

1 Setting the Scene

'In the world today a person who is religiously inclined is usually regarded as a crank, a killjoy, unhappy and a general bore. I was once one of those people who jeered at Christianity in this way but one day a great change took place in my life; the change from self to Christ.'

I wrote those words over forty years before this book was written, shortly after I became a Christian. As I look back on my life this was certainly the most significant thing that has happened to me. More significant than graduating from university, getting married, becoming a father, becoming a solicitor, becoming a senior partner in my firm or anything else this world has offered me.

As a child I never went to Sunday school and very seldom to church. In my early teenage years I became an atheist, quite convinced that God did not exist. My first encounter with real Christianity was when I went to Oxford University to study law. I must have been fairly intelligent, but I was certainly abysmally ignorant as to what Christianity was all about.

A fellow student at my college started telling me about his faith. He was different from anyone I had ever met before. To him God was real and relevant. I can well remember having many arguments and discussions with him. As an atheist and a budding lawyer I was quite convinced that I would soon refute his arguments about

Setting the Scene

Christianity. But this was not the case. Instead, for the first time in my life, I found myself thinking about the meaning of life and the evidence for the Christian faith. As I argued furiously with my Christian friend, I had a horrible suspicion at times that, after all, he was right and Christianity was true. This made me argue against Christianity more than ever! But one Easter Sunday everything changed.

I awoke in the morning of that day with no thoughts of Christ at all in my mind. I was as full of this world as the next person. Then suddenly the thought came to me that on Easter Sunday Jesus rose from the dead. He was alive and I could come into contact with him. Something inexplicable happened to me. I suddenly knelt down and talked to Christ. Yes, to Christ. I suddenly knew he was living, that he was near me and that he wanted to enter my life. I talked to him. I said, as far as I can remember, 'Come into my life, Lord Jesus.' As I said this, he came. Yes, he himself. I knew he was mine. A marvellous joy filled my life.

I can now look back on what happened then and can say from personal experience that conversion to Christianity is real and it lasts. Over the years, I have been asked many times how the change from being an atheist to being a Christian took place. I always reply by saying that there are two reasons for my being a Christian. Firstly, I found that Christianity is true. Secondly, I have found that it works in my life. Many people are surprised when I claim that Christianity is true. Somehow they have the idea that to become a Christian is to commit intellectual suicide. It reminds me of the teenager's definition of faith as 'believing what you know isn't true!' My experience is the exact opposite of this. One of the main reasons I became a Christian is not that I stopped thinking but that I started thinking. As I argued with my Christian friend, I saw for the first time there was much evidence in favour of Christianity.

My subsequent career as a lawyer has confirmed this. Again, this may sound surprising. Lawyers are not noted for their Christian faith. In fact, the opposite is true. Many times I have been asked

Setting the Scene

how I can possibly be both a Christian and a lawyer. I usually reply by saying that I wouldn't want to be a lawyer if I weren't a Christian!

Over the years my Christian faith has strengthened, guided and judged all that I have done as a lawyer. Christianity has given me a new perspective on law, justice and other legal principles. It has also given me a sense of finiteness. Lawyers are tempted to pretend to be God and to be judgmental. Many a time I have been reminded of the saying of the old Puritan when he saw someone being taken away to the gallows to be hanged — 'There go I but for the grace of God.'

Above all, law trains one to think logically. One of my main hobbies is playing chess and the thing that always fascinates me about that game is the sheer logic of working out one's moves in advance. The law has the same fascination. Not only does it train one to think but also to seek for the truth. Lawyers know when a case has been proved and are well used to assessing evidence. When I was an atheist I had an inbuilt prejudice against the Christian faith. It was through examining the evidence that I became a Christian.

