

How Can We Know God?

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I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST, HIS ONLY SON, OUR LORD.

“Where is your Father?” the Pharisees demanded of Jesus.

To the Pharisees’ ears, Jesus’ response was outrageous: “You know neither me nor my Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also. . . . You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins” (John 8:19-24).

Later Jesus had a similar conversation with his own disciples: “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him.”

These were astonishing statements. Not only did Jesus claim to be the only one through whom the Father could be known, but he also claimed that seeing him was equivalent to seeing the Father.

In spite of such a clear declaration, Philip had a followup question: “Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.”

Jesus replied, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:7-9).

What does it mean to know God? The Pharisees thought they knew God. After all, they were zealous for good works, anxious to keep up the rituals and regulations that had accumulated in Jewish tradition. But Jesus told them that they did not, in fact, know God at all. Although claiming to be children of Abraham, they were actually, Jesus said,

children of the devil (John 8:39, 44). Thinking themselves Israel's spiritual guides, they were really blind and destitute of any righteousness. They were enemies of God.

With Jesus' uncompromising assessment in mind, it would seem that this business of knowing God is rather more difficult than some of us may believe. Who doesn't think he or she knows God? Sometimes this presumed knowledge of God is expressed in explicit forms, as in Joseph Campbell's *Hero of a Thousand Faces*. Sometimes it is stated implicitly, as in public nonsectarian prayer. In either case, the natural assumption is that God is a general entity out there who can be known apart from the particular self-revelation of God in Scripture and apart from the person and work of Christ. However, throughout the Scriptures we are introduced to Jesus Christ — both by promise and fulfillment — as the One in whom and through whom God is made known. It is not complicated or difficult: one just has to know the right person. In short, no one knows or worships God but through Christ.

At various times in Israel's history, the temptation was great to follow the nations in both their religious and their cultural habits. The nations kept their gods up close. They could touch and see them. Why did Israel have to worship a God who was invisible and could not be touched? "You cannot see My face," God told Moses. "No one can see Me and live" (Exod. 33:20).

But the promise was that one day God himself would become flesh, and in that day his servants would touch him with their hands, see him with their eyes, and hear him with their ears. And now, a carpenter from Nazareth was announcing, "He who has seen Me has seen My Father. . . . Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). Jesus was claiming, in his very person, the attributes described in the previous chapter. He was God incarnate: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Therefore, John could declare, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life — the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you this eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us — that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-4).

How far this is from an ambiguous notion of "god"! As Paul told the Athenians, so we must declare to our culture: "The God whom you worship as 'unknown,' I will explain to you" (Acts 17:23). And that explanation revolves around God Incarnate. Unlike Greek philosophical speculation, God's self-disclosure is public, unmistakable, and unsophisticated. If one wants to know what God is like, he or she must look no further than Jesus Christ. He is God on display. No one can see the face of God's naked majesty, but in Christ God has hidden his majesty and has clothed himself in humility. He is God among us.

All other physical representations of the invisible God are like golden calves. But, appropriating an early Christian hymn, the apostle Paul reminded the Colossians that:

Jesus is the image [*eikon*, from which we get the word *icon*] of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist [“hold together”]. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness [of the Godhead] should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross (Col. 1:16-18).

Imagine that: Jesus Christ, like us in every respect except for sin, was nothing less than “the exact representation of the invisible God”! We only worship the true God by way of this person, this particular manifestation of God in our flesh and in our world history of time and space. Our age is not very interested in theological precision. “God,” for most Americans, is an important person in whom to believe, but it does not seem to make much difference who he is or whether the one we worship as God is the correct one. Often it is considered dangerous for a person to die an atheist, but less concern is expressed about the eternal status of the person who, though believing in “God,” has rejected Christ.

It’s important for us to realize that Jesus Christ is not simply the most perfect expression of the divine nature, but that he is God. Apart from him there is no God but mere idols of our imagination. Even conservative Christians sometimes give the impression that it does not matter whether the children in public schools pray to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, or to Allah, the “Higher Power,” Krishna, the finite god of the Mormons, the non-Trinitarian deity of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant liberals, or the divine inner light. The concern is simply that there is some public recognition of the place of “God” in society. “Maybe it isn’t traditional Christianity,” wrote one pastor, “but it’s sure a step in the right direction.”

