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– Justin Brierley

The
Definition
of
Christianity

*Exploring the original meaning
of the Christian faith*

David Gooding John Lennox



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The Definition of Christianity

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1 CHAPTER

The True Revolution

The famous Indian philosopher and statesman, Mahatma Gandhi, was once asked why he did not join the Christian church. He replied: ‘Which one?’ Undeniably, from a world-wide point of view, modern Christendom presents a very confused and confusing picture.

That has come about for a number of reasons: first, in the course of history many superstitious additions have collected about Christianity like barnacles on the hull of a ship—so many at times that they have threatened to sink the whole thing beneath the contempt of thoughtful people.

The other reason is a more serious one—after all, a discriminating observer can easily distinguish a ship from a barnacle! It is far more difficult for the outsider to distinguish original, historic Christianity from the diverse developments in doctrine and practice that have taken place within Christendom over the centuries. That is a tremendous pity, for they often obscure the basic original and unchangeable historical facts that constitute the permanent heart and essence of Christianity.

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After all, Christianity is not essentially a system of morality (as is Confucianism) that has to be adapted to the changing fashion of the centuries or else become outmoded. Nor is it a system of abstract universal philosophical truths, the validity of which is independent of the thinkers who first perceived them. Nor is it like many a pagan religion was, a system of rituals which depended for their effectiveness on being performed correctly.

As Paul, spokesman for the early church, would put it, Christianity is good news concerning a historical person, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who, on the human side was born of the royal seed of David, and demonstrated to be the Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:1-4). Jesus Christ is himself that good news: his person, his life—what he did, taught and claimed; his death—what it accomplished; and his resurrection, that demonstrated that his claims were true. These historic facts are the heart of the Christian gospel, and the New Testament is the record of them and their implications.

Of all the writers in the New Testament, the greatest literary and historical genius is undoubtedly Luke, the author of the Gospel that bears his name, and of its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles. Ernest Renan, who had little enough sympathy with the contents of Luke's Gospel, described it as 'the most beautiful book in the world';¹ and Acts, though not in that same sense beautiful, serves a unique purpose, not only within the New Testament, but also in the corpus of world history.

In the New Testament we find that three other

¹ *Les Évangiles et la seconde génération chrétienne* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1877), 283.

writers along with Luke tell us of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The bulk of the rest of the New Testament is composed of letters written to various groups of Christians. From this we gather that, by the time of writing, multiracial Christian churches had already been established with remarkable rapidity, not only in Palestine, where Christ had lived, but all over the Mediterranean world: in learned Athens; in brilliant but vicious commercial Corinth; in elegant Ephesus; in primitive Paphlagonia; and even in the metropolis of the empire, Rome itself.

The question immediately arises: how did it all get started? How did these churches come to be? Luke sets himself to answer that question. He is the one who tells us how Christian apostles and missionaries went throughout the Roman world and preached the gospel, and multitudes both of Jews and Gentiles, hearing the gospel, believed, found salvation through Christ and constituted themselves into Christian churches.

But deeper questions suggest themselves: what were the contents of this gospel? Obviously the early Christians did not wait to have their message defined by the stately creeds of later centuries before they could preach it. Nor did people have to wait for later doctrinal developments before they could believe and find salvation through Jesus Christ. What, then, was the message that proved so effective in the early years of Christianity? What were its essential features? Who defined them, and how did they come to be defined? It is this last question above all that Luke the historian sets himself to answer.

Before observing how he does it, we should notice how well qualified he was for such a task. First of all, he was

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a travelling companion of the apostle Paul, and witnessed first-hand the formation of many Christian churches and the preaching by which they were formed.

Secondly, during the two years when Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea, Luke was able to use the opportunity to consult the contemporaries of Jesus Christ and learn the basic facts from eye-witnesses of our Lord's ministry (so he tells us in the preface to his Gospel). It is true that Luke's work has been fiercely criticized, but modern research has demonstrated that where he can be tested he proves to be a reliable and accurate historian, as we see from the massively detailed and documented work by Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*.²

However, the genius of Luke as a historian is seen above all in the fact that he has not attempted to chronicle every last detail of every journey made,³ and every sermon preached by every single one of the Christian missionaries. Naturally, he was interested in the geographical spread of Christianity; witness the summaries with which he concludes each major section of his work, which, like the pealing of bells, proclaim the irresistible spread of the Word of God and the consequent multiplication of Christian churches. But when we examine his selection of material in each of those major sections, we can immediately see that his prime interest lay elsewhere.

Take, for instance the first section (Acts 1:1–6:7). Here Luke describes how the apostles, empowered by the Holy

² Volume 49 of *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989).

³ For a fuller treatment of the validity of Luke's selective treatment of history, see *True to the Faith*, by David Gooding (Coleraine: Myrtlefield House, 2013), 503–13.

