

“John Stott’s *Basic Christianity* is a simple, clear, deep explanation of our faith. I am so grateful for the lucid elegance of this invitation to follow Jesus.”

John Ortberg, teaching pastor, Menlo Church, author of *Eternity Is Now in Session*

“‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ and ‘What does it mean to follow him?’ These are the basic questions that need to be first sincerely asked and then meaningfully answered. They are the fundamental questions the Gospels ask and to which they give the perfect answer. From Augustine to Bonhoeffer, from *The Confessions* to *The Cost of Discipleship*, great theologians with pastors’ hearts have asked and answered these two basic questions for their own age. In our time, it has been John Stott and his *Basic Christianity*.”

Michael Card, musician, author of *Inexpressible*

“Anything John Stott says is worth listening to. Anything he writes is worth reading. *Basic Christianity* is not only a classic must-read for every believer, it is truly a blessing preserved on the written page for the enrichment of this generation and those to come.”

Anne Graham Lotz, author of *Just Give Me Jesus*

“We can thank God that in the past few years those committed to Christian orthodoxy have been realizing the importance of the subjective and experiential aspects of the Christian gospel and using these in introducing Christianity to others. But the danger is that we can get so carried away by this that we forget the heart of what Christianity is all about. At such times it is good to go back to tried and tested expositions that have stood the test of time. And what better resource is there for this than John Stott’s classic *Basic Christianity*?”

Ajith Fernando, teaching director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka

“I first read *Basic Christianity* as a new Christian in college. I feasted on every word. The blend of head and heart, soul and strength, marks me to this day. It provided a rudder of truth that would long keep me on course amid the gale-force winds of our day. Later in life, when I had the opportunity of meeting the author, the book took on an even richer texture—for it was clear that the words of the book were a reflection of the life that he led. I cannot commend this book, or the life behind it, highly enough.”

James Emery White, author of *Serious Times*

“[This slim volume] has introduced more people to Christ than any book I know other than the Bible.”

James W. Sire, author of *The Universe Next Door*

“This was the classic forerunner of strong, balanced evangelistic books, and I am delighted it is being republished. . . . It led many to faith then, and it will again.”

Michael Green, former senior research fellow at Wycliffe Hall, author of *Who Is This Jesus?*

“John Stott’s books have helped millions around the world to a better understanding of the Christian faith. I, for one, am extremely grateful for the way in which he explains complex and difficult issues with great clarity, insight and wisdom. *Basic Christianity* has become a classic of our time.”

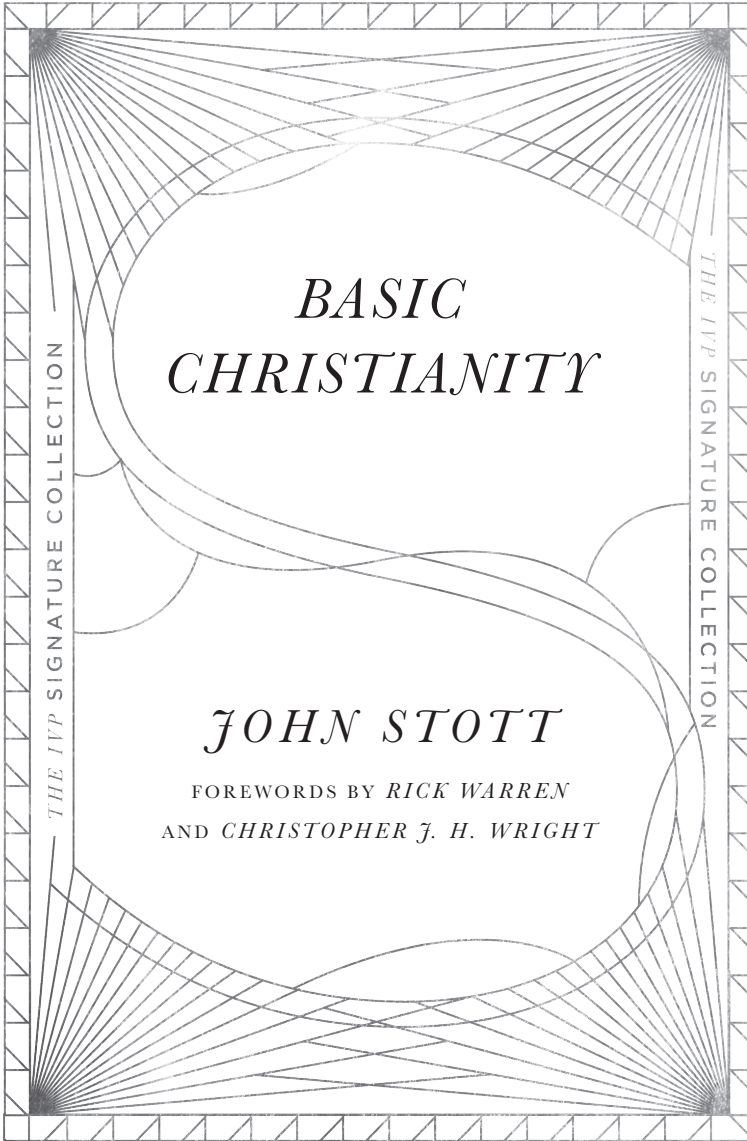
Nicky Gumbel, vicar, Holy Trinity Brompton, and pioneer of the Alpha course

