

*Why I Believe
in Christ*



By Rev. J. W. BURTON, M.A.

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WHY I BELIEVE
IN CHRIST

This address was delivered
over the air from Station 2CH,
Sydney, and is printed in re-
sponse to a number of requests.

I have thought it best to
leave it in its original form,
for what it may lack in liter-
ary grace it may gain in
directness.

—J.W.B.

Why I Believe in Christ

BY

Rev. J. W. BURTON, M.A.

SYDNEY:
THE BOOK DEPOT.

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THE VOLUMES IN THIS
SERIES ARE:

"THE CRAFT OF PRAYER."

By Rev. C. Irving Benson.

"THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT."

By Rev. Hugh Paton.

"THE CRAFT OF FINDING GOD."

By Rev. C. Irving Benson.

"REFINING FIRES."

By Rev. Lionel B. Fletcher.

"WHY I BELIEVE IN CHRIST."

By Rev. J. W. Burton, M.A.

Why I Believe in Christ

MY brief words to-night are not addressed to those who are perfectly satisfied with their beliefs about Christ, and who, with unruffled serenity and without mental reservation, can recite the ancient and recognized creeds of the Church. For such I have no message, nor do they need any. They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.

Nor have I any word for those who are not prepared to accept the high ethical standard of Christianity and who find in their unbelief a convenient excuse for not obeying the dictates of their higher self. Of these I would ask Robert Browning's searching questions:

"What think ye of Christ, friend, when all's
said and done?

Like you this Christianity or not?

It may be false, but would you have it true?

Has it your vote to be so, if it can?"

I have come to know, through many years

of intimate contact with men, and especially with young men, that there are earnest and sincere souls who manifest a wistful yearning to believe in Christ, and who are prepared joyfully to accept His challenge to live a life of devotion and of service, but who cannot force their minds to accept all the teachings of the Church, couched as they are in an archaic language, out of harmony with modern ascertained knowledge, and savouring of unreality. They have been given to understand that before they can believe in Christ and claim to be His disciples, they must believe many things *about* Him; and many of these things are of a metaphysical and dogmatic character, and for which they think there is not sufficient evidence. Even for the peace of mind and moral inspiration they so much covet, they are not prepared to dethrone their intellect and accept blindly what even the most venerable creeds affirm.

They are conscious of the spell of the moral beauty of Jesus; they have been drawn by the nobility and sanity of His teaching; they have felt the power of His peerless example; and they have bowed in humble reverence before His tragic and sacrificial death upon the Cross; but

they hesitate to commit themselves to some rigid credal interpretation of the charm and majesty that so allure them.

That He is far above them in moral achievement and in spiritual insight, they freely admit; that He stands for all that in their best moments they themselves would like to be, they are without any doubt; but whether He is very God of very God, eternal and essential deity, they dare not affirm.

It is to such I would speak to-night.

I think I may take it for granted that you have, at times, been deeply impressed by the evidently sincere experience of others—an innumerable company of men and women through all the Christian ages, representative of all types of mind and members of all races, who passionately and triumphantly declare that they have "found Christ," as they phrase it, and in that finding have discovered a new and better way of life. Many of them have lived lives of rare devotion and of sacrificial service, and have obviously been conscious of a mystic and joyous fellowship with God. You cannot easily discount such experience and testimony, but nevertheless, you are not convinced that the

theological interpretations of the facts are entirely acceptable. While you would find it difficult to think that they are mistaken regarding their actual experience, yet might they not be mistaken, you suggest, in their explanations of it? You remember that Hindu and Buddhist mystics have testified to a similar experience, but have interpreted it in quite different terms.

You have read quietly and reverently the somewhat meagre and disjointed reports of Christ's life contained in the three gospels, and the interpretation of His mind so beautifully and mystically expressed in the fourth gospel, and you have endeavoured to gain from other books of the New Testament, written even earlier, the impression that Christ made upon the minds of His contemporaries. You yourself have been impressed, as you have read the various accounts of His personality, by the consistency of His character, by the perfect poise of His spirit, and by the calm sense of God's presence, and you have striven to explain them to yourself. As you have pondered His words, so deep and searching, you have wondered whether any other so truly understood the human heart, and as you have gazed into the crystal depths of

His purity of soul, you have felt Him to be strangely apart from all other men you have known. If it was only the simple undefined faith of those early disciples that was required of you, it might be possible to be a disciple too, but unfortunately later and somewhat quarrelsome disciples have taken the simple faith of Jesus, argued about it, fought about it, and left it for you a cold and lifeless thing. What was self-evident beauty has now become harsh and argumentative dogma that somehow does not assort with the simplicity and spirituality that were so characteristic of the Jesus you saw in the gospels.

