

CHAPTER 1

SOME IMPORTANT POINTS AT THE OUTSET

In writing this first book and indeed, all the other books in this series, I have no desire to offend anyone. I have gone out of my way to try to avoid doing so. However, real Christianity, when understood correctly, is unavoidably offensive. It confronts you with the truth about yourself. Most people don't like that and it will offend them, no matter how politely it is said. That is why Jesus Himself said:

"And blessed is he who takes no offense at me"
Luke 7:23 (RSV)

Instead of taking offence, why not open-mindedly consider the astonishing claims that Jesus Christ makes about Himself? Try to ask yourself *"Is this true?"* rather than *"Does this suit me?"* Then you will be in the right frame of mind to come to a proper conclusion. Sadly, many people do approach Christianity by asking whether it suits them and is convenient to their lifestyle or ambitions.

If you do that you are unlikely ever to become a Christian, because real Christianity is difficult and challenging. In fact, it could cost you everything, even your life, and it's unlikely ever to be convenient. Jesus never claimed to be convenient. He does not merely want you to "make some room" for Him on your existing agenda. He wants you to make Him the very center of your life and will not accept any less than that.

He offers us a stark choice: to wholeheartedly accept Him as Lord and follow Him, or else to reject Him. There is no middle ground. You cannot be neutral about Jesus Christ. You must either be totally for Him or against Him. Jesus will not accept us being half-hearted. He wants us to be radical and passionate about Him and His message. He hates it when we are spiritually lukewarm. Listen to what Jesus Himself said about this:

¹⁵I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!
¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.
Revelation 3:15-16 (NIV)

Watered down Christianity

Nowadays, very many writers and speakers present a watered down version of Christianity. Much of the real message is edited out to make it inoffensive. It ends up as a confusing mixture of truth and error. So, I want to tell you about Christianity as it really is, even at the risk of offending you. But that is never my intention. Apostle Paul faced the same problem and he decided to tell people the whole truth, without leaving anything out:

"For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God".
Acts 20:27 (NASB)

I want to try to write an accurate and complete explanation of the Christian gospel (that's Greek for "good news"). I want it to be clear but not simplistic, detailed but not too lengthy, and accessible to people of any educational or religious background. I also want to cover some of the key mistakes people make and the reasons why so many people fail in their Christian life, or even fall away.

I also want to give you helpful information on several related topics that I wish someone had told me about when I first became a Christian. Some of that is within this first book, but there is much more in the subsequent books in this series. Most importantly of all, I have tried to be true to the Bible and to focus on what the Bible itself actually says, rather than on what men say about it, or the traditions of any denomination. I want to tell you the real truth to the best of my ability, without compromising or pulling my punches, and yet as courteously as I can.

I do not want to ‘sell’ Christianity to you like a used car. I won’t use any kind of marketing techniques or try to hide anything from you. I want to just tell you the full truth and hope that you will be open minded enough to see it. That was apostle Paul’s approach:

Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

2 Corinthians 4:2 (NIV)

However, it will not be easy. The Devil is real. So are the demons who serve Him. They will do everything they can to confuse you and to blind your eyes spiritually. They want to prevent you reading this book at all. If they can’t prevent that, then they will try to stop you from understanding it.

³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4 (NIV)

Also, our own human intellect by itself won’t enable us to see the truth about God or spiritual things. Without God’s help, the gospel will seem like foolishness to you and will make no sense:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

1 Corinthians 2:14 (NIV)

Ask God to help you to see the truth

Pause for a moment and ask God to help you to understand this book and to know whether it is true or not. Without God’s help nobody can ever understand the Bible. He has to open your eyes first or you will be blind. Therefore ask Him right now to help you to understand this. That is the kind of prayer He loves to answer quickly:

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

James 1:5 (NIV)

So, why not pray broadly along these lines:

"LORD, please help me as I read this book, and especially the passages from the Bible, to know whether it is true. Please open my eyes and my mind to see the truth and to be able to see and abandon any wrong beliefs that I currently have."

I hope that after reading this first book, you will have enough relevant information to be able to make an informed choice about Jesus Christ and whether to believe in Him and follow Him. I hope you will then start to study the whole Bible for yourself. This book is written so as to be understandable

by those who have never been in a church or heard anything of the gospel. However, it is also intended for people who are already involved in churches and who assume they are Christians, but perhaps aren't really saved. It's also for those who have no assurance of salvation. And it's for those who just feel they know less than they should.