“Lucid, clear and compelling. After *Mere Christianity*, perhaps no other book has helped more people come to faith. I’m thrilled that this classic has been appropriately shaped and refreshed for a modern audience without losing any of its timeless charm and persuasive brilliance. Having led and organized university missions for over twenty-five years, I was sobered to be reminded of what a debt we all owe to this book and its author. ‘Christ is Christianity,’ and no other book exemplifies a Christ-centered apologetic more simply and clearly.”

Richard Cunningham, director, UCCF: The Christian Unions

“Its uncompromising clarity, intelligent logic, and easy application make this one of the most enduring of Christian classics. In a time of ambiguity and confusion I can think of no other book I would rather recommend. Every evangelist should consider *Basic Christianity* a master class in communicating the gospel. This book is a must-read for those who are seeking God or wishing to refresh their own faith, or for those who hope to lead others into the loving arms of Jesus Christ.”

William Van der Hart, evangelist and pastor, Central London



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Contents

<i>Foreword to the Signature Edition by Christopher J. H. Wright</i>	7
<i>Foreword by Rick Warren</i>	11
<i>Preface</i>	13
1 The Right Approach	17
PART ONE: WHO CHRIST IS	
2 The Claims of Christ	29
3 The Character of Christ	45
4 The Resurrection of Christ	57
PART TWO: WHAT WE NEED	
5 The Fact and Nature of Sin	75
6 The Consequences of Sin	87
PART THREE: WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE	
7 The Death of Christ	101
8 The Salvation of Christ	119
PART FOUR: HOW TO RESPOND	
9 Counting the Cost	131
10 Reaching a Decision	145
11 Being a Christian	155
<i>Study Questions</i>	169
<i>John Stott: A Timeline</i>	175

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In the USA, the national member of the Langham Partnership International is John Stott Ministries. Visit the JSM website at www.johnstott.org.

Foreword to the Signature Edition

CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT

ON A NUMBER OF OCCASIONS, in the ten years that we worked together before his death in 2011, I would hear someone ask John Stott what he considered to be his most significant book. His consistent reply was *The Cross of Christ*. There is no doubt he poured his heart, mind and soul into that classic work. It is a monument to his most mature biblical and theological reflection and his most thorough scholarly research and engagement. And by his own request, his tombstone bears his personal testimony (in conscious reflection of the epitaph of his hero, Charles Simeon): “who resolved, both as the ground of his salvation and as the subject of his ministry, to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” That book leads its many readers into the depths of that profound, grace-filled and heart-warming relationship with the crucified and risen Christ that characterized John himself.

