

Discovering Christianity Today

The great 20th century preacher Billy Graham recounts an incident that occurred when he was flying across the USA one day. A very large man in the row in front of him was drinking too much and becoming more and more noisy. After a while he began to make advances to the female cabin staff as they passed in the aisle. Eventually the attendant in charge, somewhat in desperation, said to him “Would you mind quietening down; you know the passenger in the seat behind you is Dr Billy Graham.” At this the large drunken figure hauled himself unsteadily to his feet, turned round, stuck out his hand, and said “Gee, I’m sure glad to meet you; your sermons have been such a help to me in my life.”

This is one of the stories Billy Graham tells against himself but of course it makes a very serious point: no man, no preacher, however famous or eloquent, can change the inward quality of another man’s life. The heart of a man needs superhuman or divine power to reform it.

Each of us comes face to face more often than we like to admit with the fact that our lives are not what they were meant to be. Many years ago there was a correspondence in the Times of London under the title “*What is wrong with the World?*” After several dozen contributions, the shortest letter of all was published. It read “*Dear Sir, I am. Yours*

etc. GK Chesterton.” Once we accept that, we must inevitably realise that it needs a power outside ourselves to change us.

An Old Fiddle and a Modern Airliner

In the early 20th century a sale of valuable musical instruments was held at Sotheby’s auction rooms in London. One item in the catalogue was a most unusual violin made by the most distinguished of craftsmen. It was given a high reserve price; but when it came under the hammer the bidding was disappointing. It hadn’t been well looked after; it was shabby in appearance and the bidders were suspicious of its pedigree. The auctioneer was about to withdraw it when an old man got up from the back and came slowly forward on his stick. Reaching the front he took up the fiddle and bow and began to play. The sale room filled with the most beautiful melodies. A whisper went round, “Paganini”. When the maestro had returned to his seat the bidding resumed and the reserve price was exceeded many times over. What did the violin need to bring out its true potential? It needed the master’s touch. Each of us was made by a master craftsman but we have become spoiled by our disobedience to that Master. We were made in the image of God but our sinfulness has marred that image. Like the violin, to achieve our true potential we need the Master’s touch. Only the transforming touch of Jesus can change us.

Let me give another illustration. I remember well the first time I flew in the Rolls-Royce Tristar jet. It was one of the first three-engined passenger planes, one engine under each wing and one in the tail. My wife and I were flying from Malta to London up the coast of Italy in most beautiful weather. When the Alps began to appear up ahead the cabin attendant suggested that we might like to visit the cockpit. It was long before the time when terrorism and hijackings put an end to such courtesies. In the course of a most fascinating chat about the new plane, I asked the captain what would happen if one engine were to fail. “Oh, you’d hardly notice it,” he said, “our speed would decrease slightly and we would ask permission to fly at a lower altitude, but I doubt whether the passengers would be aware anything had happened.” And then he added, “Of course it would be a different story if we hit turbulence or strong head winds.”

I was due to preach at a boys’ school the next day and as I walked back to my seat it hit me in a flash that I had the perfect illustration for that particular audience. We are all like the Tristar – made to fly on three engines. We are built of three parts, body, mind and spirit. Most of us are good at looking after our bodies and our minds but so often the most important engine – the one up in the centre in the tail – is neglected or even ignored. The fact that the spiritual engine is not working may go unnoticed so much of the time; but when we hit the turbulence and storms of life, that is when it is missed. And that is when others can pick out

the person who is living as the Creator made him to live, upheld by an inward source of power and peace.

What is your Goal?

As you read my booklet today, may I ask: What is your goal in life? Is it perhaps financial success with a happy family life thrown in? Early retirement with a comfortable home, two cars, and an adequate bank balance under your belt? In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells the story of a man whose business prospered so much that he said to himself, "Man, you have ample goods laid up for many years, take your ease, eat, drink and be merry." But that same night God intervened and the man came face to face with Him. If you were to die tonight could you confidently say, "I know that I have eternal life. I know that I belong to Christ. I know that the whole question of my sin in the sight of a Holy God is settled." Or would you perhaps be frightened? The celebrated philosopher and atheist Voltaire on his deathbed cried, "A million of money for a moment of time."