Spirit, were busy proclaiming the incontrovertible fact of the resurrection of Jesus, and pressing home upon their hearers its inescapable implication: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ, and salvation and forgiveness of sins are to be found in him and in him only. But then a crisis occurred—the Sanhedrin banned all preaching in the name of Jesus.

Now the Sanhedrin was for normative Judaism the supreme religious authority; the apostles had been brought up in Judaism, and Christianity had been born in its midst. To disobey and defy the Sanhedrin was a serious step to take and one fraught with all kinds of foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences.

But to obey the Sanhedrin was impossible without denying the very heart, life and soul of Christianity. To deny or keep silent about the deity and messiahship of the living Lord would have been disobedience to God, disloyalty to Christ and to the cause of man's salvation. Compromise was impossible. Without hesitation, the apostles disobeyed and defied the Sanhedrin; and Christianity took its first step away from official Judaism.

Thus, with a historian's fine sense of what was truly significant and important, Luke shows us the apostles of our Lord Jesus defining for all time what is the first major indispensable foundation of the Christian gospel.

In the second major section of the work (Acts 6:8–9:31) Stephen, the first Christian martyr, though he had been brought up to revere the Jewish temple, began to perceive that Christ's sacrifice on the cross, his resurrection and entry into heaven, carried implications that would eventually make that temple obsolete, along with its whole

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elaborate system of sacrifices, rituals, and priesthood. For advancing this view and maintaining it in public discussion, he was put on trial for his life. But he made no attempt to recant. For him, the Christian understanding of man's new way of approach to God, inaugurated by Christ, was so essential to the gospel that compromise was impossible. So Stephen died, and Christianity defined another element in its essential message.

In the third section (Acts 9:32-12:24), Luke tells how the ancient Jewish concept of holiness threatened to prevent the Christian message from leaping over the boundaries of Judaism into the vastly bigger Gentile world. God therefore had to intervene, to teach the apostle Peter how different Christianity was going to be from the Judaism in which he had been brought up. External ritualistic and ceremonial holiness, based on strict observance of dietary laws and religious washings, valid as it was in Old Testament days, was no longer appropriate.

In fact, it was now to be set aside. From this time on, holiness was to be achieved by a deep, inner, personal relationship with the living Lord. Cleansing from the guilt of sin was to be conveyed by the blood of his substitutionary sacrifice, and power to live a clean life was to be supplied by the indwelling Holy Spirit whom Christ imparts to all who personally put their trust in him.

The same pattern repeats itself in the fourth section (12:25-16:5). In Judaism, in which the early Christians had been reared, the initiatory rite of circumcision, normally performed on babies a few days after birth, was regarded as indispensable for membership in the holy nation; and helpful, if not necessary, for salvation. Some Christians

began by thinking that this rite was still necessary for salvation; but at a meeting of the apostles and elders called in Jerusalem to consider the matter, Peter and James pronounced the official, authoritative and permanent apostolic decision. The religious rite of circumcision was unnecessary for and contributed absolutely nothing to salvation, not only in the case of the Gentiles but for Jews as well. It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of the epoch-making step which Christianity took away from the ritualism of Judaism at that time.

Similarly in section five (16:6–19:20), when Paul and his companions eventually reached Macedonia and Greece, Luke, by a judicious selection of incidents and speeches, once more shows us Christianity defining itself against the background, not now of Judaism, but of pagan spiritism, politics, religion, and philosophy.

Finally, in the last and longest section of the book (19:21–28:31), the atmosphere of Luke's record is noticeably different, for Paul is to be found here not so much preaching but defending the gospel in the civil and religious courts of the empire. But the pattern is the same. For as Paul defends both himself and the gospel from the slanderous allegations that have been made against them, Luke's record makes clear that Paul and the gospel are not what people have ignorantly imagined them to be, or what people have maliciously represented them as being. Luke is thus continuing to define by contrast what Christianity really is.

Luke's fine sense of what was essential Christianity can be very enlightening for us who live in this distant century. For, in the ensuing ages, Christendom has often

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allowed its message to become confused with civil politics and contemporary philosophies. In fact, in some countries, pagan customs have been baptized into the church; and in our own day, obsession with the occult and fascination with various practices of Hinduism threaten to invade the church and lead to unholy syncretism. In wealthier countries temptation has been strong to join secret business associations which in their ceremonies worship the same old pagan deities as the ancient world did; while in poorer countries in recent decades there has been the opposite temptation to wed the Christian gospel with Marxism, to produce a politicized liberation theology.

Now Luke originally dedicated his work to a certain Theophilus in the hope of convincing him of the true nature and credibility of the Christian faith (Acts 1:1). As we study the detail of Luke's record, and Christianity stands forth in all its pristine clarity, it would be Luke's hope that he could do the same for us as he did for Theophilus.