And yet an uncountably greater number of people would testify that it is *this* book—one of his earliest—that led them to the cross of Christ in the first place, and into the joy of salvation and new life in Christ. Wherever I go around the world, if word escapes that I

work for Langham Partnership, founded by John Stott, somebody will come up to say that they came to faith in Christ through reading *Basic Christianity*—in one of the myriad languages into which it has been translated. It would be a fascinating statistic (known only to God, of course) whether the number of people who have come to Christian faith through reading this book is greater or less than the number who responded to his evangelistic preaching in those fifty or so university missions that he conducted around the world—not to mention his years of faithfully preaching the gospel at All Souls, Langham Place, in London and leading that church in pioneering methods of parish evangelism and discipling (a tradition which, since it is now my own home church, I can confirm strongly continues).

For John Stott was at heart an evangelist. Of course, he was passionate about many things, as is evident in the enormous legacy he left through his leadership of the Lausanne Movement, his personal investment in students and young people through IFES and SU, his strong advocacy for creation care and the work of A Rocha, his belief in the culturally transformative power of Christians in the “secular” arena and professions through his founding of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, and his loving response to the Majority World church and its need for equipping and resources, leading him to found the ministries that combine in the Langham Partnership.

But at heart? Yes, an evangelist, from his personal meeting with Christ as a teenager to his deathbed. I remember visiting him not long before his death, when he was greatly reduced in strength and mobility. It was an afternoon. And with obvious joy in his eyes he told me how he had got into conversation with the woman caregiver who was wheeling him back to his room after lunch, “and I was able to share the way of salvation with her,” he concluded.

Which is what he does in this book, though at greater length, no doubt, than he was able to muster in that short journey after lunch. He shares the way of salvation. God’s way. The way opened up for us

by Jesus of Nazareth, in his life, death and resurrection. The way that John Stott himself took and that has now taken him into the presence of the Jesus he loved and will love for all eternity.

All that John would wish for those who read his book in this new edition would be the same: that they would come to understand what the Christian faith is all about, to begin a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ himself, and to start walking in that way that leads to eternal life.

Foreword

RICK WARREN

THERE ARE A FEW LANDMARK BOOKS THAT everyone in the world should read. This is one of the rare few.

In the twenty-first century, you cannot afford to ignore this book! Whether you are a skeptic, raised in another faith, a spiritual seeker or a Christian believer, you need to know why 2.3 billion people call themselves “Christians.” You need to know what they believe and why they believe it.

This book is especially essential for leaders in business, government, academics, media, entertainment, journalism and other fields that work directly with people. To be able to have an intelligent conversation with one-third of our world’s population, you need to understand their worldview.

John Stott’s *Basic Christianity* is a classic introduction to the faith that has transformed billions of lives.

Preface

“HOSTILE TO THE CHURCH, FRIENDLY TO JESUS CHRIST.” These words describe large numbers of people, especially young people, today.

They are opposed to anything that looks like an institution. They cannot stand the establishment and its entrenched privileges. And they reject the church—not without some justification—because they see it as hopelessly corrupted by such evils.

Yet what they have rejected is the contemporary church, not Jesus Christ himself. It is precisely because they see a contradiction between the founder of Christianity and the current state of the church he founded that they are so critical and hold back. The person and teaching of Jesus have not lost their appeal, however. For one thing, he was himself an anti-establishment figure, and some of his words had revolutionary overtones. His ideals appear to have been entirely honorable. He breathed love and peace wherever he went. And, for another thing, he always practiced what he preached.

But was he *true*?

An appreciable number of people throughout the world are still brought up in Christian homes where the truth of Christ and of Christianity is assumed. But when their critical faculties develop and they begin to think for themselves, they find it easier to discard the religion

of their childhood than to make the effort and investigate whether or not it is true.

Very many others do not grow up in a Christian environment. Instead they absorb the teaching of Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, or ways of thinking that have no room for God at all.