A Famous Verse

'For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

John 3.16 is perhaps the most famous Bible verse. To many it has been the first step on the road to discovering Christianity. The promise of eternal life, full forgiveness of

sin, and peace with God for this life and the next is available to everyone who will believe in Jesus.

But what does it mean to believe in Him? To believe *in* someone is a great deal more than to believe *about* him. Certainly we begin by believing about Him; that is believing the simple historical facts that are found in the Gospels and amongst the other historians of the first century. A man called Jesus undoubtedly lived in Palestine at that time. He did remarkable things; He spoke astonishing words; He died a cruel death at the hands of the Roman governor of the day. No student of history can doubt these facts.

But we are driven to believe too that He rose from the dead after crucifixion. The *evidence for the resurrection* is overwhelming, so much so that a former Lord Chief Justice of England used to say that no jury properly directed could fail to find the resurrection of Jesus proved beyond a reasonable doubt. The fact of the empty tomb is a compelling piece of evidence. Both the Jewish authorities and the Roman militia were desperate to disprove the resurrection and yet they were quite unable to produce a body. Every attempt to disprove the resurrection has ultimately foundered on this touchstone.

Then there is the fact of the astonishing change of eleven demoralised disciples into a fighting body of men who, faced with horrible persecution and successive martyrdoms,

nevertheless carried the news of the risen Lord to the four corners of the first century world.

Believing *in* Jesus Christ : The Cross

We must believe these facts *about* Jesus but we must go further and believe *in* Him. That means accepting by faith, however small, that he is the God-man, and He died on the cross in my place taking the punishment that I deserved. In the Old Testament Isaiah writes

**We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the sin of us all.
(Isaiah 53. 5&6)**

Isaiah 53 is a remarkable prophecy about the death of Christ on the cross that was to take place some 600 years later. If you doubt this statement get hold of a Bible and read it. You will see that in the most graphic way a death by crucifixion is described. – and the description of the victim is such that in the light of history it could only be Jesus Christ. Isaiah says that God in heaven laid on Jesus Christ the sin of each of us while He hung on that cross. But why? Why did Jesus Christ have to suffer this macabre death? Was it not simply a terrible miscarriage of justice and nothing more?

I practised as an advocate in Britain for 20 years. During that time I often appeared in the criminal courts either for

the prosecution or defence. I also sat for some years as a part-time judge trying accused persons and passing sentence on those convicted. The law would very quickly fall into disrepute if, when a verdict of guilty was brought in, the offence was passed over by the judge. Justice demands that a punishment should be imposed to meet the crime. God is all-loving, but also all-just; and His justice demanded that sin should not go unpunished. So it was that a penalty had to be paid for the sin that had estranged us from God. It was a terrible divine dilemma. Either man was to pay his own penalty and be separated forever from God; or somebody else suitably qualified must be found to pay the penalty instead. So it was that God's love devised the *greatest rescue plan* of all time.

God decided to send the one person who would qualify to take the punishment in our place; no mere man could qualify since each deserved to die for his own sin. And so the Lord Jesus Christ came from heaven's highest glory, was born in Bethlehem's stable, lived a perfect life without sin, and after 33 years was nailed to a cross thus taking the punishment for all sin.

Repenting of my Sin

Do you begin to see how serious sin is in the sight of a Holy God? Do you think that God would have sent His only Son from the palace of heaven to the mud-hut of earth to suffer such a terrible death, if there had been any other way

to deal with the problem of sin? That leads us to the other great Bible word that is always linked to '**Believe**'. When Jesus began his preaching by the Sea of Galilee he proclaimed:

The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. REPENT and believe the good news! (Mark 1.15).

On the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus, and when the people asked 'What shall we do?' he declared:

REPENT and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2.38)

When Paul was defending himself before King Agrippa he declared:

I preached that they should REPENT and turn to God and prove their REPENTANCE by their deeds. (Acts 26.20)

Clearly we have to take **Repentance** seriously. It means doing a 180 degree turn in our attitude to God. As best I know how, and in the strength God promises to give me when He enters my life by His Holy Spirit, I must turn from going my own way and begin going God's way. The Greek word translated **repentance** literally means **changing one's mind**. The Anglican Prayer Book provides a very helpful explanation of repentance:

If we are to turn to God in true penitence, we must be cut to the heart (Acts 2.37). There must be sorrow and a desire to amend. We must be willing to accept the fact and gravity of sin with no attempt to conceal it. Furthermore there must be a desire to live the new life in Christ.