But in both the Old and New Testaments, anything other than worship of the true God is called idolatry, and idolatry is never a step in the right direction. It is a bad thing to worship a general “God.” We are simply going to have to realize that Christianity does not consider religion benign and honorable, but makes public claims that directly counter the claims of every rival. From the Christian perspective, religion is no less dangerous than atheism. To seek to know or worship God in any way other than through the person and work of Jesus Christ is to invite wrath and confusion. It is a particular God who is described for us by God himself in Scripture and history.

Christ is the key to knowing God. Apart from him, there would be no world, no human speech, no relationship with God. In fact, apart from the Son there would be no God at all, since the only God who really exists is the Trinity: one in essence, three in person.

This is why Scripture describes God by revealing Christ in promise and fulfillment, from Genesis to Revelation. We know God by seeing him in action, and the whole biblical story is about his action in Christ, foreshadowed in promise and accomplished in fulfillment. It is not “God,” but this God — Yahweh — who is the object of our worship. It is not by personal experiences or by speculating or spinning a web of reasonable opinions about God that we come to know the true Creator and Redeemer, but by locating divine action in history.

As with ourselves, God is best known by his involvement in personal relationships to which he attaches his authority. In other words, God is known as he reveals himself in Scripture, not as we “find” him ourselves. The question is not, “What should God be like, given our experiences or philosophical premises?” but “What has God actually shown himself to be like?” This is why Jesus Christ — and not philosophical speculation — must be our guide to the Godhead. Not even the Bible itself is to guide us to the Father apart from Christ. Although our Savior is everywhere in Scripture, it is possible to read even God’s inspired Word in a way that ignores Jesus’ central role. This was our Savior’s chief critique of the way the Pharisees read the Scriptures (John 5:39-40).

God is not to be thought of apart from Christ for two reasons: He is the eternally begotten Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity, and to talk about “God” is to refer to the Trinity. Second, it was the Son — not the Father or the Holy Spirit — who became man and revealed God to humanity. This leads us to the heart of our affirmation in this line of the Creed: “His Only Son, Our Lord.” Israel’s creed was summarized in the Shema: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one” (Deut. 6:4). They were to have no other gods (Exod. 20:3). While monotheism (belief in one God) lay at the heart of biblical religion, the triunity of God was maintained from the very beginning. To be sure, it becomes clearer with successive chapters of redemptive history; nevertheless, even in the opening act of the drama we see God acting in the triune Godhead. The Father speaks the Word, while the Holy Spirit is hovering over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2-3; John 1:1-3).

When we come to the creation of Adam, we read, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness’” (Gen. 1:26). Three interpretations have been offered here concerning the use of the plural, “us” and “our.” Some argue that the reference is to the plural of majesty — the “royal we.” God here is speaking as a royal personage. The problem with this interpretation is that it depends entirely on a convention of English history and language. We have no evidence that ancient Near Eastern rulers adopted a similar grammatical convention, so this interpretation does not seem plausible.

A second option is that the use of the plural refers to God and his angels, the heavenly hosts. But unless we are willing to say that creation in God’s image is really creation in the image of God and the angels, this interpretation runs into problems. Furthermore, this image is expressed in dominion, which belongs properly to God and not to angels. Later in Genesis we are confronted with the Angel of Yahweh (Jehovah) who is

described as both Yahweh himself and distinct from Yahweh (Gen. 16:7-13; 18:1-21; 19:1-28).¹

Finally, the next verse announces, “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (v. 27). It would seem, therefore, that God is referring here to himself alone, but to himself as a plurality of persons. This third interpretation seems most consistent with the narrative as with the rest of Scripture: We have, in other words, the first reference to a plurality of persons within the one Godhead.