Yet both groups, if and when they read about Jesus, find that he holds a fascination they cannot easily escape.

So our starting point is the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. He certainly existed. There can be no reasonable doubt about that. His existence as an historical figure is vouched for by pagan as well as Christian writers.

And whatever else may be said about him, he was also very much a human being. He was born, he grew, he worked and sweated, rested and slept, he ate and drank, suffered and died like other people. He had a real human body and real human emotions.

But can we really believe that he was also in some sense “God”? Isn’t the deity of Jesus a rather picturesque Christian superstition? Is there any evidence for this amazing Christian assertion that the carpenter of Nazareth was the unique Son of God?

This question is fundamental. We cannot dodge it. We must be honest. If Jesus was not God in human flesh, then Christianity is thoroughly discredited. We are left with just another religion with some beautiful ideas and noble ethics; its unique distinctiveness is gone.

But there *is* evidence for the deity of Jesus—good, strong, historical, cumulative evidence; evidence to which an honest person can subscribe without committing intellectual suicide. There are the extravagant claims that Jesus made for himself, so bold and yet so unassuming. Then there is his unique character. His strength and gentleness, his uncompromising righteousness and tender compassion, his care for children and his love for those at the margins, his self-mastery and self-sacrifice have won the admiration of the world. What is more, his cruel death was not the end of him. It is claimed that he rose again

from death, and the circumstantial evidence for his resurrection is most compelling.

But suppose Jesus was the Son of God—is basic Christianity merely an acceptance of this fact? No. Once persuaded of who he is, we must examine what he came to do. What did he intend to achieve? The Bible's answer is that he “came into the world to save sinners.” Jesus of Nazareth is the heaven-sent Rescuer who we all need. We need to be forgiven and brought into friendship with the all-holy God, from whom our sins have separated us. We need to be set free from our selfishness and given strength to live up to our ideals. We need to learn to love one another, friend and enemy alike. This is the meaning of what we call “salvation.” This is what Christ came to win for us by his death and resurrection.

So is basic Christianity the belief that Jesus is the Son of God who came to be the Savior of the world? No, it is not even that. To accept that he is divine, to acknowledge our need of salvation, and to believe in the effectiveness of what he did for us are still not enough. Christianity is not just about what we *believe*; it's also about how we *behave*. Our intellectual belief may be beyond criticism; but we have to put our beliefs into practice.

What then must we do? We must commit ourselves, heart and mind, soul and will, home and life, personally and unreservedly to Jesus Christ. We must humble ourselves before him. We must trust in him as *our* Savior and submit to him as *our* Lord; and then go on to take our place as loyal members of the church and responsible citizens in the community.

This is basic Christianity, the theme of this book. But before we start by looking at the evidence for Jesus Christ being divine, we need to pause in order to reflect on the right approach to take. The Christian claim is that we can find God in Jesus Christ. Examining this claim will be much more straightforward when we realize, first, that God is himself seeking us and second, that we must ourselves seek God.

1

The Right Approach

“IN THE BEGINNING GOD.” The first four words of the Bible are more than a way of launching the story of creation or introducing the book of Genesis. They supply the key that opens our understanding to the Bible as a whole. They tell us that the religion of the Bible is a religion in which God takes the initiative.

The point is that we can never take God by surprise. We can never anticipate him. He always makes the first move. He is always there “in the beginning.” Before we existed, God took action. Before we decided to look for God, God had already been looking for us. The Bible isn’t about people trying to discover God but about God reaching out to find us.

Many people imagine God sitting comfortably on a distant throne, remote, aloof, uninterested, a God who doesn’t really care for our needs and needs to be badgered into taking action on our behalf. Such a view is completely wrong. The Bible reveals a God who, long before it even occurs to men and women to turn to him, while they are still lost in darkness and sunk in sin, takes the initiative, rises from his throne, lays aside his glory, and stoops to seek until he finds them.