Likewise, this book is also for those who are in lukewarm churches where the leaders do not preach the real gospel but teach instead something watered down or even false. There are many such churches where wishy washy liberal ideas, political correctness, and dead religious rituals have replaced real Christianity. If you are in such a church it is quite possible you may still be unsaved even if you have been going to church for 50 years. I would therefore invite you to examine yourself to see whether you are really a Christian in the biblical sense, rather than just a "churchgoer". Merely going to church doesn't make you into a real Christian, just as standing in your garage at home doesn't make you into a car.

Are you sure you are a Christian?

So, if you assume that you are a Christian already, I would urge you to think carefully as to whether you really are. Try the quiz type questions in chapter 19. They are designed to help you work out whether you are a real Christian or not. You may find that all you really have is something shallow and superficial. It could be that what you have is merely "religion," rather than a genuine personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Real Christianity is a personal relationship with Him; not just to know about Him, but actually to know Him. Perhaps you have that already, or perhaps not. If not, the aim of this book is to try to convince you that you need to know Him and to show you how you can.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?

2 Corinthians 13:5 (NIV)

Many who go to church would be offended if asked whether they are a real Christian and truly saved/born again/forgiven. In Britain many would consider it impolite even to ask such a question. Yet it needs to be asked, because throughout all the denominations there is now widespread biblical illiteracy and deep confusion. Millions of people are misinformed, even those who go to church. Many believe they already know what Christianity is about because they have read books, heard sermons, prayed and even been in leadership positions. To suggest to such a person that what they have been taught is not true, and that they may not be saved, is unlikely to be welcomed.

Yet, there are millions of people worldwide, in all denominations, to whom that applies. They may think they are Christians, but many are mistaken. Instead, what they have believed is just a set of man-made ideas. These come from their own minds, or from tradition, or from misunderstanding the Bible, or from what they have been mistakenly taught by others, rather than from the Bible. Such a person can be sincere and yet still be very wrong. If so, then what they believe in, however sincerely, may not be genuine biblical Christianity.

If you believe yourself to be a Christian already, do try not to be offended. Please read on and weigh up as open-mindedly as you can whether your beliefs are in line with what the Bible actually says. You may be in for a surprise. A very high percentage of people describe themselves as "Christian" when filling in forms. They can't all be genuine Bible-believing Christians. But if not, then what are they?

The answer is that they are at many different levels. Some are genuine Christians. Some are on the way there, exploring and seeking. Some are misinformed but relaxed about it, because they don't

realise they are misinformed. Others are completely uninformed. Yet, all these categories of people might put “Christian” on official forms without hesitating.

The 'good news' is primarily about the coming Kingdom of God and about us having the chance to be in it.

I shall try to make another thing clear throughout this book and the other books which follow. That is that the *gospel* or *good news* of Jesus Christ is primarily about the fact that He has been appointed to be the King and that His Kingdom is coming. We are being offered the opportunity to be part of that Kingdom

If we could not be part of it, then the fact that Jesus is going to set up His Kingdom would not be good news, at least not for us. Conversely, if everybody is going to be part of His Kingdom, regardless of what they believe, then it would not even be news. There would be nothing worth announcing or making a fuss about if we were all inevitably going to be part of God’s Kingdom, without exception. If that was true then none of us would need to be or do anything. There would also be no need to tell us anything and certainly no need for us to respond.

The Kingdom of God is at the very heart of what the 'good news' is all about. When He spoke in shorthand of what His message was basically about, note how often Jesus used the phrase 'the Kingdom of God'. So did the gospel writers. These are just some examples. There are very many more. As you look at these sample verses you will see that Jesus and the apostles regarded the Kingdom of God as being crucially important.

