

Before we begin...

YOU MAY HAVE been given this book by a friend or you may have just picked it up. It deals with how we can become friends with the living God.

It is written for people who are prepared to look into Christianity. It sets out the fundamentals. My hope is that it will help you in your pilgrimage back to God.

I have been a Christian for more than fifty years. I find each year more exciting than the one before. I still cannot get over the fact that God should care so much for me that he sent his Son into the world so that I could become friends with him. That friendship has been so satisfying to me over the years that I want everyone to share it with me.

I have quoted freely from the Bible. You may be unfamiliar with it. It might help you if I point out that a reference such as (Luke 2:10) means that the quotation comes from a book in the Bible called The Gospel According to Luke. 'Luke' is in the New Testament, '2' is the chapter number and '10' is the sentence number in chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel.

Since this book was first published I have met hundreds of people who have told me they had read it and that it has played a significant part in their becoming real Christians. This is exactly why I wrote it. I hope it helps you.

John Chapman

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CHAPTER ONE

Where is it with you?

I REMEMBER hearing a story about a small child who asked, “Dad, where did I come from?”. The slightly embarrassed father sat his child down and went through a long involved explanation about the birds and the bees and the flowers. The child showed a degree of surprise and interest.

When the father had finished, he asked, “Is that clear?”

His son replied, “Yes, quite clear and very interesting, but all I wanted to know was where I came from. Tommy Jones says that he came from Manchester and I want to know where I came from.”

Over the last 25 years I have spoken to thousands of people about becoming Christians. Some of them believed in God, some of them were uncertain even about his existence. Some who believed in God were not sure whether Jesus Christ was God’s Son, while others already believed this. Some believed Jesus to be the Son of God but just did not want to change their way of life, while others did want to become Christians but did not know what to do.

None of us is at exactly the same place in our spiritual life, and this presents me with a slight problem. I don't want to bore you with answers to questions which you aren't asking. Yet I want to cover the ground so that a proper investigation of Christianity can be made. Therefore I have written this book in four parts.

Part 1 deals with God's solution to our problem. It assumes the existence of God, that Jesus Christ is God's unique Son, and that the Bible gives accurate information about God.

Part 2 is written for those who are uncertain about God's existence and whether Jesus was God's Son. It also sets out to show that the New Testament histories about Jesus are reliable and that the Bible does give us accurate information about God. If these are not your questions you may like to skip this section and proceed to Part 3 or Part 4.

Part 3 deals with the serious responsibility of responding to God in his way rather than our own.

Part 4 sets out in detail what we need to do to become Christians, and how we can be sure we are Christians.

Part 1

OUR PROBLEM,
GOD'S
SOLUTION

CHAPTER TWO

Sometimes I'm treated like a block of wood

MY NORMAL pattern in the morning is to set the alarm for 6 am, turn on the radio news and listen to what has been happening in the rest of the world while I've been sleeping in my part of it. Then I work out if it's worth getting out of bed. Up till now it's been OK.

One morning I heard of the assassination of President Sadat of Egypt. To my knowledge, no-one has ever tried to murder me, but as I thought over that morning's news, I was convinced again that the act of assassination demonstrates the ultimate in a broken relationship. Not only does the assassin not want to be a friend with his victim, but his action is deliberately designed to ensure the impossibility of friendship in the future. He removes the other person from the scene. It is a fairly ruthless denial of relationship. It says in quite an unmistakable way, "I don't want you as a friend".

I just ignore him

There are other ways of rejecting people which demonstrate the same idea but are not so dramatic in application. Once, at a meeting, I made what I thought was a helpful and very valuable contribution. Deathly silence followed, and after a convenient pause, the discussion continued as if I had not spoken at all. My contribution was ignored. That was bad enough, but even worse was the realisation that I had been rejected. I had been treated as if I were a block of wood, and what is more, I knew it. I have experienced the same feeling of rejection when someone comes into a room and relates to everyone else, but not to me. Sometimes this may be unintentional carelessness, but when it is deliberate, the rejection is as clear as if I had been given the ‘Sadat’ treatment. Such rejection is always hurtful and usually makes me angry. “I’m here”, I want to cry out. “I mightn’t be too bright but I am a person. I’m not a nothing, and I’m certainly more significant than a lump of wood”.

Whenever it happens, I censure such behaviour. Yet we are strange people. Why do I censure behaviour in others which I excuse or even encourage in myself? Although I hate it when I am ignored, I once had no difficulty relating to God in exactly that way. I just ignored him. I didn’t want to worry him and I didn’t want him to worry me. I lived in a world which told me he was there. I wasn’t unaware of his existence, nor did I doubt it. Yet I related to him as if he were a block of wood. The rejection was as plain as if I had gone on an anti-Christian rampage. Could I expect God to be anything but hurt by my reaction to him? I had passed judgement on myself by my own angry attitude towards those who, by ignoring me, had rejected me.

Always when I'm in trouble

One night I gave a lift in my car to a young man who was hitchhiking.

“What sort of a night have you had?” I asked.

“So, so. I've been to see my girlfriend. Yours?”

“Good.”

“What do you do for a living?” he asked.

“I work for the Anglican Church.”

“Doing what?”

“They employ me to try and persuade people to be Christians.”

“My mate just became a Christian. He goes to the Baptist Church.”

“Do you ever go to church?” I asked.

“I used to, but haven't for a long time. I believe in God though.”

“Great!”

“I sometimes say my prayers”, he said. (I got the distinct impression that he thought I would be impressed.)

“When do you do that?” I enquired.

“Generally when I'm in trouble!” he replied.