This sovereign, forward-looking activity of God is seen in many ways. He has taken the initiative in *creation*, bringing the universe and

everything in it into existence: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” He has taken the initiative in what we call *revelation*, making known both his nature and his will to humanity: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” He has taken the initiative in the rescue operation of *salvation*, coming in Jesus Christ to set men and women free from their sins: “God . . . has come and has redeemed his people.”¹

God has created. God has spoken. God has acted. These statements of God’s initiative in three different areas form a summary of the religion of the Bible. It is with the second and third that we shall be concerned in this book, because basic Christianity by definition begins with the historical figure of Jesus Christ. If God has spoken, his last and greatest word to the world is Jesus Christ. If God has acted, his noblest act is the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ.

God has spoken and acted in Jesus Christ. He has said something. He has done something. This means that Christianity is not just pious talk. It is neither a collection of religious ideas nor a catalog of rules. It is a “gospel” (i.e., good news)—in the apostle Paul’s words “the gospel of God . . . regarding his Son . . . Jesus Christ our Lord.”² It is not primarily an invitation for us to do anything; it is supremely a declaration of what God has done in Christ for human beings like ourselves.

GOD HAS SPOKEN

Human beings are insatiably inquisitive creatures. Our minds cannot rest. We are always prying into the unknown. We pursue knowledge with restless energy. Our lives are a voyage of discovery. We are always asking questions, exploring, investigating, researching. We never grow out of the child’s constant cry of “Why?”

When our minds begin to think about God, however, they are be-

¹Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 1:1-2; Luke 1:68.

²Romans 1:1-4.

wildered. We grope around in the dark. We flounder helplessly out of our depth. But this should come as no surprise. For surely God, whatever or whoever he may be, is infinite, while we are finite creatures. He is altogether beyond our understanding. Therefore our minds, wonderfully effective instruments though they are when it comes to scientific investigation, cannot immediately help us here. They cannot reach up into the infinite mind of God. There is no ladder to climb, only a vast, unmeasured gulf. Job, a character in the Bible, is challenged with the question, “Can you find out the deep things of God?” The only answer is “No.” It is impossible.

And that is how it would have stayed had God not taken the initiative to help us. We would have remained forever agnostic, asking—just like Pontius Pilate at the trial of Jesus—“What is truth?” but never staying for an answer, never daring to hope that we would receive one. We would be those who worship, for it is part of human nature to worship someone or something; but all our altars would be like the one the apostle Paul found in Athens, dedicated “To an unknown god.”

But God has spoken. He has taken the initiative to make himself known. The Christian concept of revelation is essentially reasonable. The idea is that God has “unveiled” to our minds what would otherwise have been hidden from them. Part of his revelation is in nature:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

What may be known about God is plain to them (that is, human beings), because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.³

³Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:19-20.

We call this God's "general" revelation (because it is made to all people everywhere) or "natural" revelation (because it is in nature). But it is not sufficient. Yes, it reveals his existence, and gives us hints of his divine power, glory and faithfulness. But if we are to come to know God personally, to have our sins forgiven and to enter into relationship with him, we need something that goes further. We need something that helps us find out how to get to know him for ourselves. God's disclosure of himself needs to include his holiness, his love and his power to save from sin. The wonderful truth is that God gives us this as well. We call this a "special" revelation, because it was made to a special people (the nation of Israel) through special messengers (people who are identified as "prophets" in the Old Testament and "apostles" in the New).

It is also "supernatural," because it was given through a process we call "inspiration," and it found its chief expression in Jesus—in who he is and in what he has done.

