, (see 2 Peter 3v9) but because He is just, He always has to do the 'fair' thing in punishing sin.

There was a village of Indians who were ruled by their chief. One day someone came in to the chief's tent and reported that chickens had been stolen. The chief pronounced that they would receive 10 lashes of the whip when they were caught. The stealing continued, so he commanded that the person, once caught, would receive 20 lashes of the whip. To cut a long story short, the stealing continued until the punishment was 100 lashes, which meant certain death for the culprit. Soon after this the culprit was caught. To the chief's horror, it was his own mother. What was he going to do? Was he going to show mercy because it was his own mother whom he loved

Dilemma



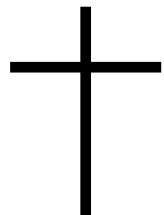
Solution



dearly, or was he going to show justice and uphold the law that he had made? God had a similar dilemma, for God loved the world and didn't want to punish it, but God had given His law which men and women had rebelled against.

The village was intrigued at what the chief was going to do. So when it came to the day of sentence everyone was present. The crowd gasped when the chief had his mother tied to the whipping post. He handed the whip to the young Indian brave who caught her red-

Love and
Justice



handed. The chief himself walked over to his mother, took off his shirt, wrapped his arms around her, bearing his own back, and ordered that the whipping commence. The chief showed love and justice at the same time. He upheld the law that had been given and showed mercy to his mother. Her life was spared by her son taking the punishment.

That is precisely what God did for us. God had to punish sin, but because of His love for us, took the punishment Himself. It wasn't an accident or a mistake that God made when Jesus died on the cross, but it was the very reason for which He came in the first place.

God's answer

Jesus is the only perfect person to ever walk this earth. The Bible tells us that Jesus was fully man at the same time as being fully God. Jesus paid our penalty and took our punishment as the Indian chief did for his mother.

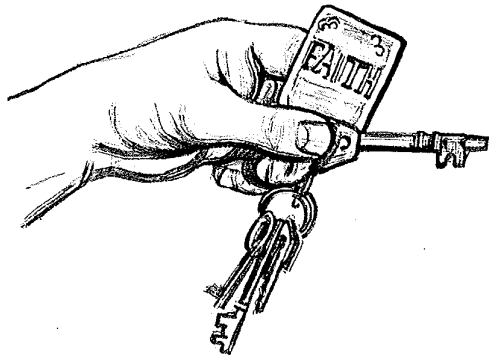
The Bible tells us that, *"We like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on Him (Jesus) the iniquity (sin) of us all."* (Isaiah 53v6)

You may be asking the question, "If Jesus died to take the punishment of mankind, does that mean that all people everywhere will one day go to heaven?". No! The Bible says that, *"God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3v16)

In another place, the Bible says, *"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith."* (Ephesians 2v8). What does this mean?

I locked my keys in my car on one occasion several years ago. I was desperate as the spare set was some 40 miles away at my parents' house. What could I do? I had no idea how to pick the lock. I certainly didn't want to smash the window of the car. So I decided to ask a local second hand car dealer if he would provide me with a bunch of keys. He generously granted my request. After about 20 attempts I found a key

that fitted. All the keys, except one were wrong. The same is true of heaven. Many people try to get in with the wrong keys. What sort of wrong keys do we use? Let me list a few: good works; charitable deeds; religion; born in Britain - a 'Christian'



country; read the Bible and pray occasionally. The only one that will fit, is the one with the word 'FAITH' on it.

Let me just tell you what faith isn't, before I tell you what it is. Faith isn't some

leap into the dark, trying to bring yourself to believe something that isn't true. Faith isn't just believing that God is there, or that He created the world. The Bible tells us the demons of hell "believe" in Jesus, (see James 2v19), that is they believe all the right things about Jesus, but don't worship Him as Lord. Faith is not some head-knowledge alone, although faith starts with our understanding.

KNOWING THE RIGHT FACTS ISN'T ENOUGH!

Have you got your ticket for heaven?

True saving faith is to trust Jesus Christ alone for your ticket to heaven. I've already said how Jesus died for every person in the world. But we must now do something with this information. Suppose you were at Tamworth Railway Station, and you wanted to go



to Birmingham. The Birmingham train pulls up at the station. You know it is the right train. You know the time it is going to leave. You know what time it is going to get to Birmingham. But, unless you get on the train, you are not going to get to your destination. All your head knowledge will amount to nothing. You must act upon what you know.

The same can be said for a Christian. A Christian is one who



not only knows the right facts about what the Bible says, but one who has acted upon that information. A person can have all sorts of views about religion, Jesus, God, morality and the church. But unless those views reflect what Jesus actually taught, then that person would be most misguided to think of himself as a Christian.

The word 'Christian' is totally tied up with 'Christ'. What is the central core of what Jesus taught? "FOLLOW ME!"

A Christian is someone who has Jesus as the undisputed boss of his life.

What about you?

What must I do?

Remember ... **A,B,C**

A - Admit that you have 'missed the mark' with God and that you are ready and willing to turn away from all that is dishonouring to God.

B - Believe that the only way to get right with God, and eventually get to heaven, is through Jesus Christ (God's only provision for salvation).

C - Commit yourself to following Him, that is, not just on Sunday but every other day as well. It is important to recognise you are now under 'new management.' Your new 'Boss' is God.

If you mean business, then God is now only a prayer away. Why not take that step right now? You might find this prayer helpful:

Dear God

I admit I am a sinner and need your forgiveness; I believe that Jesus Christ died in my place paying the penalty for my sins; I am willing right now to turn from my sin and accept Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord. I commit myself to you and ask you to send the Holy Spirit into my life, to fill me and take control, and help me become the kind of person you want me to be.