What are you to do? You need, and need desperately, for your own life the sort of help that men in all ages claim that they have found through faith in Christ, but even for such a boon you are not prepared to accept theories that you cannot honestly make your own. No external authority, whether of an infallible pope or an infallible book, is likely to command you, and so you are left in doubt—a rudderless vessel. Yet you crave inward peace and moral strength.

May I suggest that you should start more

simply and let the complexities that worry you wait until later.

When I was a missionary in Fiji I knew a young Indian, a university graduate with a brilliant mind, who was living a notoriously immoral life. His conduct was a grief to his friends and a despair to himself. He was in the grip of evil habit, and his good resolutions were made only to be broken. He was slipping down the ladder rung by rung. I left Fiji, but some time after I received a letter from him, in which he told me that he had become a Christian. It appears that that rare disciple of Jesus, C. F. Andrews, who was visiting Fiji in connection with the Indian indenture system, had given this young man a New Testament as containing the secret of his own victory over himself. My Indian friend read the book, and as he naively put it, "fell in love with Christ." The change in his life was astounding to his friends, and even more so to himself. He told me that the foul habits he had been unable to break had now slipped off him and that he had been able with surprising ease to master his temptations. A year or so later he called on me in Melbourne on his

way to India. His radiant face proclaimed the truth of his letter. We had a long talk, and none could doubt the sincerity of his words and the reality of the new-found power in his life. It appeared that some well-meaning and theologically-minded person had lent him a book on the divinity of Christ, with the object of ensuring his orthodoxy. We discussed that side of things, and I asked him what was his theological position in regard to Christ. His answer was somewhat like this:

"I have been told that the sun is ninety million miles away from the earth, and is a mass of flaming gas. It may be so, but I have no means of verifying that for myself. Moreover, I cannot conceive what one million miles means, and as for ninety million, it is only a line of confusing figures. I am not sure what the sun is, and I do not much care; but I do love the sunshine. Christ to me is sunshine; He gives me all the light and warmth I need; but whether He is the Sun—very God of very God and absolute deity, I don't know, and I don't much care—He is all the God I need for my life."

Now that is the natural and true line of approach. Start with whatever gleam of sunshine

Christ gives to you; live in it and enjoy it to the full; then, if you feel so impelled, seek the relation between the sunshine and the sun, but remember that for practical life it is the sunshine that is all-important. You may have astronomical knowledge and yet live in a cellar.

That seems to have been the way of early disciples. They knew Jesus as a man, as a friend and companion. They walked with Him, talked with Him, worked with Him, until they caught something of His spirit. At first it was merely the attraction of a gracious and winsome personality. They had no thought of Him as God. They scarcely stopped to define anything; all they knew was that they could not help loving Him; and they followed Him about simply because He was so loveable, and it meant such pleasure to be in His company. It was only when they reflected upon His teaching that they exclaimed, "Never man spake like this man"; only when one honest frank disciple compared his own feeble attempt at goodness with the goodness of the Master that he cried out, "My Lord and My God." They enjoyed the sunshine before they even thought of the sun.

And is not this the experience of most of us who have come to love Christ and to know Him as "the Master-light of all our seeing?" We love Him, not because He is God, or had a miraculous birth, or turned water into wine, or even because He rose from the dead. We love Him because of what He was—His goodness, His magnanimity, His generosity, His tolerance, His courage, His self-sacrifice—in a word, because of His moral and spiritual loveliness. He is the Highest we know, and we needs must love the highest when we see it. It is not by a process of reasoning, but by an experience of loving that we come to know Christ.

We realize the beauty of a picture or of a sunset, not by measurement or analysis, but by inner appreciation. Spiritual things are always spiritually discerned.

What God actually is in all His fulness we humans shall never know. Words like "infinite," "eternal," and "unconditioned," as applied to Him, only serve to rid us for the moment of the necessity of further definition. Any description of God must only be a rough approximation to something infinitely remote. We see only fringes of His ways; the geolo-

gist thinks of Him in terms of millions and millions of years; the physicist conceives Him in terms of unvarying law and inexhaustible power; the biologist conjectures Him in terms of continuous adaption of means to ends; and the philosopher outlines Him in terms of the absolute—yet God is surely more than all these. They are but broken lights of Him.

In the moral and spiritual realm we think of God in terms of moral and spiritual quality. It is more important from the standpoint of moral endeavour to know that He is good and loving than to know that He is eternal and omnipotent. We do not, however, first define God and then say Christ is divine, rather we first discover in Christ such moral and spiritual beauty that we are compelled to say, God must be like that—"He that hath seen Him hath seen the Father"—that is, God is Christ-like.

Whatever then God may be in any absolute sense, so far as our moral and spiritual nature is concerned, Christ is all the God we can absorb. We need no other. He meets all our ethical demands and satisfies all our spiritual desires. We cannot think of any quality we

would wish to find in God that is not shining in the gracious beauty of our Lord.