The real support for the Trinity, as for any other revelation of God’s nature, is to be found in divine action, not in abstract contemplation of the divine nature. Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity, though revealed somewhat obscurely in the Old Testament, is clearly disclosed in the work of redemption as it culminates in the sending of the Son and then the outpouring of the Spirit.

First, the New Testament recognizes the Old Testament’s identification of Israel’s Redeemer as none other than Yahweh himself and then applies this identity to the man Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:21; Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Gal. 3:13; 4:4-5; Phil. 3:20; Titus 2:13-14). As Louis Berkhof points out, the Old Testament presents Yahweh as indwelling the hearts of his people (Ps. 74:2; 135:21; Isa. 8:18; 57:15; Ezek. 43:7-9; Joel 3:17, 21; Zech. 2:10-11), while the New Testament applies this specifically to the Holy Spirit who indwells his church (Acts 2:4; Rom. 8:9-10; 1 Cor. 3:16; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 2:22; James 4:5). God sends the Son (John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:6; 1 John 4:9). and both the Father and the Son send the Spirit (John 14:26).

At our Lord’s baptism, there is the voice of the Father, pronouncing his benediction on the Son, with the additional presence of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. An even more direct reference to the Trinity is found in the baptismal formula, where the sacrament is to be performed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). First Corinthians 12:4-6, 2 Corinthians 13:14, and 1 Peter 1:1 refer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as well.

In his own life and ministry, Jesus was aware of his eternal Sonship. In Matthew 11:27, he says of himself, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” The Great Commission proceeds from Christ’s own person: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18). Clearly, this is a violation of the heart of Israel’s faith (i.e., monotheism), unless Jesus Christ is actually who he claimed to be: God the Son in the flesh. “No one has ascended to heaven,” said Jesus, “but he who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” (John 3:12). We see once more the importance of coming to know God through his historical actions when Jesus says, “My Father has been

¹ I am indebted to Louis Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* for supplying these proof texts and recommend his section on the Trinity for a more thorough treatment.

working until now, and I have been working” (John 5:17). It was not that the Father was on holiday, but that the Son’s role in redemptive history had now taken on more direct significance. The Father plans our redemption, the Son secures it, and the Holy Spirit applies it.

Liberal Protestants have sought to explain such passages away by saying that Jesus understood himself to be God’s Son in the same way that we are all children of God. But our Lord’s original audience had no trouble understanding his meaning: “Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (v. 18). This was simply not the sort of announcement that young Jewish men went about town making! It was not perceived as a benign, friendly reference to the universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, but as a declaration of nothing less than equality with God.

And how did Jesus respond to their perception? Did he say, “Wait a minute! You have misunderstood me”? Not at all! He said:

For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whomever He will. For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son *just as* they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. (vv. 21-23, emphasis added)

Those two words, “just as,” are unmistakable: Jesus was claiming that he is equally worthy of divine worship as the Father himself. “Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). The presence of Jesus among us is the very presence of Yahweh himself, our Creator and Redeemer who undertakes personally to rescue us. Jesus Christ was and is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). This leads us to second affirmation in this line of the Creed.

The Sovereign LORD

Matthew’s Gospel describes a remarkable scene:

While the Pharisees were gathered together. Jesus asked them, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is he?” They said to him, “The Son of David.” He said to them. “How then does David in the Spirit call him, ‘Lord,’ saying: “The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool”?’ If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his Son?” And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare to question Him anymore. (Matt. 22:41-46)

Knowing about his earthly lineage, the Pharisees recognized that Jesus belonged to David’s house, as Scripture prophesied concerning the Messiah. But Jesus presented them with a puzzle: In Psalm 110:1, David is referring to a future Son who is

nevertheless already in existence as his Lord! How could David call one of his descendants “Lord”?

No wonder the Pharisees were tied up in knots in the face of this theological question! They had acknowledged that Jesus was a descendant of David, but to identify him as David’s “Lord”? That would be to identify Jesus as nothing less than the Messiah, he who sits at the Father’s right hand until all his enemies are made his footstool. Whatever their conclusion about Jesus, the Pharisees had to grant the argument that David’s future messianic descendant (whoever that might be) was his present, existent Lord.