You say, ‘I could never keep it up.’ You are right. Our lives are filled with broken ‘new resolutions’. But once I come to Christ He offers me a new power to do what is right. Imagine the gloves of one of the great boxing heavy-weight champions. Take one of the gloves and swing it by its laces; it would hardly swat a fly. But put the owner’s fist in the glove and it becomes an immensely effective weapon! So with us; alone I am no match for temptation. With Christ inside me I am a new and very different person.

Coming to Jesus

Jesus followed up his commands to **Repent** and **Believe** with the invitation:

COME, follow me. (Mark 1.17)

Those three wonderful steps – **REPENT-BELIEVE-COME** – are the route to the Kingdom of Heaven. If you can take the first two, then you are ready to accept the invitation to come. When you come to Jesus, He comes to you.

Jesus is standing outside the door of your life impatient to come in by His Holy Spirit. He has been waiting perhaps 10 years, perhaps even as much as 40 or 50 years. Now that you have heard Him, His knocking becomes particularly insistent. This is how the apostle John saw it in his dream:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in. (Revelation 3.20)

Notice that the invitation is to *any man*, but notice also that the door must be opened from the *inside*. In a famous painting depicting this verse the artist Holman Hunt shows Jesus wearing a crown of thorns and a purple robe standing, knocking, outside the door of a dilapidated cottage. The door is overgrown with creeper because it has been shut for so long. There is no handle on the outside. Hunt explained that this was no mistake. Jesus will never force Himself upon us. He waits for us to open the door and invite Him in.

How do I invite Him in? It does not require any special form of words. A simple prayer in the silence of my heart will be enough to elicit an immediate response. For example:

Lord Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross, taking the punishment for my sin in my place. I repent of my sin; I turn from my way and in your strength I want to go your way from this day on. I come to you; please come into my heart and take your place as my Saviour, my Lord and my friend.

Once you have invited Him in, however few or many your words, once you have made that wholehearted unreserved commitment that is the essence of repenting and believing in Jesus, then you can be sure He has entered by the person of His Holy Spirit. Look again at Revelation 3.20. The promise is quite unconditional. Jesus does *not* say, ‘I might come in’ or ‘I will come in if you turn over a new leaf’. He knows you have been trying to turn over a new leaf for far too long! When He comes in you experience God’s new birth and become a new person!

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5.17)

Postscript

Having taken that vital step, you may well be saying to yourself, ‘Well, I don’t feel any different.’ That does not matter. ***Faith depends on facts, not feelings.*** Trust the promises of God. “My Master is a gentleman who never breaks His word” wrote African explorer and missionary, David Livingstone. On more than one occasion when travelling from one country to another by car I have been struck by how similar the new country is to the old. Initially, the scenery, the people and even the place names are so much the same. I could easily be deceived into thinking I had not crossed the border if I relied upon my feelings. But the stamps in my passport are facts telling me otherwise. So with beginning the Christian life; the

Christian family likeness comes gradually; unlike natural birth where a family likeness may be evident immediately. But we can rely from the first moment of spiritual life on the Master's promises; the feeling of peace and assurance will soon follow.

Or perhaps you are asking, "Well, what do I do now?" Find other Christians and join them in friendship and fellowship. Tell them about your new discovery. Don't keep it secret! But most important of all, get yourself a Bible in a modern translation and start reading it. Start with one of the Gospels. The Bible is God's living word, and once we have the Holy Spirit in us, the pages will light up. It will become a treasure chest relevant and meaningful to everyday life.

Then start to pray. The essence of any friendship is two-way communication. Jesus speaks to us through the Bible; we respond in prayer. Talk to Him quite naturally. Call Him by His own personal name, Jesus; but call Him **Lord Jesus** because He is Lord as well as friend. Tell Him your misgivings, your joys and your fears. Tell Him your day to day needs, and ask Him to teach you more and more about Himself. He is worth getting to know!

Here is a prayer you might like to use regularly:

Day by day, Lord Jesus, of you three things I pray
To see you more clearly, to follow you more nearly
And to love you more dearly. Amen

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