I smiled. How well I knew that reaction. I'd done it a hundred times myself. Always when I was in trouble. “O God, if you will get me out of this jam, I'll...” I'd never kept the promise. I guess I'd never really meant to. Although I felt as though I did mean it at the time, when the crisis passed I always forgot the promise. There was no real friendship between God and me, not on my part anyway.

“I get upset when people treat me like that, don't you?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” He sounded surprised and puzzled.

“I’m usually upset when people only want me because they are in trouble or when they want to use me in one way or another.”

There was a long silence, but he didn’t say any more. I thought again, what strange mixtures we are. We hate it when people cultivate us to use us, yet when we do it to God, we think he will be happy.

It is a thoroughly unsatisfactory way to treat God, and again I had passed judgement on myself by my reaction to that young man. I seem to be able to recognize inconsistency in others faster than I can recognize it in myself.

If only he wasn’t always right

I’m at a party. There is a large crowd and I start talking to a stranger who is near me. He is pleasant and makes me feel at ease. Having just read *Nicholas and Alexandra* by Robert K. Massie, I hold forth on the horrors of the 1914–18 war and the Russian involvement in it. I might say that although that book constitutes the greater bulk of my knowledge of that event it does not stop me going on and on as if I am a specialist in the field. After about fifteen minutes, when I pause for breath, I ask my new friend what he does for a living.

“I’m a lecturer at the university here,” he replies.

“What faculty?”

“History.”

“Ancient or modern?” (There might yet be hope.)

“Actually, I did my thesis on the Russian involvement in the 1914–18 war.” (Wouldn’t you know it?)

What do I do now? He has given me a valuable piece of information. Up to now, I have assumed that I am a specialist (on the basis of having read one paperback). What course of action can I take?

I have several options open to me. I can talk about the weather or the football. I can continue to hold forth as if I really *do* know what I'm talking about, when, in fact, I'm an amateur. Or I can admit that I've been talking through my hat and get him, from his knowledge as a specialist, to tell me what the true picture really was. One thing is certain, if there is to be any positive relationship between us then I will have to stop pretending I am his equal (at least in the area of history). I need to recognize that he knows more than I do. If I don't do that, but continue as if I know as much about the subject as he does, you can be sure when he goes home he will say to his wife, "Who was that crashing bore?". However, if I let him share with me from his knowledge, there is no reason in the world why we shouldn't become friends. Indeed if we do, there is a good chance that I will really learn something about that part of history. The whole relationship will have a broadening effect on me. He will teach me from his resources what I could never know if left to myself.

All relationships work like this. When I know more than you do on a given subject then you recognize that, and you act appropriately. When you know more than I do, the reverse takes place—and when we are mutually ignorant, we will have lively discussions. But if I pretend to be a specialist, when in fact I'm an amateur, you can be sure that I will be a crashing bore.

When I encountered Christianity and began to understand what it was really about, one of my biggest problems was right at that point—I didn't want God to be God. At least not over me.

I didn't mind the idea that God should be God over everyone else. In fact, I rather liked that idea. I just didn't want him to be God over me. I wasn't too sure if I wanted to relate to someone who really was a specialist in everything. The truth was that I tried to relate to God as if he wasn't a specialist at all. I didn't think it a strange thing to tell God that he was quite wrong in his views of life—all rather old-fashioned really, I thought—and the idea of submitting my life to him never occurred to me. If it had, it would have been quickly dealt with. I was going to be free and submit to no-one. That attitude could only make me into a very lonely man. I needed to have within me all the available resources for life.

Several years ago I worked in a church in London. In the congregation was an artist named Tim.

“Have you been to the National Gallery?” he asked.

“Yes. It's a truly marvellous collection.”

“Did you see the seventeenth century Dutch paintings?”

“If I did, Tim, I didn't take them in.”

“Can I take you to the Gallery sometime and show them to you?”

What are my options? I can submit to him as a specialist or, alternatively, resent his expertise and say, “I'm really terribly busy, Tim, but if I find a moment I'll let you know”.

I did, in fact, go with him. Those who know that marvellous room in the Gallery will know what a feast was in store for me. I had missed it. It is only a small room, with small canvasses, not brightly coloured; not the type which would have immediately caught my attention.

“Do you know what this painter is trying to do?” Tim asked.

“Tell me”, I replied. “I really know nothing about it.” Out of his lifetime study, Tim began to explain to me what was really there before my eyes. It was as if I had been blind. We were there for only an hour, yet a whole world opened for me.

It is not an exaggeration to say that I wasn't the same man. Whenever I had a spare minute I slipped back to the Gallery and sat in that room. I am sure you will have had similar experiences, maybe not in regard to art, but perhaps in other areas. It may have been in bush-walking, when after having been taken to a particularly beautiful spot, you've gone back many times. You might have stumbled onto it yourself, but you didn't and someone shared it with you. It was part of friendship. You might have been shown a special surfing technique which has increased your enjoyment of the sport. It was part of friendship.

What a strange mixture we are. How could I get it so right with my friends and yet be so wrong when it came to God. At best I treated him like an equal—at my worst I treated him as if I knew better than he did. I pushed him away, kept him at arm's length and wouldn't let him share his world or his life with me. I never really thought it out, but it was as if I were saying, “I am a completely resourceful man. I don't need your friendship”.

Caught in my own net

The ways I set out to relate to God were ways which irritated me when people tried them on me. I hated it when I was ignored and treated like a block of wood. I did not respond happily when I was used and manipulated. I found it a pain in the neck when people raved on in areas where they didn't really know what they were talking about. I was caught in my own net.

I had ignored God and just gone on as if he wasn't there. I had

A FRESH START

used him. In times of great crisis I had said my prayers with accompanying promises. I had stood up to God and had corrected him when I felt him to be in error. I was not really a friend of God. I know that I am not unique in this. But why are we like this?