By contrast, in most churches today the Kingdom of God is another of the many things that are rarely mentioned. Even where it is referred to in passing it is not explained or understood. However, the good news we are going to be hearing about needs to be understood in the context of Jesus being a King whose Kingdom is coming. That is why that Kingdom is referred to so often and given so much emphasis:

But he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” Luke 4:43 (ESV)

“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” Luke 7:28 (ESV)

¹And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, ²and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. Luke 9:1-2 (ESV)

When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing. Luke 9:11 (ESV)

And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Luke 9:60 (ESV)

²⁹“And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. ³⁰For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. ³²Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Luke 12:29-32 (ESV)

When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Luke 14:15 (ESV)

“The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. Luke 16:16 (NASB)

Even the prayer known as the 'Lord's prayer', or the 'Our Father,' begins with a direct reference to the Kingdom:

⁹Pray then like this: Our Father who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. ¹⁰Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in Heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread; ¹²And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors; ¹³And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. Matthew 6:9-13 (RSV)

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews (probably Paul in my view) also referred to the Kingdom:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, Hebrews 12:28 (ESV)

Also, when the approach and emphasis of apostle Paul's ministry is summed up by Luke at the end of the book of Acts, the Kingdom of God is clearly central to it. That point also emerges from Paul's letters:

³⁰He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. Acts 28:30-31 (ESV)

we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. 1 Thessalonians 2:12 (ESV)

Likewise, apostle Peter emphasised the Kingdom:

For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 1:11(ESV)

That Kingdom which Jesus spoke of will be referred to several times in this book and in the other books in this series. We will try to explain its implications and also to look at the different levels of meaning about it. In one sense, the Kingdom of God has already come. Yet, in another sense, it is still to come. In fact, we can validly say all the following things about the Kingdom of God:

a) **It began in the past**

The Kingdom came nearly 2000 years ago and it includes the whole earth, which Jesus has won back from the Devil through His death on the cross and His resurrection.

b) **The Kingdom is in operation now**

The Kingdom exists now wherever two or three genuine Christians are gathered together in Jesus' name as part of His body, the Church.

c) **The Kingdom is in the future and will last for 1000 years**

Although the Kingdom already exists, it is also yet to come. That is in the sense that it also includes the literal, physical return of Jesus Christ to this Earth in His resurrection body to rule as King over Israel. He will also reign as King over the whole Earth for 1000 years during what is known as the 'Millennium'. By the end of that time Jesus will rule over a world which is made up of both Christians and non-Christians. The activity of Satan and his demons will be severely

restricted during most of that 1000 year period and there will be perfect government. However, there will still be sin and death, albeit far less than we experience today.

d) The Kingdom will change again after those 1000 years and become eternal and perfect

After the Millennium is over the Kingdom will change again. It will then continue for eternity in a completely perfect condition. God Himself will come down to live on this physical Earth and will create what the Bible calls the '*New Jerusalem*'. There will then be perfection on Earth. Every person will be a believer and there will be no sin, death or pain and no demonic activity whatsoever. This is the ultimate and perfected form of the Kingdom. All of us can be part of it if we choose to follow Jesus.

This next passage speaks of the 1000 year period called the Millennium when Jesus will reign over the whole Earth as King:

¹Then I saw an angel coming down from Heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. ²And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, ³and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

⁴Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. ⁶Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.
Revelation 20:1-6 (ESV)

So, the Kingdom of God began in the past, and is in operation now, but even so, it has not yet fully come. Moreover, even when it does come in a much more dramatic and visible form, when Jesus reigns for 1000 years, it will still not be complete. The Kingdom of God has yet another stage to reach, when it becomes totally perfect, complete and eternal.

We shall examine more of the different aspects of the Kingdom's meaning and significance in the chapters that follow, because it is central to the whole message of the gospel. Everything that we are going to say in terms of sin, judgment, Hell, the Lake of Fire, repentance, faith, salvation and so on needs to be seen and understood in the context of Jesus being a King. He has a Kingdom, into which we are being allowed to enter and remain for all eternity, provided we repent and put our faith and trust in Him.

If you come from some other non-Christian background such as Hinduism or Islam, or if you are totally secular, please accept my assurance that I have no desire to offend or attack you. I merely want to explain real Christianity as best I can, because you may never have heard any of this before. One of the distinctive features of Christianity is that Jesus commands us to tell other people about Him. Therefore, I am not writing this just to get people to agree with me. It is to obey Jesus' solemn command that I tell everybody I can about Him, whatever their reaction may be:

¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)

However, you should not believe or accept anything that I say at face value. Everything in this book needs to be checked against what the Bible says. My aim is to present you with an accurate and balanced account. But it is always your responsibility to check whether I have done so, by carefully reading the whole Bible for yourself and in a reliable translation. I would strongly urge you to do what the people of Berea did when the apostle Paul came to speak there:

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.
Acts 17:11 (NIV)