As we have seen, Jesus elsewhere identified himself as the “I am” of the Old Testament (John 8:48-59), the self-existent, self-sufficient, omnipotent, omniscient, holy, just, loving, jealous, merciful, wrathful, good God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Astonished by this announcement, the Jews demanded, “Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Who do You make yourself out to be?”

Our Lord replied by saying that the Father honors him. Furthermore, he said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad. . . . Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (vv. 53-58). Once again, the Jews had no trouble understanding Jesus’ claims: “Then they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by” (v. 59).

The Jewish leaders understood Jesus far better than today’s liberal Protestants do. The Jesus proclaimed by the liberals is quite benign: He is simply a preeminent example of someone who possessed a God-consciousness to the full, hardly the sort of claim that would ruffle too many feathers.

The New Testament affirms the Old Testament faith in one God (for instance, 1 Cor. 8:6; 1 Tim. 2:3), but clearly declares, “For it pleased the Father that in Christ all the fullness of deity should dwell (Col. 1:17). We are told to wait patiently “for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great *God* and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). In the earliest New Testament writings, the apostolic Witnesses to our Savior’s divinity clearly forbade the tendency of modern theologians to separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. This, as if Paul’s “invention” of Jesus as God was different from the Jesus Christ who was described by the disciples themselves.

If one wishes to deny Jesus’ divinity, the Gospels must also be surrendered. More than that: the Old Testament, too, is similarly insistent that the One who would come and secure redemption would be no less a person than Yahweh himself. Christianity stands or falls on the divinity of Christ, as did the Old Testament anticipation.

If Jesus is not who he claimed to be, he is not a helpful guide or a singular example for what it means to be a child of God. Rather, he is one of the greatest charlatans in history, a self-deluded man who was in fact guilty of the highest blasphemy, just as many of the Jews claimed. Nothing that our Lord says about himself, or that the

apostles say about him, is unrelated to this claim to divinity. Therefore, those who take what they want from the New Testament (the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, etc.), have no reason to believe that their cherished remains of Christianity have any more validity than the ravings of a religious huckster.

When the New Testament, therefore, attributes the title “Lord” to Jesus Christ, the purpose is clearly theological. It is not good manners, but an affirmation of Christ’s divinity that leads the apostles to address him in this way. We must always keep in mind that the apostles themselves were Jews. In fact Paul was a Jew of the highest religious and academic order. Each knew what “Lord” meant as a title of address, and they boldly applied it to Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus was the same Lord who spoke the world into being (John 1:1) and who upholds it by his power (Col. 1:17). It was he who appeared in his pre-incarnate state to saints in the Old Testament. To simultaneously affirm belief in one God (1 Tim. 2:5) and the belief that Jesus is God (Titus 2:13) is to confess faith in the Son’s lordship as a necessary expression of his nature, not merely as an exercise of a role. There is one God, but three persons in the Godhead: trinity in unity.

What Does This Have to Do with Us?

The early Christian martyrs went to their deaths not because of an experience they’d had, nor because of moral principles or religious and philosophical ideals, but because of an announcement of God’s personal involvement in human affairs. It was not a “God-in-general” they had in mind—the nameless, faceless “Unknown God” of Athens. It was this particular God who is known in Jesus Christ. Their lives hung in the balance of two words, *Christos Kyrios*, “Christ is Lord.”

If they had simply renounced this claim concerning the universal lordship and deity of Jesus Christ, they could have believed, claimed, or practiced whatever they wished. They could have gone on seeking converts, helping to build moral fiber, and get on with their interesting, if mysterious, rituals. All they had to do was to give up this stubborn particularity — the conviction that Jesus was the only embodied self-revelation of God, Savior, and Lord, the only true way of salvation. All they had to do was deny that, apart from him, all people were eternally lost. Everything hung on this single issue, both the Christian witness and their own lives.