This experience of examining the evidence and then being converted to Christianity is by no means unique to me. One of America's leading lawyers a few years ago was Charles Colson. At the time of the Watergate scandal he was serving as Special Counsel to President Nixon. He was at the height of his legal career and was well known as Nixon's 'hatchet man', described by *Time* magazine as 'tough, wily, nasty and tenaciously loyal to Richard Nixon'. Suddenly in the crisis of Watergate his life was changed. He first began to consider the claims of Jesus Christ when visiting a business friend. Colson was startled to find his friend talking as if Jesus were real. Up to then, as far as Colson was concerned, Jesus was just a historical figure. His friend explained that Jesus is alive today and that his Spirit is part of today's scene. Before he left, his friend gave him a copy of *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis and urged

Setting the Scene

him to read it for himself. A few days later the opportunity came to do this. Colson was on holiday in a cottage by the sea. He recalled in his book *Born Again*:

I unpacked Lewis's book and placed a yellow pad at my side to jot down key points, not unlike the way I prepared to argue a major case in court... All my training insisted that analysis precedes decision, that arguments be marshalled in two neat columns, pros and cons... On the top of the pad I wrote: Is there a God? I opened *Mere Christianity* and found myself... face to face with an intellect so disciplined, so lucid, so relentlessly logical that I could only be grateful I had never faced him in a court of law. Soon I had covered two pages of yellow paper with pros to my query, 'Is there a God?' On the con side were listed the conventional doubts so prevalent in our materialistic, science-has-all-the-answers society — we can't see, hear or feel God. Or can we?... As a lawyer I was impressed by Lewis's arguments about moral law, the existence of which he demonstrates is real, and which has been perceived with astonishing consistency in all times and places... The central thesis of Lewis's book, and the essence of Christianity, is summed up in one mind-boggling sentence: Jesus Christ is God (see John 10:30). Not just part of God, or just sent by God, or just related to God. He was (and therefore, of course, is) God. The more I grappled with those words, the more they began to explode before my eyes, blowing into smithereens a lot of comfortable old notions I had floated through life with, without thinking much about them. Lewis put it so bluntly that you can't slough it off: for Christ to have talked as he talked, lived as he lived, died as he died, he was either God or a raving lunatic. There was my choice, as simple, stark, and

Setting the Scene

frightening as that, no fine shadings, no gradations, no compromises. No one had ever thrust this truth at me in such a direct and unsettling way. I'd been content to think of Christ as an inspired prophet and teacher who walked the sands of the Holy Land 2,000 years ago — several cuts above other men of his time or, for that matter, any time. But if one thinks of Christ as no more than that, I reasoned, then Christianity is a simple palliative, like taking a sugar-coated placebo once a week on Sunday morning. On this sunny morning on the Maine coast with fresh breezes picking up off the ocean, it was hard for me to grasp the enormity of this point—that Christ is the living God who promises us a day-to-day living relationship with him and a personal one at that... And so early that Friday morning, while I sat alone staring at the sea I love, words I had not been certain I could understand or say fell naturally from my lips: 'Lord Jesus, I believe you. I accept you. Please come into my life. I commit it to you.'

In this simple way Colson's whole life was changed. Ahead of him lay seven months in prison because of his involvement in Watergate. Afterwards, he abandoned his law career and is now giving all his time to the ministry of Prison Fellowship, working amongst prisoners in many countries.

Charles Colson certainly had to do some thinking before his encounter with Jesus Christ. My aim in writing this book is to start you thinking. Before I became a Christian I was ignorant about the Christian faith. Like so many people today, I was quite sure that the Gospels were full of contradictions, but I had never even read them! It always amazes me how many people are still in that position. They are extremely knowledgeable about life, politics and every other subject under the sun. But they have never really examined

Setting the Scene

the claims and teachings of Jesus. Sir Norman Anderson in his book *A Lawyer among the Theologians* has pointed out:

Lawyers are predisposed by their training to accept the propositions that documentary evidence should, as far as possible, be allowed to speak for itself; that an honest attempt should be made to sift and assess oral testimony and not to jump to any premature conclusions that it is mutually contradictory; and that circumstantial evidence may, on occasion, be exceedingly persuasive. A lawyer, and especially a judge, is always face to face with the problem of how to evaluate evidence and distinguish the reliable from the misleading.

Ever since I became a Christian I have carefully examined the evidence for the resurrection, the physical return from the dead of Jesus Christ. My purpose in writing this book is to present this evidence to you. I claim that logic must point in the direction of his resurrection on an actual day and date in our history when, if you had been there, you could have touched the living Jesus and heard him speak. There is another reason why I have written this book. For far too long the Christian faith has been under attack. Of course, it does not really need a lawyer to defend it. As a famous preacher said many years ago, 'Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion!' But, despite this, I feel it is high time someone spoke up for the Christian faith. I maintain that not only does it stand up to examination, but it is the most relevant thing in the world today.