The way in which the Bible explains and describes this revelation is simply to say that God has "spoken." Speech is what we ourselves use where we can in order to communicate with one another most straightforwardly. It is by our words that we let others know what is in our minds. This is even more true of God in his desire to reveal his infinite mind to our finite minds. Since, as the prophet Isaiah put it, his thoughts are higher than our thoughts—as much as the heavens are higher than the earth—we could never get to know those thoughts unless he clothed them in words. The way the Bible puts it is that "the word of the Lord came" to many prophets, until at last Jesus Christ came, and "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."⁴

Paul wrote to his Christian friends in the city of Corinth along similar lines: "since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of

⁴John 1:1, 14.

what was preached to save those who believe.” We come to know God not through our own wisdom but through God’s word (identified by Paul here as “what we preach”), not through our human reason but through divine revelation. It is because God has made himself known in Christ that the Christian can boldly go to those who are agnostic or superstitious and say to them, just as Paul did to the Athenians on the Areopagus, “What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”

Much of the controversy between science and religion has arisen through a failure to appreciate this point. Scientific methods are no use when it comes to religion. Scientific knowledge advances through observation and experiment. It works on data supplied to us by our five physical senses. But when we enquire into what lies beyond the observable universe, when we seek to reflect on the metaphysical, there is no data for us to make use of. We cannot touch, see or hear God directly. Yet the Christian Faith is based on the assertion that there once was a time when he chose to speak, and to clothe himself with a body that could be seen and touched. So in the New Testament, John began his first letter with the claim,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched . . . we proclaim also to you.

GOD HAS TAKEN ACTION

The Christian good news is not simply a declaration that God has *said* something. It also affirms that God has *done* something.

God has taken the initiative in both these ways because this is what we need. It isn’t just that we are ignorant but also that we are sinful. This is why it isn’t enough for God simply to reveal himself to us and dispel our ignorance. He must also take action to save us from our sins. He began in Old Testament days. He called Abraham from his

home in Ur, making him and his descendants into a nation, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, entering into a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, leading them across the desert into the promised land, guiding and teaching them as his special people.

All this was by way of preparation for his even greater deed of redemption in Christ. People needed to be delivered, not from slavery in Egypt or from exile in Babylon, but from the bondage and alienation of sin. It was chiefly for this that Jesus Christ came. He came as a Savior.

You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

He was like the shepherd in the parable told by Jesus who missed the only sheep that was lost from the flock and went out to search until he found it.⁵

Christianity is a religion of salvation, and the fact is that there is nothing in any of the non-Christian religions to compare with this message of a God who loved, and came after, and died for, a world of lost sinners.

OUR RESPONSE

God has spoken. God has taken action. The record and interpretation of these divine words and deeds is to be found in the Bible. The problem for many people is that this is where they remain. It's all too easy to imagine that what God has said and done is all in the past and just leave it at that. But it needs to come out of history into experience, out of the Bible into life. God has spoken—but have we

⁵Matthew 1:21; 1 Timothy 1:15; Luke 19:10; Luke 15:3-7.

listened to his word? God has acted—but have we benefited from what he has done?

What we must do will be explained in the rest of this book. At this stage it is necessary to make just one point: we must *seek*. God has sought us. He is still seeking us. We must seek him. Indeed, God's chief quarrel with us is that we do not seek.

The LORD looks down from heaven on the human race to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.⁶

Yet Jesus promised: “Seek and you will find.” If we do not seek, we shall never find. Jesus told three stories to illustrate this point. The shepherd searched until he found the lost sheep. The woman hunted until she found her lost coin. The father was constantly on the lookout for his lost son. Why should we expect to do less? God desires to be found, but only by those who seek him.

We must seek *seriously*. “Man is as lazy as he dares to be,” as the American writer Emerson put it. But what we're dealing with is so important that we must overcome our natural laziness and apathy and give our minds to the search. God has little patience with those who just trifle with him; “he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”⁷

We must seek *humbly*. If apathy is a hindrance to some people, pride is an even greater and more common hindrance to others. We must freely admit that our minds, being finite, cannot possibly discover God by their own efforts. We depend on God to make himself known. I am not saying that we should suspend rational thinking. On the contrary, the psalmist encourages us *not* to be “like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding.” We must use our minds; but we must also admit their limitations. Jesus said,

⁶Psalm 14:2-3.

⁷Hebrews 11:6.