Today, something far more subtle than lions and lunatic emperors threatens this central Christian affirmation. Our “Babylonian captivity” takes the form of modernity, the spirit of the age that has so shaped the world in which we live. When the Enlightenment convinced men and women that religious truth claims belonged to the realm of the mystical, “otherworldly,” and unknowable, much of the church reduced “truth” to the level of mere “opinion.” “For me, Jesus is Lord,” has replaced the uncompromised confession of the martyrs. Jesus’ title became “my personal Lord and Savior,” rather than the Lord and Savior. In other words, objective claims of truth were reduced to subjective claims of experience.

Earlier this century, William James said that the test of a religious truth claim is “its cash-value in experiential terms.” In other words, will it work? Pragmatism makes sense as a way of justifying claims only if there is no access to historical, scientific, or rational explanations. And that is precisely what the modern mind concludes about religious claims. Indian missionary and bishop Lesslie Newbigin describes this shift from truth to opinion:

It is certainly not more than a hundred years since children in Scottish schools learned at an early stage the fact that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” This was as much a fact as the movement of the stars and the Battle of Bannockburn. Today it is not taught as fact. It may be included in a syllabus of religious studies, along with the beliefs of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, for it is a “fact” that some people do have these beliefs. But it is not itself a fact: it is a belief which some people hold.²

The chasm between “We know” and “We believe” grew wider in German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s subversion of right and wrong in favor of the will. Thus, personal choice reigns. “Values” replace “truth” and “preference” replaces “facts.” Modern thought has concluded that either our minds discover or impose a structure on reality (rationalism, idealism) or are blank slates upon which reality writes its truths (empiricism). It is not just the gulf between God and the observable world that is assumed in modernity, but a gulf between the knower and that which is known (i.e., subject and object).

Where rationalism and idealism promised a knowledge of everything, postmodern thinkers who are now repudiating this failed enterprise often revel in “playful” agnosticism with respect to any ultimate truth and meaning. It is reflected in a healthy appreciation for human finitude, but it also takes the form of skepticism: the belief that one cannot really know anything except for one’s own subjective feelings and opinions. In other words, it is not just religion that is removed from the realm of truth to that of opinion. This fallacy applies to all knowledge.

That, of course, may work for philosophers and social scientists, anthropologists, literary specialists, and other theoreticians. But even these people go on reading history books as if they conveyed some accurate details of other times. They are still consulting scientific journals for the results of experiments and studies. Common sense operates at a deeper level than sophisticated speculation, and no one can escape it — not even the philosophers who regard common sense as an outdated notion.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to Greeks: The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 15.

Various philosophers of science have led some helpful discussions on this topic in recent years, many of them influenced by Michael Polanyi.³ How can a modern or postmodern relativist even level charges of inadequacy or foolishness? There are certain things that even the most dedicated scientist assumes before he or she can even begin to doubt other things. For instance, has it ever been proved that the world exists objectively and not simply as a projection of the human mind? We believe that other people exist besides ourselves. But can anyone prove this assumption?

Has an experiment ever proved that the world is rational and open to critical investigation? How can we be certain that rules of logic are true? How can we trust our senses to perceive reality? Scientists advance because they assume these things, and it is only by presupposing these unproved assumptions that they can then begin to investigate and doubt other things. Those who begin and end with doubt, therefore, have no basis for doubt itself. One must believe some things are true in order to doubt or disbelieve in other things.

To be sure, we cannot know everything, and even that which we do know is only known to us in part. This, after all, is affirmed in Scripture: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12). Nevertheless, to know in part is not to know nothing at all.

The Gospel According to Kant

Immanuel Kant was perhaps the most important modern philosopher. Kant believed that there was an invisible realm to which none of us has access. That realm, which includes God, cannot be observed empirically nor proved rationally. Nevertheless, we have to believe in it: otherwise how could we believe in morality? Newbigin is helpful on this point:

To the Kantian one may put the question: "How do you know that the unknowable noumenon exists?" And to the one who says that the whole truth of God cannot be disclosed in Jesus Christ, the Christian may fairly ask, "What is the source of your knowledge that this is so?" How does the doubter know so much about the unknowable? . . . But seeking is only serious if the seeker is following some clue. . . . The relativism which is not willing to speak about truth but only about "what is true for me" is an evasion of the serious business of living. It is the mark of a tragic loss of nerve in our contemporary culture. It is a preliminary symptom of death.⁴