Thank you Father for loving me,

In Jesus' name,

Amen

If you have sincerely prayed that prayer then God says that He will forgive your sins and give your life a brand new start and a clean slate.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5v17)

Consider other things God wants you to know:

- † All those who trust Jesus Christ, God's Son to save them, have eternal life. (John 3v36)
- † "Anyone that calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10v13)
- † God has said, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13v5) "I give to them eternal life and they shall never perish, no-one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10v28)
- † "To all who receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God." (John 1v12)

What happens now?

Someone once said, "The best way to keep your faith is to give it away". In the next 24 hours tell someone, who you know is a Christian, of your decision to follow Christ. This will do you good and confirm your new found faith. (It will also undoubtedly encourage the person you tell !)

Try reading the Bible. See it as God's love-letter to you. Why not read one of the Gospels? (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John). These are biographies of Jesus. Before you start reading, ask God to help you understand the passages you read.

Take time to talk to God. All relationships need to be cultivated. If you stop talking to a friend the relationship dies. We need to make sure we cultivate our relationship with God. There are different sorts of prayers you can pray. The letters of the word **ACTS** may help you:

A - Adore.... God is great and does great things. He saved you! Tell Him how much you appreciated Him. (Read Psalm 139)

C - Confess.... Confess your sin. Don't forget that God longs to forgive you, but only if you are repentant. (Repentance means turning away from the past.)

T - Thanks.... God is good to us. Think about His goodness to you and thank Him.

S - Supplication.... This means bringing your heart-felt needs to God and asking Him to meet them.

Find a good, Bible believing church where you can be both encouraged by other Christians and where you can use the gifts and abilities that God has given you. (See Hebrews 10v24, 25). Be a worker, not a spectator.

For further help, advice or information, please contact:

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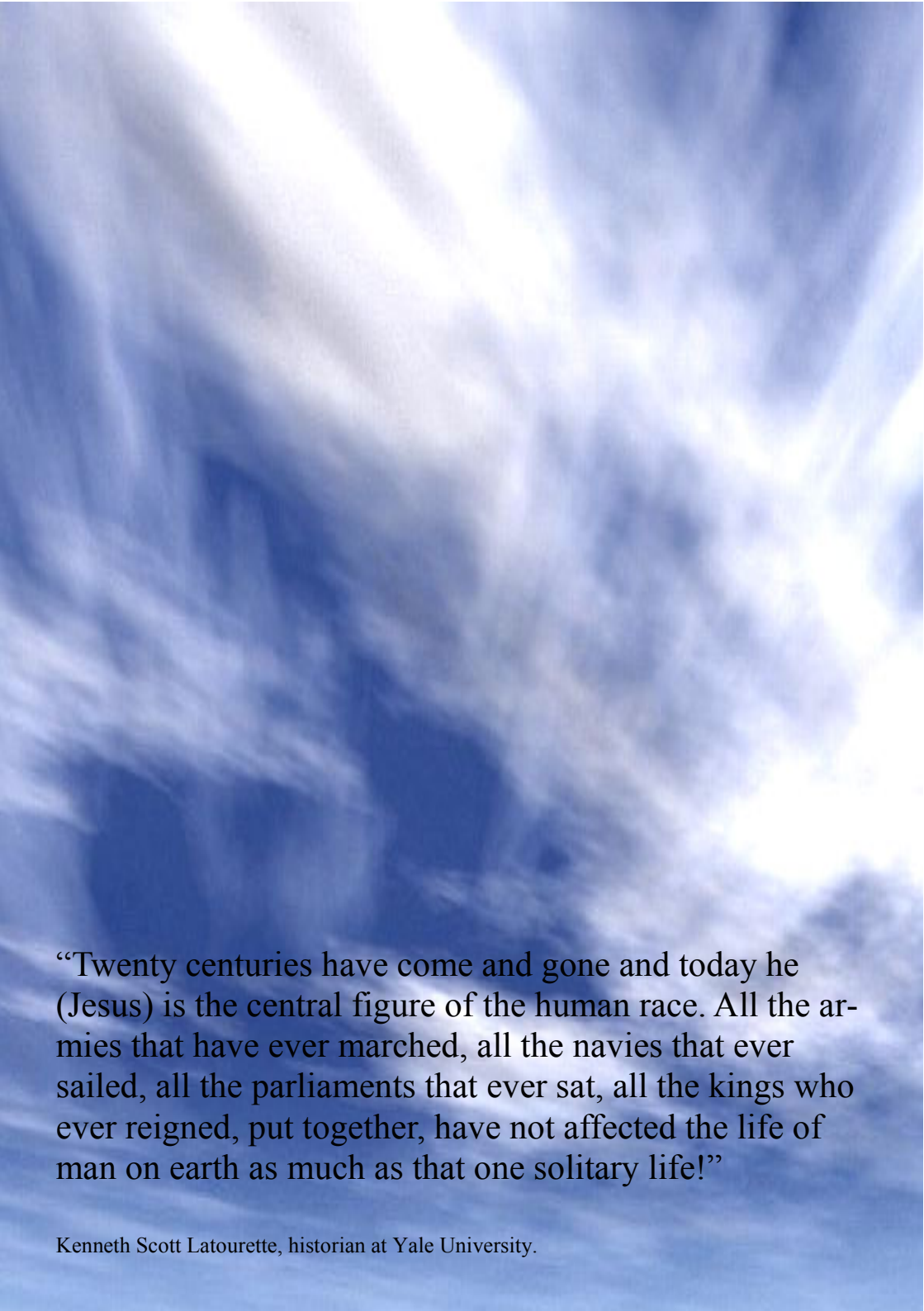
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Notes



“Twenty centuries have come and gone and today he (Jesus) is the central figure of the human race. All the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings who ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on earth as much as that one solitary life!”

Kenneth Scott Latourette, historian at Yale University.