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.

It is one of the reasons why Jesus loved children. They are teachable. They are not proud, self-important and critical. We need the open, humble and receptive mind of a little child.

We must seek *honestly*. We must come to what claims to be God's revelation of himself not only without pride, but without prejudice; not only with a humble mind, but with an open mind. Every student knows the dangers of approaching his subject with preconceived ideas. Yet many would-be enquirers come to the Bible with their minds already made up. We need to remember that God's promise is addressed only to the earnest seeker: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."⁸ So we must lay aside our prejudice and open our minds to the possibility that Christianity may after all be true.

We must seek *obediently*. This is the hardest condition of all to fulfill. In seeking God we have to be prepared not only to revise our ideas but to reform our lives. The Christian message has a moral challenge. If the message is true, this moral challenge has to be accepted. The point is that we cannot treat God as if he were an object for our detached scrutiny. We cannot fix him at the end of a telescope or a microscope and say "How interesting!" God is far from being merely interesting. He is deeply upsetting. The same is true of Jesus Christ.

We had thought intellectually to examine him; we find he is spiritually examining us. The roles are reversed between us. . . . A person may study Jesus with intellectual impartiality, he cannot do it with moral neutrality. . . . We must declare our colors.⁹

⁸Jeremiah 29:13.

⁹P. Carnegie Simpson, *The Fact of Christ* (London: James Clarke, 1952), pp. 23-24.

This is what Jesus was getting at when, talking to some people in his own day who refused to accept him, he said, “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” The promise is clear: we can certainly know whether Jesus Christ was true or false, whether his teaching was human or divine. But the promise has a moral condition attached to it. We have to be ready not just to believe, but to obey. We must be prepared to do God’s will when he makes it known.

I remember a young man coming to see me when he had just left school and begun work in London. He had given up going to church, he said, because he could not say the Creed without feeling that he was a hypocrite. He no longer believed it. When he had finished telling me what he thought, I said to him, “If I were to answer your problems to your complete intellectual satisfaction, would you be willing to change the way you live?” He smiled slightly and blushed. The answer was clearly “No.” His real problem was not intellectual but moral.

This, then, is the spirit in which our search must be conducted. We must set aside apathy, pride, prejudice and sin, and seek God—no matter what the consequences. Of all these hindrances to the search for truth the last two are the hardest to overcome: intellectual prejudice and moral self-will. The reason is that both are expressions of fear—and fear is the greatest enemy of the truth. Fear paralyzes our search. It isn’t long before we realize that to find God and to accept Jesus Christ is a very inconvenient experience for most people. It would involve our rethinking our whole outlook on life and lead to major changes to the way we live. Such a combination of intellectual and moral cowardice makes us hesitate. We do not find because we do not seek. And the truth is that we do not seek because we do not really want to find. And the best way to be certain that we won’t find is to decide against looking in the first place.

So let me urge you to be open to the possibility that you may not have got this right and that Christ may in fact be true. And if you

want to be a humble, honest, obedient seeker after God, spend some time reading the Bible, the book that claims to be his revelation. Look particularly at the Gospels, which tell the story of Jesus Christ. Give him the opportunity to confront you with himself and to authenticate himself to you. Come with the full consent of your mind and will, ready to believe and obey if you become convinced that it's true. Why not read through the Gospel of Mark, or John? You could read through either in one sitting (preferably in a modern translation), to let it make its total impact on you. Then you could reread it slowly, say a chapter a day. Before you read, pray—perhaps something along these lines:

God, if you exist (and I don't know you do), and you can hear this prayer (and I don't know if you can), I want to tell you that I am an honest seeker after the truth. Show me if Jesus is your Son and the Savior of the world. And if you bring conviction to my mind, I will trust him as my Savior and follow him as my Lord.

No one can pray such a prayer and be disappointed. God keeps his promises. He honors all earnest searching. He rewards all honest seekers. The undertaking given by Jesus is very clear: "Seek and you will find."