Christianity cannot exist as an opinion, for it is a claim to universal truth; public truth, not private sentiment. Unlike other religions, Christianity goes out on a limb when it insists that its claims about what God is like, what we are like, and how God reveals himself

³ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁴ Newbigin, pp. 21-22.

and saves are historical in nature. When, for instance, a Buddhist claims belief in Nirvana, or when a Hindu claims belief in reincarnation, these are not argued on the basis of knowledge to which everyone has access. In order to be a Muslim one must simply accept that Mohammed is the prophet of God and the Qu'ran is inspired. But Christianity says that something happened in history that belongs to the public record, like any other historical event.

The life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus Christ are not spiritual or moral lessons that are useful even if they never really happened. And their historical character is what makes the religious truth claims valid. If I told you that I had discovered a cure for cancer, when in fact I actually had only discovered how gullible the public is when it comes to a cure for which we desperately search, there would be no way to put a positive spin on my bogus announcement. My students might defend my claim by saying that it represented the universal longing for such a cure and, after all, it gave the world a renewed hope for what could be if we all worked hard enough. But nothing could save such a false announcement from the scorn and mockery of the public.

Similarly, when the stakes are so high, Jesus and his apostles (even the prophets who predicted their existence centuries earlier) cannot be forgiven if the historical claims are false. There is no salvaging the Christian religion by appeals to universal reason or experience being somehow illustrated by these claims.

Modern liberalism insists that what is important in religion is ideas — universal truths that stand above and beyond the historical claims of the Bible. God may or may not have created the world out of nothing; there may have never been a historical Adam who was created in God's image and plunged the race into judgment and depravity; the Exodus may never have really happened except in the lively religious imagination of ancient Jews; a Jewish rabbi may never have been bodily raised from the dead in first-century Palestine. Nevertheless, modern liberals insist, these "myths" are *important* because they illustrate something that is true and *significant*: ideas, principles, longings, and hopes. The Bible may be more a revelation of the religious aspirations of human beings than a revelation of God's character and activity in history. However, they assert, that does not mean that it is an insignificant guide to the moral and religious life.

But we cannot apply criteria of judgment to a religion that resists such criteria as alien. Christianity bases all its claims on public events. If these events did not happen, there is no reason to believe that Christianity is a reliable guide to anything except the misguided reflections of a remarkably deluded sect. We will see this in further detail when we discuss the Resurrection.

The claim of Jesus Christ to be the eternal Son of the Father and Lord of the universe is not merely a declaration of private belief; it is a statement of public truth. In a world whose view very much resembles the pluralistic relativism of ancient Athens and Rome, we find that our message is still "foolishness to Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews."

Nothing has changed on that front and we must still be willing to stake our lives on those two words, *Christos Kyrios*. Apart from that confession, nothing else is important.

“In Faith, through the Holy Spirit”

In May of 1934, a group of Lutheran and Reformed pastors and theologians gathered to confess the faith in the face of opposition that was not unlike the fires confronted by the first century martyrs. Their gathering was called the Confessional *Synod* of the German Evangelical Church, convened because the group believed that it was only by confessing the faith that the salt would not lose its savor and become part of the ungodly Reich of Adolf Hitler.

At this point, the Evangelical Church of Germany, dominated by liberalism and pietism, had come to regard doctrines as divisive obstacles to genuine Christian experience and national unity. Many of its leading theologians and leaders mocked Christian truth claims with their own claims to universal knowledge through philosophical idealism and rationalism. And their “enlightened” version of Christianity as religious and moral sentimentalism made it possible for them to officially adopt the Nazi dogmas, to embrace Hitler as the leader, and to change the name of the Evangelical Church to the Reich’s Church.

In opposition to this apostasy, the Confessing Synod drafted the Barmen Declaration. The preamble declared, “In opposition to attempts to establish the unity of the German Evangelical Church by means of false doctrine, by the use of force and insincere practices, the Confessing Synod insists that the unity of the Evangelical Churches in Germany can come only from the Word of God in faith through the Holy Spirit.”