Christ taught men, in very simple and non-theological language, that God was their Father, that His love was unlimited, and that His strength was available for every human soul. Christ insisted that the personal experience of God He Himself had was possible to every human being; and that by taking the way of life He Himself had trod, every man could find rest to his soul. He bade men take His yoke upon them and learn of Him and they would find perfect satisfaction in life—their character would be integrated and their confused will made whole. He said in effect, Try My way of faith in God, be meek and humble, gentle and forgiving, kind and helpful, and you will find life inconceivably rich.

A few men, not many perhaps, through the ages, have utterly given themselves to Christ's way, and have found it more than they dared to hope; but most of us have not had courage enough to embark unreservedly upon the adventure, and have to that extent failed. I would recommend to you a beautiful book, full of insight and sympathy, written by C. F.

Andrews—perhaps the best-loved man in India—entitled, "What I Owe to Christ." He tried Christ's way and found the secret of peace. I fear that Andrews would not undergo a very satisfactory examination in the historic creeds, but he knew Christ, felt His power, which sustained him through years of toil and misunderstanding. Andrews' directions are very simple: "Cut out of your life all that Christ would not approve; and trust Him for strength to do what is right." That is a great working faith. The first part of it reminds us of John Stuart Mills' conviction that there could be no higher standard of life than so to act that Christ would approve; and the second recalls Paul's triumphant words, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

Dr. Albert Schweitzer is another case of a man who found his way to Christ along the common road of simple faith in Jesus as Friend and Comrade. He had a great reputation in Europe as a scholar and a musician; but his love for Christ sent him to Africa on a mission of healing, and in a quiet native hospital in the fever-stricken equatorial belt he is joyously obeying the Command of his Lord.

At the close of one of his most scholarly books are these simple and revealing words:

"Christ comes to us as the Unknown, without a name, just as of old by the lake-side He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us in the same words, 'Follow thou Me,' and sets us to those tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship. And as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is."

That is the only way to learn who He really is—by personal obedience and simple following. "He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

I may be speaking to some who have been harassed by doubt, and you have wondered how it is you cannot believe some of the things that others so easily accept. You feel that you have tremendous need of some one to help you, to enable you to fulfil your broken purposes of good, and to give you strength to overcome your temptations; but you are too honest to

commit yourself to any formal statement of belief that does not carry your whole judgment. Do not worry. Remember that the disciples of Jesus included not only the impulsive unreasoning Peter, not only the gentle, loving and mystical John, but also the doubting, probing Thomas. He loved them all; and they loved Him, each in his own way. Start where you can in this great adventure of discipleship. If you can only start with Jesus as a Man, start there. Read His words, think His thoughts, practise His deeds of simple kindness, catch His spirit of utter sincerity, and try to tread His path of service and humility, and you will, almost unconsciously perhaps, find yourself loving Him, and most unexpectedly maybe the mystic secret of His presence will break in upon you as it has done upon all sincere followers through the long centuries.

Why I believe in Christ? I have to give, as I gladly and humbly do, my own personal testimony. I have had my struggle with dark doubt. I know of days, and long nights, when the universe seemed empty of God and vacant of purpose, and when the story of Christ seemed

only a beautiful and tenuous dream. His face had no divine light upon it. At times I had to think of Him only as a man—good and noble, gracious and inspiring—but only man; but the more I thought and the more I tried to relate my own life and conduct to His standards, the more I felt how inadequate such a view was. It was not big enough to hold all that Christ meant to me. I was driven to something bigger. I have always refused to be drawn into mere academic and theological discussion about Jesus, just as I would refuse to subject my love for those of my family circle to public analysis; but I can truthfully and earnestly give this testimony that Christ is all of God that I need for my daily life. He fulfils all my spiritual desires and o'er-tops all my highest aspirations. He gives me the moral leadership I need, and most important of all, when I trust Him and pray to Him, He gives me all the strength I require to overcome my temptations. I cannot think of any God of greater practical help to me in my moral and spiritual struggle than Christ has proved Himself to be. He is to me in the highest and truest sense the Son of the Living God. My

problem is not with Christ, but with myself—that my spiritual desire has often been so dull, that I have so often lacked the courage to follow Him when the path was difficult, that I have not always relied on His strength in my moments of temptation. I have failed Him as a disciple; but He has never failed me as Lord and Master.

While I cannot pronounce all the beliefs that come easily to the lips of some other men, and while I feel ashamed of my unworthiness, yet I humbly and reverently claim to be His disciple. In His pure presence I can only touch His feet, scarcely daring to raise my eyes to His face of grace, but He bends to me and whispers words that give me hope and strength, and I love Him, believe in Him, and will ever try to follow Him.

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