2 The Most Important Question in the World

‘If you could meet any person of the past and ask just one question, whom would you meet and what question would you ask?’ When asked this, Professor Joad, then professor of philosophy at London University and not a Christian, answered, ‘I would meet Jesus Christ and ask him the most important question in all the world — “Did you or did you not rise from the dead?”’ Professor Joad was right. The most important question in the world is whether Jesus Christ rose from the dead and is alive today. In other words, did Easter really happen?

To start with, the resurrection is the very heart of the Christian faith. In connection with a television programme called *Credo*, a book was published entitled *In Search of Christianity*. Amongst the contributors was Colin Buchanan, the Bishop of Aston, who stated ‘The Jesus Christ to whom Christians respond is not the dead (though appealing) person of the past, but the Living Lord of the present. He is the same Jesus Christ who is presented to us in the Gospels.’ Any search for Christianity must begin here. Personally, the importance of the resurrection really came home to me when I was asked to speak to a university group on ‘The Message of the Early Church’. In order to find out what it was, I read carefully through all the thirteen messages or sermons in the book of Acts — seven by Paul, five by Peter and one by Stephen. As I read them, I

The Most Important Question in the World

was impressed by the fact that, as recorded by Luke, they were brief and simple. Also I realised that every one of them had one thing in common, namely, Jesus is alive and he can change your life.

Peter sums it up in his message on the day of Pentecost: *This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses* (Acts 2:32). Every sermon was an Easter sermon. The resurrection is mentioned more than one hundred times in the New Testament and nearly every book refers to it. This is what Christianity is all about: that Jesus Christ not only lived and died but on the third day he rose again from the dead. Without the resurrection there is no gospel. As Paul says, *If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile* (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Any consideration of what Christianity is about must begin here. Yet, amazingly enough, in these days when Jesus is often in the news, this is something we have forgotten. The rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* ended with Jesus in the grave. Incredibly it missed out the most vital thing about the life of Christ. His death was not the end. He rose from the dead. As a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Michael Ramsey, has said, 'For the first disciples, the gospel without the resurrection was not merely a gospel without its final chapter; it was not a gospel at all.'

The resurrection also makes Christianity unique. In the global village in which we live people are increasingly asking, 'What is the difference between Christianity and other religions?' The answer is basically very simple. Christianity is the only religion in the world based on the resurrection from the dead of its founder.

No Buddhist has ever claimed that Buddha rose from the dead. When he died it was a passing away in which nothing whatever remained behind. The same applied to Mohammed. According to tradition he died on the 8 June 632AD at the age of 61 in Medina, where his tomb is annually visited by thousands of devout Muslims. But down the ages the claim of Christianity is that Jesus not only died but rose from the dead and is alive today, changing people's lives. If this is true, then Christianity stands by itself. There is no real

The Most Important Question in the World

comparison with other religions because their founders are dead. Christians claim that the founder of their faith is still alive.

Many years ago a fellow lawyer, Frank Morison, started to write a book disproving the historical resurrection of Christ. He felt that the evidence for it rested upon insecure foundations. A remarkable thing happened as he was doing research for his book. As he studied the life of Christ, sifted the evidence at first hand and formed his own judgment, a revolution took place in his thinking. Instead of writing a book disproving the resurrection, the overwhelming evidence in favour of it compelled him to write a book proving it! Its first chapter was entitled 'The Book that Refused To Be Written', and his book *Who Moved the Stone?* was a bestseller for very many years.

In his play *The Vigil*, Ladislav Fodor cleverly constructs a court scene in which the evidence for the resurrection is examined. A gardener is accused of stealing Christ's body, witnesses are called and evidence is brought in court for and against him. The audience is the jury. They are drawn into the play by being asked to give a verdict at the end of it.

In the same way I want you to imagine that you are a member of the jury while I, the lawyer, present to you the evidence for Christ's resurrection.