The Synod’s first article insisted, “The inviolable foundation of the German Evangelical Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is attested for us in Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the Confessions of the Reformation. . . . We are bound together by the confession of one Lord of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” they said.

When one of the leaders of the Confessing Synod met with Hitler, he informed the dictator that the church has only one king and one messiah. Arrested shortly thereafter by the Gestapo, Pastor Martin Niemöller was acquitted by the court, but was then immediately sent to Sachsenhausen and Dachau as Hitler’s “personal prisoner.” Although he was liberated by the Allied troops in 1945, a number of other Confessing pastors did not fare so well. Among them was the martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

“My Jewels . . . My Festive Dress”

For the leaders of the Confessing Synod, confessing Christ as God’s Son and our Lord was not merely a matter of official assent to church teachings. It involved the personal embrace of Jesus Christ himself. In a sermon on Jesus’ parable of the wedding garment, Niemöller attacked the idea that the great enemy of Christianity is atheism and

immorality. “That is a man-made thought, but it will not do the moment God approaches us: ‘Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment?’”

The garment is not a matter of indifference to him. We must repent — put off our old garment of self-righteousness, which is really sin, and believe in Christ — which is to wear his righteousness instead. “Dear friends,” Niemöller said, “that is the real temptation for us church Christians:

I do not speak of those who come to church to hear something special or interesting, something that is not in the newspapers. “Verily they have their reward.” Nor do I speak of those who come to spy, to catch the Lord Jesus Christ and to nail Him to the cross. They too have their reward. I am thinking of us who come again and again and cannot make up our minds to say goodbye to our own self-righteousness, so that we may give ourselves up wholly to the merciful grace of God. “Many are called but few are chosen.” Do we belong —no, do you belong — no, do I belong to those chosen few, who build their hope and their trust wholly upon grace, because they know that Christ the Lord won God’s grace for us on the cross? May God help us, we pray, to believe and to learn to profess our belief:

**Christ’s precious blood and righteousness
My jewels are, my festive dress.
Clad in this glorious robe of grace
Boldly I’ll stand before God’s face.⁵**

At the end of the day, to confess, “I believe in Jesus Christ, [God’s] only Son, our Lord,” is not merely to know the truth and to accept it as public truth, but to trust in the person who comes to us wrapped in the promises and declarations of Scripture. The devil is quite orthodox. Unlike those he seduces, he never questions the deity or lordship of Christ as objective truths, for even now the rattling chains that bind him to his dark cell remind him of these truths. But faith *in* is more than faith *that*. Many will be condemned on the last day who believed the correct doctrine, but never allowed those precious truths to lead them by the hand to the person about whom they spoke so eloquently.

Do we trust in Christ as both the universal Lord and our own Redeeming King? His eternal deity must banish all rival princes to exile. His claim to the royal title over heaven and earth must receive our fullest homage. Individually, this means that we must declare war on our own sinful hearts and continue in that battle, however often we fail, until we are safe on the other side of the front. Corporately, it means that we must dethrone the forces of modernity that work against the kingdom of Christ even as they promise to us the kingdoms of this world.

⁵ Martin Niemöller, “The Wedding Garment,” in *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*, ed Walter Kaufmann (New York: Harper, 1964), p. 322.

No longer can we allow politics, marketing methods, pragmatism, and the claims of consumerism, therapy, or abstract religious experience and speculation to reign in the church. As our supreme prophet, Christ's word alone is to be believed and obeyed. As our supreme priest, his redeeming, justifying, and sanctifying work alone must be relied upon. As our supreme King, his revealed will alone must guide and direct the mission and methods of the church.

As he liberated his people from Egyptian bondage and led her by his sovereign command, so too we can only believe in Jesus Christ, owning him as God's Son and our Lord, because he has taken us for himself as his covenant people. Surrounded by the cloud of witnesses in the heavenly arena, may we also receive God's grace to confess, "Jesus Christ is Lord," by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

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